

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Little Street of Big, Big Dreams

Richard Klin · Thursday, June 1st, 2023

He could never quite ascertain the exact point of origin of that little radio station at the very end of the dial. Perhaps some college station here in the city; maybe New Jersey. It popped up regularly, the programming untethered to any discernible format or fixed schedule. It was on this station that Art heard that mind-boggling, unforgettable opus.

The song—if one could really call it that—began with a nightclub-style monologue delivered in a rough, almost gravelly timbre, the singer extolling the virtues of the humble, hard-working denizens of the little street where he was raised. A muted trumpet and piano chugged away in the background. *Nobody had a lot of dough*, the singer was reminiscing, and then he posed some questions, as if there was someone else in the room: *Hey, remember Jimmy Z? Always quick with a smile and a joke. Whatever happened to Jimmy Z?* The question of Jimmy Z's fate remained unresolved as a sudden, startling burst of crooning commenced, as if this narrator was suddenly charging the microphone: *Little street of big, big dreams!* he sang out in a booming baritone. *Little street of big, big dreams!* Art had assumed at first this was some sort of parody, but the singer continued with his mawkishly earnest patter: *Remember Mrs. Chinnici? The little old lady you could hear up and down the block? And the Neapolitan Palace? Those Wednesday-night specials?* There was more of the same, then the vocal crescendo of *Little street of big, big dreams!* followed by additional reminiscing: Billy Boy. Sal's Barbershop. *Little street of big, big dreams!* Mr. Schecter's pharmacy. *Little street of big, big dreams!* It was the single oddest thing Art had ever heard and he listened, mesmerized, to the very end of the saga, when the DJ announced—without elaboration—that the singer was Gunga Din.

In the weeks that followed he actually asked some people if they had ever heard of a lounge singer named—of all things—Gunga Din. Unsurprisingly, nobody had. As if he had nothing better to do, Art undertook his own research, scouring the library's magazine archive. He hit payday immediately: There, in a showbiz annual from 1971, was the brief mention of the nightclub and recording artist Gunga Din, the appellation a takeoff on his long, unpronounceable last name. But this easy availability of information was deceptive: There was no more to follow. Art was unable to locate any other scrap of info on this Gunga Din.

His curiosity certainly would have faded away completely were it not for Dorian, a coworker whose cubicle was on the other side of the building. Dorian was a towering, dour personage, their contact limited to the stray *hello*, yet one day Art happened to be strolling by Dorian's cubicle. A little gaggle of coworkers were gathered around, laughing at something Dorian was saying, and then Art heard it: Dorian was imitating "Little Street of Big, Big Dreams," complete with faux

crooning.

He stood, transfixed, as if discovering a co-religionist. “Gunga Din!” he blurted out and Dorian looked at him with astonished wonder.

A sort of improbable friendship sprang up between the two of them, the catalyst a shared interest in a hackneyed nightclub performer with an odd, borderline offensive, nickname. From time to time they would while away the hours downtown at the White Horse, beer after beer, coffee after coffee, and amid the usual work gossip they created elaborate, boozy scenarios involving Gunga Din. What sort of clientele ate the Neapolitan Palace? What had happened to Jimmy Z? And Gunga Din himself—assuming he was still alive—became the object of much discussion. It was Art who postulated that Gunga Din lived in the West Fifties, an anonymous, unaesthetic stretch of the city that still had hamburger joints and cigar shops.

There was always a *New York Post* in the little lunchroom; Art often sneaking a look at the déclassé paper while at the coffeemaker, and one day as he paged through it he spied an ad for a one-night performance by Gunga Din. For a moment he actually thought he had read incorrectly. But there it was: None other than Gunga Din would be appearing at the Organ Grinder in Spring Hill, Long Island. And he practically sprinted to Dorian’s cubicle.

The plans were quickly set. Audrey, as it turned out, was coming along too, a sort of tough, no-nonsense coworker who sat near Dorian, and the fear of being a third wheel prompted Art to ask Nina, a pleasant enough colleague, who declined graciously, expressing genuine puzzlement at the prospect of journeying to the nether reaches of Long Island to see a comically atrocious nightclub singer.

And so, on a Friday night, Art found himself—along with Dorian and Audrey—amid the chaotic swirl of Penn Station, pushing themselves through the mass of people and making their way to the unfamiliar realm of the Long Island Railroad.



“Penn Station Status Board” by Kevin Harber; used under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The train to Spring Hill was packed at this hour. It was a novelty, after all these years of subway riding, to be on a real train: large seats, wide windows, a conductor who made his way down the aisle, punching tickets. The cityscape shifted to town after Long Island town, the train stopping at regular intervals as the crowd thinned out. Momentary vignettes could be observed: suburban housing, little shopping centers, office buildings, a bank.

The train was almost empty by the time they arrived at Spring Hill, the three of them trooping through the long connecting tunnel that led to the street. And now Art was feeling some pinpricks of embarrassment, which he tried to squelch. It was one thing to go on incessantly about Gunga Din and his little street of big, big dreams. It was another thing to expend time, energy, and money to actually go and see Gunga Din. He hoped this feeling would pass.

Spring Hill’s main drag was unexpectedly shabby: a tavern, TV-repair shop, grocery, the Organ Grinder easily located at the end of the street, parking lot filled with cars, most of them of the large, gas-guzzling variety. An older man, hair greased back, begrudgingly helped his wife out of the car. Art’s creeping embarrassment was now replaced by a sudden stab of discomfort, the sudden awareness of his gold-rimmed, round glasses, Dorian’s stubble, Audrey’s oddball hat with the large flower. Their plan was to get high before the show and Art had been looking forward to this all day, but as they darted to a far corner of the parking lot and crouched behind a Dumpster, his discomfort only grew.

The Organ Grinder was a bona-fide nightclub: tables facing the stage, a piano off to the side. The maître d’ shoved them into a little table and, without preamble, informed them of the two-drink minimum. What did one order in a place like this? They settled for beer, Art downing half his glass in almost one gulp.

The odor of perfume and cologne wafted over the Organ Grinder. Art suddenly became aware of

Audrey's many earrings, but then the musicians filed out onstage: bassist, drummer, saxophonist, pianist. And before they knew it, the lights had dimmed, the band bleated out a little fanfare, and an older, craggy-looking man in a tuxedo bounded onstage to thunderous applause. And the three of them began to laugh, spontaneously. How could you *not* laugh at the sheer incongruity of sitting here at the Organ Grinder in Spring Hill, with Gunga Din himself onstage?

They guffawed at Gunga Din's hokey stage patter, his first song; at the repartee between him and the pianist, who seemed to be his foil. Dirty looks were starting to be thrown their way. Someone shushed them. Art ordered another beer. Gunga Din launched into a Rodgers and Hart medley and traded more insults with the pianist. Art began to feel a new strain of emerging discomfort. In essence, what they had done was travel a good distance to publicly mock the crowd for their idiocy. The piano player stood up and theatrically dropped his pants, revealing oversized boxers bedecked with pink hearts. The audience roared with laughter and applauded. Art's discomfort was replaced for the moment by a deep sadness. These people loved Gunga Din with all their hearts. They found a man dropping his pants riotously funny. He ordered another beer.

Another, even more hideous revelation began to creep up on him: Gunga Din really wasn't that funny. True, his singing and stage patter were corny. But they weren't *that* corny. This was standard-issue nightclub. Gunga Din was hokey. But he wasn't *that* hokey. The expected finale, "Little Street of Big, Big Dreams," was mildly amusing, nothing more.

When the concert came to its merciful end, the three of them avoided each other's gaze, as if they'd participated in some sort of shameful activity, and they moved along briskly with the crowd, Art so loathe to stay another moment that he eschewed using the Organ Grinder's men's room.

The night air was growing cooler as they marched down Spring Hill's now-deserted main street. It was early fall; perhaps still warm enough to sit outside the White Horse in the Village, which was no doubt packed at this hour. They trudged through the cavernous tunnel, arriving at the platform, and Art was set to sneak off to take a piss when he remembered that Audrey was here.

They kept craning their necks in the direction of the Manhattan-bound train, as if willing it into existence, and then there was a sudden burst of bright color. A black woman, garishly clad in fluorescent orange and sporting a tank top, had seemingly materialized out of nowhere. The three exchanged glances. This woman, whoever she was, belonged in Times Square, not here—but, of course, what did they know about Spring Hill? There wasn't much time to ruminate on this; a minute later, a terrific racket ensued and three males, all clumped together, burst onto the platform.

They were loud, that was for sure: two beefy-looking guys in caps, and a third, skinny companion in glasses. The racket continued from the other end of the platform, which seemed to morph into taunts directed at the orange-clad woman. And then this woman, whoever she was, followed the normal instinct and scurried away from them. And now she was in their midst, standing in between Art and Dorian. "I don't even know them," she stated emphatically, and then repeated it, as if this was a crucial point she needed to establish. Everything proceeded very quickly. The three guys followed her over and now they were here. "Is that your girlfriend?" one of the stocky neanderthals asked, pacing his face next to Art's. "Is that your girlfriend?" He was so close that Art could see the hectoring, leering expression, the wide, crazy-looking eyes. "Fuck off," he responded instinctively, and to his shock the skinny one with glasses backhanded him on the right cheek.

Art stood, stunned. It hurt, although it was more shocking than painful, and then beefy guy number

two punched the woman with a violent, full-on swing. She sprawled onto the concrete platform. He had never seen this before, he realized; had never personally witnessed an assault like this. Almost clinically, he was aware of his fear spiking as it never had before. There was now a great deal of shouting and it was impossible to ascertain what was going on. The platform was suddenly flooded with light: the Manhattan-bound train, inching its way into the station.

The orange woman had disappeared, vanishing as mysteriously as she had appeared. Dorian was now perched on the side of the platform. “You’re not getting on this train,” he bellowed, and there was more shouting. Audrey was at Art’s side. He had forgotten about her and she was crying, imploring him to call the police, and although utterly unsure of what course of action to take, he somehow found himself flying down the stairs, through the tunnel, finding the lone pay phone just outside the station. Willing himself into a sort of calm, he dialed 911 and explained as coherently as he could.

He was even more unsure of what to do next and then—although this seemed impossible—he heard the distinct sound of the train pulling out of the station, and before there was time to process this, the first signs of flashing police cars could be glimpsed. A car drove up, coming to a halt right in front of him.

The two cops listened with contempt as he related his story; bored and irritated, they insisted on going back to the platform, finding it amusing that Art momentarily hesitated when it came time to reenter the tunnel. “Does little boy want Mommy to hold his hand?” one of the cops asked. The platform was empty, devoid of people and train. It was if none of it had happened.

The police made their departure and Art took the opportunity to piss all over the platform, not caring at all if anyone saw or if there were any repercussions, but the bravado was quickly replaced by an intense wave of fear so palpable that he almost had to sit down. It was late. He was here at the deserted train station and Art trotted down the platform and broke into a panic-filled run through the tunnel, finding himself in front of the very same pay phone. Spring Hill seemed dark and dead as he stood in front of this train station, exposed, inhaling huge gulps of air to tamp down the galloping dread. The night air had grown colder and his right cheek, he realized, stung. He needed to leave and he needed to leave now. Again, he fought down imminent hysteria.

There was a faint noise coming from somewhere, which grew louder, and he was debating whether to duck into the shadows or not when he saw, to his disbelief, that an off-duty taxi was chugging down the main drag. And then he did something he never thought he would do in a million years: disregarding all notions of safety, he planted himself in the middle of the street, arms waving in desperate entreaty, banking on the fact that the slow-moving taxi would slow down, which it did.

The driver’s-side window rolled down, the dark-skinned cabbie beginning to explain, in a thick, unidentifiable accent, that he was off-duty, but Art—with a determination that only stemmed from intense fear—pleaded to be taken home to Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn?” the driver exclaimed with his foreign intonation, and then he laughed. It wasn’t an unkind laugh, though, more one of astonishment. “Brooklyn?” he repeated. “Why... that will cost you fifty dollars!” Art quickly withdrew his wallet, all but shoving his money in the man’s face, and the driver whispered a quick consultation with the person sitting next to him. He smiled at Art and motioned to the back door.

The cab was warm. There was a woman sitting in the passenger seat; she turned and gave him a

huge smile. Yes, the driver knew the way to Brooklyn. Art settled in for the long ride.

He hadn't fully realized until now how cold the night had gotten. Utterly depleted, he sank into the backseat. Where were Dorian and Audrey? Spring Hill, which he hoped never to lay eyes on as long as he lived, passed by through the taxi's windows, dark and dilapidated, menacing. The man and woman in the front began a quiet conversation, strains of their melodious tongue drifting over. They had left Spring Hill and were now on an unfamiliar stretch of highway. There were many lights off to the side—some town, somewhere—as the cab sped on its way. Then darkness, another town, a highway; more lights off in the distance.

The driver and the woman were now laughing at something. Art fell into an exhausted daze. The warm air enveloped him as the cab continued on its way.

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