

ROBERT CHIARITO

Sicilian Trilogy Panel 1, 2017
Oil on canvas, 72 x 64 in



DOUGLAS SOVERN

Grace Notes

Not so long before he died, my father-in-law insisted we dig up his old drum kit—a scuffed-up set of Ludwig jazz traps we rescued from a moldering corner of his basement—so that he could sit in with my band at his senior home’s spring barbecue. His tempo was given to rushes and lags, and his chops were more than a little sloppy, but George was unfettered behind the kit, like a Labrador retriever, I remember thinking, with drumsticks in his paws. His eyes danced, his foot pedal slapped the kick drum in time (mostly) with the fat notes of my bass guitar’s bottom end. We kept things simple, running through a few basic blues numbers, but then George surprised us by calling out jazz standards, leading us on a nostalgic wander through the songbook of his youth. My own childhood soundtrack being a generation behind his, I played swing jazz like a man in dress shoes stepping gingerly onto a frozen lake. George intuited my uncertainty and led me where the music needed to go. This man who could no longer tie his own shoes or fasten a shirt button could still negotiate his ride cymbal and tom-toms, even on songs he hadn’t played since his days in twiggly ties and pleated Donegal tweeds.

“That was in the pocket, son,” George beamed after “It Don’t Mean a Thing.” “What should we try next?”

We played until he was depleted, resting his sticks with quiet rim shots instead of rattling them across the toms. Later, my wife would discover he had wet himself rather than interrupt the set to take a break.

I brought him a plate of tri-tip and slaw as we sat in the sun.

“You threw me for a loop a couple times, George. Where the chorus had an extra beat, or the turnaround went to the six instead of the five.”

“You did fine, son. Just fine.”

“We’ll be tighter next time. I’ll get the music.”

“You don’t need music. Get off the book. Improvise.”

After lunch, I helped him pack his cymbals—or, more accurately, I packed them up while he fussed over what I was doing.

“Careful now. Those are vintage.”

They seemed like tarnished relics to me but to him, they were beautiful: thick bronze Zildjians forged in the 1940s, with a deep, brooding patina from all those years in the basement.