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

The 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

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Cambodia, and had a lawsuit pending against a nameless source which would eventually make him rich. Cannon made sure you knew that his job was beneath him, that he was more interested in real trouble, not the petty concerns of a motel and its music bar.

All the danger that night energized me. I couldn't wait to get back.

It was one of my first gigs after recovering from tendonitis, an arm injury that had caused me to abandon my guitar for two years. Not playing guitar was like not eating. I physically craved the feel of the strings under my fingers, the wood body resting against my torso, the neck an appendage of my ribs and shoulder.

When I took the instrument up I again I wondered if starting over was preferable to giving up for good. When friends would ask how I was doing, I'd say, "It takes balls to sound this bad." I'd caress the guitar one moment, and then want to set it on fire. My arm no longer listened to me; now it had a mind all its own, stiff and cranky, and at the slightest twinge of pain I was afraid of reinjury. In the end it was boredom, not inspiration, that fueled my recovery. I grew weary of all that vacant space in my mind that only music could fill.

Blues shuffles, tunes by Sly & the Family Stone, The Meters, James Brown, and R&B warhorses like "In the Midnight Hour," "Dancing in the Street," or "I Got a Woman" were my staples. I also carefully selected some newer guitar-driven Rock and Soul numbers, like Robert Cray's "The Forecast (Calls for Pain)," Delbert McClinton's "Never Been Rocked Enough," and John Hiatt's "Thing Called Love." Most of the regulars were over forty. My job was to make them dance.

Toussaint was a Cajun construction worker who at fifty-five could lift a hundred-pound steel girder with one arm and fight you with the other, and laugh harder, stay up later, and drink harder than a teenager. He would get loaded at a few other spots and end up at Point Marina for our fourth set around midnight, and he'd dance with wobbly and delicious abandon by himself, a half-moon smile on his scarred face. I'd sit with him after we played, especially early on when the gig still seemed fresh and I wasn't all that eager to go home. Toussaint said to me, more than once, "I'd a been a singer m'own sef' if I hadn't had me four kids right outa the gate. Toussaint was a fool, brother."

He'd point a meaty finger at my sternum and spew forth barely intelligible aphorisms like, "A mule ain't no fool kickin' his tool round the stall, but the fuel that rules ain't in the stall at all." He developed prostate cancer towards the end of my tenure, but he kept dancing until he couldn't walk anymore.

Chuy was a forty-something Mexican hipster, with a big gut and a greased, graying ponytail—a street poet and petty thief. He was a remarkable pool player—he could take your money and make you laugh about it. After he became a crack addict, he went from weighing about 170 to 120 in a year.

Strong, a porter for Amtrak, always on his way to the next train, would sit quietly in the back, request "Sweet Home Chicago," and have a shot of Dewar's neat. Susie, a big-hearted, even bigger-breasted woman who drank way too much, was in love with a married man who drove an 18-wheeler through town a couple times a month. She'd pull me down into a chair during a break and bore me silly with her woes.

Something about those people, all their sadness, cheered me up. I had an unhealthy attachment to their misery. The Point Marina Inn was like a nasty girlfriend you want to fuck and run away from at the same time.

On occasion a friend would show up to hear me. Looks of trepidation and mild shock would appear when they walked in. It really was a lonely dump. But when the band got rolling, anyone could feel the spirit of the place. Some nights when the dance floor filled up, when I played everything I could play, joy poured into the room. Sad people got happy, especially the older couples—the ones who didn't request the latest frou-frou, who had some gravitational pull towards Big Bill Broonzy or Johnny Adams.

Peanut was the drummer. He was a streetwise, overweight jokester. He never said no to a gig, and always blasted one-liners that would make your head hurt, you laughed so hard. Frank played bass. He was one of those men who were born to question what they wanted, so their talent never gets them anywhere. One of the keyboard players sticks out in my mind, not just because of his pretty-boy waves of blond hair and his raging, rock-star synth solos but because he continually told the story of teaching his new girlfriend what the word "felch" meant. I was no goody-goody, but that was way too intimate for me. He just couldn't stop talking about all the sex he had, its variations and poses, up in his East Oakland loft, behind security fences with barbed wire to keep the crack-addled riffraff out.

Then as now, it was amazing how easy it was to get a great band together for almost no money. I'd have serious jazz players in there, guys who could play in any time signature, who could erupt into "Donna Lee" at any tempo, but they were up for playing dance music in a forlorn motel bar for truckers, transients, and neighborhood drunks.

Some joker always wanted to sit in and sing—should I let him? Drunk, or near drunk, none of the aspirants had talent, but they figured they had as much right to the stage as the band—guys who needed their mothers to walk in and tie their shoes, remind them of their manners.

One Saturday night a tall, lean pathogen who claimed he had just gotten out of San Quentin watched our band from a couple tables back, liberally commentating on how mediocre we were. He practically ordered me to sit down next to him during the break, flashed a long shiv that was affixed to his hip, and suggested he might lead the band in the next set. He had a scar on his cheek, a brambly afro, and his clothes looked like he got them from the Free Box. He had a cheap, whorish blonde next to him, who had the aggravating habit of repeating her man's sentences after they dribbled out of his mouth, a contagion of echoes. I'll admit he scared me. I didn't feel like arguing, so I brought him up to sing a couple of blues tunes the next set. He was awful, and he didn't know it, liberally spitting on the mike parading around as if he were Marvin Gaye, scratchy and out of tune.

When I thanked him and tried to gently take back the microphone, he got angry, and launched into a tirade about how white people are always stealing black people's music, that I was a racist motherfucker thief, on and on, as loud as he could in between songs. I resisted telling him to shut the fuck up—I had no desire to see his shiv again.

At the next break I resolved to make peace, United Nations style. I sat down and tried to reason with him. "Man," I said calmly, even conspiratorially, "I love black people enough to have devoted my whole freaking life to the legacy of their music. Isn't that good enough? I mean, I'm not up there trying to pretend I'm Stevie Wonder, I'm just trying to sing a few dance tunes and go home—this is my workplace, dude! I got a job to do!"

This only infuriated the would-be singer more; why, I don't know—and soon the guy's skanky girlfriend was up in my face, demanding that her man be paid for his time on stage. I managed to finish the last set without being knifed. Part of me was ready to pack up and leave before the last set—I mean, how much dignity was I willing to give up, just to play for these aliens? But I liked the drama. Some unsettled, masochistic place inside demanded my attention.

Sometimes the audience was just Toussaint and three strangers. Toussaint would scream his appreciation. "I love ya madly, boys!" Toussaint might run up and hug me when we were done, looking like he'd cry. He'd keep singing the song after we were done, and maybe grab a stranger and dance to the sound of his own voice. I wondered, "How could a man love music so much," but of course I knew.

I'd felt a great void when I injured my arm and I couldn't play. I was a whining, morose little bitch. I prayed to saints Haggard, Coltrane, Palestrina, and Robert Johnson to bring me back. I kept listening, even when I couldn't make music. I'd met the Holy Ghost when I was thirteen, when I learned how waves of sound reach into the body of another human being to illuminate their hearts. The power of music was an endless aphrodisiac, drawing me forward, even at the Point Marina Inn. Playing again and getting paid for it—that was all that mattered. I didn't give

a goddamn *what* I played. I'd have played polkas, disco, Journey covers, Helen Reddy medleys—I didn't care.

I sought help when I couldn't use my arm, went to New Age grifters, the yoga gestapo, one-note Johnnies with a massage license. Their abilities ranged from modest to nil. As I gradually came to learn, everyone was willing to take my money, but no one knew how to treat the specifics of a tendon injury, and the advice I got went from harmless to contradictory to idiotic. Ice it, don't ice it, rest it, don't rest it, exercise the muscles, don't exercise them, meditate more, change your posture, play simpler music, get a past life reading, eat more shellfish. So much advice, piling up higher and higher, like a mountain of refuse at the town dump. At one point I went to a slick doctor in New York who had just written a book and opened a clinic to specialize in this new malady, "overuse injury." The syndrome was showing up in computer users across the country, not just in musicians. He had all the analytical tools and data, and a team of young physical therapists who all looked like young Tom Sellecks, fresh out of university, taking up half the floor of a hospital, what with all the woeful people streaming in. One thing for sure, he was making bank. He did nothing for me.

I finally discovered a brilliant iconoclast in Berkeley who had developed a singular ability to manipulate the tiny fibers of a tendon—no fancy measurement tools, no office, no secretary, just a cheap massage table, a ragged towel to throw over you if it was chilly, and a genius set of hands. His phone machine message said that "someone from his staff" would return calls, but he had no staff. He had an ear for the frequencies of the spirit world. He probably bought one suit his whole life, could have charged huge amounts of money but kept his prices low.

Bill could dig down into the muscle in a way that felt as if he were probing the center of the earth; he'd lay his hands on my back, and zings of electricity would run down my spine, and my shoulders would open up, and I'd tingle with life force. He'd adjust the carpal bones in my wrist by rearranging the soft tissue between them, and then suddenly twist and yank my hand so hard I thought it would snap off of my arm. I owe this gentle, eccentric man everything. He healed my arm when no one else could.

After a while, the Point Marina Inn started to seem more like a punishment than a way station for my soul. What I longed for, as always, was a few steps farther than I could see. It began to feel less like an entertainment center and more like a morgue, and I knew I couldn't keep slogging away there, I had to set my sights higher. I was beginning to write a lot of new music, studying Bartok's string quartets, auditing advance harmony courses at UC Berkeley, taking lessons through the mail with the legendary jazz teacher Charlie Banacos.

The impulse to grow and learn—after food, water, and love—isn't that what makes us whole, keeps us alive? One part of our minds offers a rope, a lifeline to the other part, which is perpetually drowning in mediocrity, malaise, or dull acceptance of the status quo. To climb that rope—that's where purpose and meaning are. Sometimes you need to be shocked into reaching for it, drummed out of your torpor.

One Saturday night in October I began the first set for three guys who were already drunk, all of them trying to dazzle the same girl with middling success. One thick, lumbering blond, who declared that he was from "Looziana," requested "Jambalaya," the Hank Williams standard, and began cavorting across the dance floor, tugging the poor girl along as I bumped into a second-line groove. The kid's dancing was lunging and jumping; she gamely played along with her sad smile, droopy eyes, smudged mascara, and brunette curls. I wanted to strangle his bulbous neck until all the beer squirted back out of him like a fountain.

The couple sat back down at the bar. I played a few more tunes—bored, distracted, impatient to go home. Suddenly, as I began an Al Green tune, I found myself staring back at the band from someplace above the stage. I was supposed to sing but couldn't. It was as if I were part of the ceiling and inside my own body at the same time, watching myself go through the motions of playing the song. I felt like a puppet, a machine hacking at the instrument, and had to will myself to continue.

I broke that song off and began another, a song I'd played a hundred times, James Brown's "I Feel Good," but I could hardly remember the words. I walked over toward the bass player and asked him to sing. He raised an eyebrow, obviously wondering what was going on, but he gamely shouted out the first verse as I played guitar and watched as if in a dream:

I feel good
Like I knew that I would…

The room seemed to turn gray. The joy of the lyrics was like a Day-Glo banner stretched across the River Styx. The people on the dance floor looked like stick figures in a cartoon. My throat was dry, my pulse faster by the moment, and I thought I might lay down the guitar and scream. I felt an upwelling of sadness. Tears sprang into my eyes. I had no idea what was happening to me, but I knew it was important. Some part of me was dying, and another part was struggling to come alive. I'd been reading Saint John of the Cross—maybe it was some kind of dark night of the soul, or maybe I was having a nervous breakdown, or maybe a deep longing was calling collect from the future. I played the funk guitar part to one of the happiest, most buoyant songs ever written, and felt utterly useless and lost.

The band took a break. I walked outside to my car and leaned against it. The air smelled of eucalyptus and diesel fumes, and I could hear the cars blurring by on the interstate. I stomped my feet, needing to feel the blood moving in my body. I stared at the junkyard across the street and wondered whatever happened to the '67 Chevy I used to own.

I sucked in some more air and walked back inside the bar. Five uneventful tunes later, the last set was over. I packed up my gear, loaded it onto my hand truck, and with a sigh wheeled it out the door, watching my bandmates peel away toward the freeway. The moon was shining through mist that rolled in off the bay, and a gentle, salty breeze was blowing. I unlocked my rusty car, and just as I was lifting my amp in I heard Cannon, the security guard, scream to my right. "Put that gun on the ground, motherfucker, and get on your knees!"

There were two gunshots. I leapt around the side of my car and dove to the ground, scrambling on all fours, sure that more shots would follow. Had someone been shooting at me? Terrified, I peered underneath my car, afraid to stand up, struggling to see what was going on. I heard Cannon yell again, "I want to see your hands! Show your hands or I'll nail you!"

I crawled along the ground to the edge of my car, peered around the wheel, almost pissing my pants, and saw a young black man lying on his back, crumpled on the pavement like a load of dirty laundry. He was lying about twenty feet from me, and Cannon was crouched about thirty-five feet away, pointing his pistol at the kid. A crowd had gathered around the door of the motel. Polk, the bartender, cried, "Cannon—what's going on?"

I played the funk guitar part to one of the happiest, most buoyant songs ever written, and felt utterly useless and lost.

"He's got a gun, Polk. Run and get me my shotgun—it's in the closet!"

Blood was pooling around the kid's midsection. It was bluish purple beneath the streetlights.

"Stay clear, people—he's got a weapon," Cannon screamed. And then again to his victim: "Show me your hands!"

The kid, who had been motionless, suddenly groaned, and lifted his head an inch or two off the ground and then laid it back down. He moved one hand to his stomach and groaned again. It was like no sound I'd ever heard before, a wild, primitive rasping, as if a bear, not a man, had been shot. I saw no gun.

"He can't move!" I yelled.

Cannon, now ten feet from the kid, had his 12-gauge shotgun pointed at his head. "I saw him pull a gun," Cannon said to no one in particular. "He tried to jump that girl getting out of her car." He motioned towards the entrance to the bar, but no girl stepped forward.

The kid brought his head up slowly again while the rest of his body lay inert. I heard a siren in the distance. "I been shot. Oh god, I been shot," he groaned softly. Then

he whispered, “Mama.” He groaned again. More blood pooled around his midsection.

“Get on your knees with your hands behind your back. *now*!”

But the kid couldn’t move. He lifted his head up again and stared at his wound and lay his head back down. He was looking up at the sky as if he’d been dropped from a star. “How can I … Oh fuck … somebody help me … I’ve been shot.”

“Jesus, Cannon, you shot the shit out of him,” Polk said softly, stepping up beside the body. It was hard to tell if he was impressed or upset. “Guy brought a knife to a gunfight,” someone said loudly, and then chuckled. “Bang!”

I finally stood up, dusted off my pants, and walked back over to the bar, shaking, needing to talk to someone. An ambulance came and wheeled the kid away. The crowd at the front entrance lingered, as if watching the credits roll after a movie. No one seemed particularly shook up. They looked jazzed and content, as if they’d just been given a Christmas bonus. I looked for Toussaint, or Chuy, or even Susie, but all I saw were strangers. I downed a quick shot of Jim Beam, disgusted, still trembling, sick to my stomach, and I stumbled out the door, past the puddle of blood on the ground near my car.

I started my van and slowly drove onto I-580. There were almost no cars, just some taillights through the mist in the distance. As I drove, I had the eerie thought that I could go anywhere from this portal, that the freeway went on for hundreds of miles and led to other freeways, and that without looking back I could drive forever, and never on the same road twice. I never wanted to see the Point Marina Inn again, and I didn’t want to go home.

I purposefully missed my exit, driving in the slow lane, the radio tuned to a jazz station, a nameless saxophonist playing a haunting, sultry, mid-tempo blues.

Washington D.C. native **Joel Harrison** is a guitarist, composer, arranger, vocalist, and songwriter. Named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2010, he has released seventeen CDs on seven record labels since 1994. Called “protean” and “brilliant” by *The New York Times*, Harrison has spent his career taking risks, where each of his projects takes on a different challenge and character. He has written numerous music journalism pieces and is completing a memoir of his lifelong search for new sounds.

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Trio, 2013
Oil on Canvas 36 x 48 in

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