

Kind of Poor

There's nothing *wrong* with Snug Harbor. It's a stately, dignified place: orderly, classy. The shows start and end right on time. But of all the jazz spots on Frenchmen Street, it's my least favorite. It's just a little too orderly. I like a spot with a bit of dirt under its fingernails. But this was where the legendary Mickey Squire was playing during what would likely be his last swing through New Orleans, and I couldn't miss seeing my old mentor.

I got a seat in the first row of the balcony, with an overhead view of the drums. I looked around at the audience and wondered if any of the older folks had ever seen *me* play. Probably not—it's been over twenty years since I'd played a professional gig. When I turned forty, I decided that there was a level of drumming that I knew existed but just couldn't get to, and with a new family, I couldn't afford to be some sort of jazz martyr. So I found a job at Tulane University: not in the Music department, but in Facilities. The pay was good, the hours easy, the benefits generous. And that's where I've worked for going on twenty-five years.

Finally the Mickey Squire Quartet emerged. First on the stage was the bassist, then a trumpeter, and finally a pianist. The three of them were young and dapper and, I supposed, supremely talented and dedicated, if they were sharing a stage with Mickey—who then tottered forward himself, noticeably favoring his left leg. He was exceedingly slender, his spine crooked, his pants bunched around the waist and his shirt hanging on his shoulders as though draped over a skeleton. He'd always been older than me by about a decade, but now he looked, quite frankly, like an old man.

I first met Mickey in the late sixties, when I started gigging around New Orleans as a transplant from Philly. He was already a local star, headlining the cream spots and talking about going to New York to play with Coltrane, Miles, Monk ... and he did, too, play with them, all the names, and then kept on playing, even as all those names got etched into gravestones. Anyway, for some reason or other, Mickey took a liking to me and got me going in the scene, tossing me gigs he'd outgrown. I doubt if I would've played for as long as I had, actually, without that first push from him, but eventually the momentum died down and I became just another jazz drummer in a city full of them. Plus, after six years of just barely making a living, I got married and started questioning how I'd support a family with my sticks.

Then the set began as Squire counted off a downtempo tune. His ride cymbal still sizzled in a gorgeous rhythm, his ghosted snare taps were splendid, and his hi-hat was downright poetic. Mickey reminded me of his gentle side, too, when the band played "My Funny Valentine" and he used brushes to create an entire symphony of sounds from just the head of his snare drum. What a master! I was transported back to the old days, watching in awe from the foots of stages.

Then there was a brief interlude during which Mickey told a story about taking a taxi to his first paid gig—a taxi that drove away before he remembered that all of his cymbals were in the trunk. I laughed along with the audience, but for a different reason. My recollection was that it was a taxi *home*, from what was most definitely *not* Mickey's first paid gig, and he forgot the cymbals because he was dead drunk.

By the time I'd decided to retire from the music scene, Mickey was long gone from New Orleans, but he came through town the next spring to play Jazz Fest, and we met in the Quarter for a coffee and a beignet. We talked shop for a bit and I explained that as much as I loved drums and jazz, it wasn't working out, financially, especially with a child to support. "I'm not really anything special, anyway," I said. "Not like you. Just never got there."

"Kid," he answered, powdered sugar puffing out of his mouth, "you swung those sticks about as good as me. I was just willing to stay—well, not *poor*—but, you know. Kind of." He talked about how little money he actually put in his pocket and the expense and grind of life on the road. "Ain't no shame in being comfortable," he murmured, swigging down the last of his coffee. He'd put me on the guest list for his Jazz Fest show, but between my job and the new baby, I couldn't make it out there.

Back here at Snug Harbor, Mickey announced the finale, one of his signature drum suites called "Rat-a-tat-tat." For the first few minutes the band played in unison, then the other musicians dropped out to leave room first for a duet of improvisation between drums and brass, then an extended drum solo. It was Mickey, all right. Somehow that old body of his came alive behind the kit, and his 7A sticks were a beautiful blur.

I tried to imagine if I'd kept on playing. And I wondered if Mickey imagined settling down with a family and a "real" job. Well, the set was ending soon and I was sure he'd give me a minute or two. Maybe we'd even go for a coffee and a beignet and talk about nights at Tip's or the Maple Leaf, when the band was hot and the audience digging it. "Feel like a king behind the kit, those nights," he'd once told me. And I'd tell Mickey that even if I'd chose a life with steady pay and good benefits, I'd been willing, in a different way, to be kind of poor, too.