

## RICHARD BENNETT

*Freedom Song*, 2014  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 54 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

## JOEL HARRISON

### A Circle of Stairs

#### The Humanity a Bar Musician Sees

*And so with his great grace  
he kindled your desire,  
and fastened it to a leash of longing...*

—*The Cloud of Unknowing*

**T**he Point Marina Inn was a dark, narrow club attached to a motel with zero charm. A small, scuffed plywood stage overlooked a linoleum dance floor, a pool table, rickety leatherette chairs, and Formica tables. The thin, dirty windows were strung with signs advertising Budweiser, Miller, Michelob. It was near Interstate 580, by the port of Richmond, California, shadowed by the enormous Chevron plant, where rows of oil tanks and mazes of pipelines unfolded along the San Francisco Bay. Back in the early nineties the motel was bordered by junkyards, windowless bars, liquor stores, and used car lots.

My first night playing the inn, there were two busloads of oil workers, welders, pipefitters, and boilermakers that showed up from Galveston, Texas. They were on a short-term job at the Chevron plant, and they weren't the type of people I was used to entertaining. When I entered the club at 8 P.M. they'd been drinking for two hours, rows of Budweisers lined up like bowling pins on the tables. Climbing onstage for the first set, I felt like a black man might feel trying to entertain the Klan. Big tattooed bubbas called out for country tunes I didn't know, storming about like men readying for war. I tried to recall words to Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings songs I hardly knew, as looks of boredom or outright contempt spread through the room.

A short, menacing guy decided he would be my bodyguard. He fought off a cowboy who had decided to be the lead singer. The little tough said he liked my voice. "It's your stage, man, fuck those animals." He showed me a small pistol he had tucked behind his jacket in his belt, and I recoiled, my eyes bugging out. I felt a hot flash in my chest, and I begged him to put it away.

A couple of fights broke out toward the back of the room, and I tried to soothe the savage beast with whatever lines I could remember from "Ring of Fire." I don't think there was a single woman in the room. The noise these huge lugs made was almost drowning out the band. Finally the Texans were all so hammered they slowly leaked out into the lobby and up to their rooms, and I emerged unscathed, vowing to learn the second and third verses to more country tunes.

The security guard, Cannon, ended up in the hospital after trying to break up a spat in the parking lot. Now almost sixty, he claimed he had worked for the CIA in