On Campus

High Notes on the Heights

A music maven remembers campus rhythms — and blues, too.

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Columbia is located in the middle of a thriving musical environment, and when I was in school in the 1960s, musical things happened serendipitously and had unexpectedly pleasant consequences. The encounters ranged from the blast of a rock ’n’ roll band opening a Friday afternoon party on the Ferris Booth Hall patio (thus ending an anxiety-ridden study session in Butler Library) to a wondrous blues jam session in a dorm.

Before Dave Bromberg was a sideman for Bob Dylan and a marquee performer in his own right, he was a Columbia student in the class of 1967. He played guitar and seemed an acolyte of Dave Van Ronk, at the time the hippest of the folkies playing regularly in Greenwich Village. Late one evening early in our freshman year, Bromberg and a classmate, Mark Levy, parked themselves atop the stone newels at the head of the stairs leading to 114th Street between Butler and John Jay. They wailed one of Van Ronk’s signature songs, “He Was a Friend of Mine,” a lament about a penniless friend who died on the road, imitating his raspy voice and using themusical gaps to play a game of dueling blues guitar licks.

As a freshman, I also recall dragging my friend Jack Harris to a broadcast of Beethoven’s “Choral Symphony” in the Furnald TV room. He was a swimmer, and not into music. But being a Columbian, he was up for anything new. He didn’t appear particularly moved by the experience, which he sat through dutifully, and expressed approving remarks, perhaps because he didn’t want to appear stupid. He seemed to endure it rather than enjoy it. Years later, at our 20th reunion, I discovered that the experience had in fact inspired him to take up the violin. Now he teaches biology at Russell Sage College, where he is also the director of the orchestra.

I was a member of the glee club, and in late August we would spend a week or two at Camp Columbia near Litchfield, Connecticut. It was the engineering summer camp

but was also used for preseason football. After the football team cleared out, we went there to teach freshmen the standard repertoire and get a jump on the fall season. One year a pair of apparent strangers, two freshmen, got into a conversation about piano. One of them was Bob Binkley, a sandy-haired youth with wire-framed glasses that were so out (Buddy Holly glasses with thick black frames were the vogue) that he looked cool.The other was David Schiff, longfaced, eyes set in an aspect of deep concentration, and hairline receding along a widow's peak. They sat down with a book of Schubert duets and started sightreading one of them. It wasn't just the familiar "Marche Militaire" that any wannabe virtuoso who ever put hands to a keyboard knew well. It was the real deal, an obscure piece identified only by opus and number. Schiff, now a composer and professor of music at Reed College, and Binkley played it as someone might read a newspaper story. Their manner seemed effortless, their performance flawless.

Then there was a glorious spring evening when I was a sophomore. The air was like crystal, the bricks along the walks in the south campus glistening with condensation, and the sky going through the purple sector of the color spectrum. I always tell people that no campus is quite as beautiful as Columbia's on a perfect spring day. And most fittingly, somebody from the heights of Hartley turned his stereo speakers out toward the quad and at peak volume started blasting the "Heavens Are Telling" chorus from Haydn's *The Creation*.

Duke Ellington once came to Ferris Booth Hall for what I believed was an unannounced performance of his quartet. Among the ensemble was his young drummer, Sam Woodyard. In a smooth, almost sensuous fashion that befit Ellington's reputation, he described how Woodyard treated the skins of his instruments as a considerate man would treat a woman. I suspect that at any other campus in the country, an Ellington appearance would have been scheduled and publicized unmercifully for weeks. Not at Columbia, at the edge of Harlem, where the sight of Billy Taylor's Jazzmobile making its way up Broadway was as common as ice cream trucks catering to the street crowd. Ellington could sneak onto campus and play to a packed house, using his considerable charm to turn Ferris Booth's spacious auditorium into a salon; he treated the audience as if we were guests in his home.

But what I remember most was the WKCR-FM sign-off each morning at 2:00. Every day, the station would broadcast an old glee club recording of "Sans Souci"much more slowly than I'd grown accustomed to both singing and hearing. It was sung a

cappella, very quietly in the spirit of the early morning.The sound of the lower male voices had a haunting quality that fit the moment — a few hours past the bustle of one day, a few hours before the hubbub of the next.

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Guide to school abbreviations

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