

## Brandon Sings the Blues

The change in Brandon's appearance was astonishing. The last time I'd seen him he was a starving music student, about to graduate from Pritchett State College. He was wearing a faded T-shirt he'd gotten free for donating blood, well-worn blue jeans, and shoes that looked like he picked them off a trash pile. He obviously hadn't shaved for several days, but his face radiated confidence. He talked excitedly about how well his classes were going, and the auditions he had lined up. He was going to be an opera star. We discussed his forthcoming career over a few slices of tasteless pizza washed down by free water at a crowded pizzeria just off campus, a joint that was known more for its prices than for its cuisine.

I should say Brandon discussed his forthcoming career, because I don't know Shinola about music. Brandon and I were high school buddies, but while he always played the leading roles in school musicals, I helped build the sets, set up the audio, and worked the lights. After graduation I went to an engineering school while Brandon went to the local college to study music. We kept in sporadic touch with each other during the school year and hung out together every summer. Now I was about to move to a nearby town to start my first engineering job, and Brandon was about to set the music world on fire.

As much as Brandon was looking forward to taking center stage in an opera, I think he was even more excited about the idea of being able to afford his own apartment. "You have no idea what my roommate is like!" he complained. "I mean, he's a nice guy and everything, but his music has me climbing the walls! He's a music history major, studying early 20'th century recorded music. He has stacks of old records all over the apartment. And these things he calls cylinder records. They're weird, tubular records about the size of a soup can with people singing about moonlit nights, lilacs in bloom, and cars that break down."

At this point he set down his pizza and began singing in a high wavering voice that sounded like an old man cackling "He'd have to get under, get out and get under, to fix up his auto-mo-beel."

"Can't he listen over headphones?" I asked.

"I asked him that the day I moved in." Brandon replied. "He just pointed at the phonograph and said 'it doesn't have a headphone jack.' That's the other thing. He's got these old, wind-up record players all over the apartment. He says the records sound scratchy and tinny if he plays them on a regular record player, as if they didn't sound scratch and tinny already. It's gotten to the point where even when I leave the apartment I have those Godawful songs of his bouncing around in my head." At this point he dropped his face into his hands, with his elbows resting on the table.

"It's your apartment too," I said. "Tell him he has to use headphones, even if the records do sound scratchy."

Brandon raised his head slightly, enough to look at me over his fingertips. "That's the hell of it," he said. It's mostly his apartment. He's got some sort of a grant from a national endowment for music preservation or something. He pays most of the rent and

buys most of the food. I pay what I can and help with the cooking and cleaning. I'm lucky he lets me live there, as I couldn't afford to finish school otherwise. I can't take out any more school loans because of my grades."

I shook my head sadly, mostly because I couldn't think of what else to do. I couldn't help but think of the summers I spent sweating away at a mind-numbing factory job to earn money for college while Brandon spent his summers singing in community theaters. He swore it was essential to his career, even though it didn't pay anything. Still, Brandon was obviously miserable now, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

He lifted his head from his hands and looked at me with a face that looked much older than his twenty-two years. "Do you realize I now know all the words to 'Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue?' And 'Everybody Loves My Baby?' Did you know that there's actually a song called 'The Varsity Drag?' And it's not what you think. It has nothing to do with cross-dressing." Then he shook his shoulders, sat up straight, and regained some of his former confidence. "But that will all be over soon. Final exams are next week, and I start auditioning the week after that. Then I can afford to move out and leave that noise behind forever."

I spent the next few months getting settled in my new job, finding an apartment, and scouring second-hand shops for such luxuries as a bed, a chair, and a kitchen table. I got an occasional text or e-mail from Brandon. His first audition didn't go as well as he'd hoped, but he had expected that because he was nervous. Then he had an audition with an idiot who didn't know anything about music. The next two auditions were with opera companies that were really looking for bass singers, but they promised to keep him in mind if they ever needed a tenor. One audition was cancelled, because there seemed to be a slump in the opera business. And so it went. I really wasn't too surprised. As I said, I don't know anything about music, but I suspected that top organizations like the Metropolitan Opera wouldn't be trolling for talent at places like Pritchett State College. And since he said his grades weren't good enough to get another school loan, I thought it might just be possible that he wasn't the most gifted vocalist to ever graduate from that esteemed institution. But I didn't really spend a lot of time thinking about Brandon because I had my hands full just getting my own career underway. Engineering school gives you the basic tools you need to solve problems, but when you step into a real job you find the problems you're expected to solve aren't quite as simple as the problems you studied in school. The concepts may be the same, but in the real world there are thousands of constraints, conventions, and considerations that need to be satisfied before a design is finished. The difference is like learning to read a compass in an open field and then being dropped in the middle of the Amazon and told to find your way home. I was so busy it seemed like I had only been working for a few weeks when suddenly Christmas was upon us and the office shut down for a week. I went home to spend some time with my folks. Brandon surprised me by calling the day after Christmas and inviting me to dinner at one of the swankiest restaurants in town.

As I said at the beginning, the change in his appearance was astonishing. He was elegantly attired in a suit that fit so well it must have been custom made. His shoes glistened like polished onyx. He'd put on a few pounds, not in a bad way but in a way which filled out the half-baked appearance he'd had in college. He was clean shaven,

and his face had a rugged handsomeness that I'd never noticed before. And that aura of confidence, well, it was almost there. Somehow, there was an indefinable hint of hesitation in his manner. He walked rather than strode into the room. He smiled as he surveyed the room, the way a nobleman might smile condescendingly at his serfs, but there was a hint of concern in his eyes. As though the nobleman was worried the serfs were about to grab their pitchforks and rise up against him. He stopped and shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other as he searched for a friendly face. When he saw me, however, the hesitation evaporated. His face lit up with a genuinely happy grin and he embraced me warmly when he got to my table.

We reminisced about old times for a while, and he asked many questions about my new job. There was a pause in the conversation as the waiter cleared our salad dishes and I took advantage of that opportunity to ask him how he was doing.

"Oh, I'm singing professionally now" he replied. "It's just an entry level job. You're not going to see me featured on PBS any time soon, but it pays the bills."

"So, are you an understudy in an opera production?" I asked.

"Not for any specific production. It's more of a preparatory position. I sing with an orchestra and get experience working with them, learning to read a crowd, learning to project my voice night after night without straining it. You know. The skills I'll need when I am in a production."

"So, is this an orchestra I've heard of? Like the New York Philharmonic?" I wasn't trying to interrogate him. He looked like he was doing very well at whatever it was that he was doing, but his answers seemed a bit vague. I was trying to learn more about his career."

"Hardly," he laughed. "I'm sure you've never heard of them before, although they do play for theatrical productions sometimes. There's no production at the moment, so we perform in non-theater environments."

"Like concert halls?" I was confused.

"More casual than that. We perform on a stage, but instead of sitting in fixed theater seats the audience is seated in an arrangement of tables around an open area in front of the stage."

"Like a nightclub?" I asked.

"Well, yes." Brandon sounded uncomfortable. "I suppose it is rather like a nightclub. But tell me some more about your new job. What exactly is it that you design?"

"Oh, sure." It was obvious he wanted to change the subject. "I didn't mean to pry. I just didn't realize there were nightclubs where people sang opera. The company I work for is one of the world's leaders in . . . Brandon? Are you OK?"

Brandon had folded his arms on the table and dropped his head onto them. It looked like he was sobbing. "I, I'm not singing opera" he finally said.

“Well that’s OK” I hurriedly replied. “You never said you were singing opera. That’s my fault. I just assumed you were singing opera. I’m sure there’s nothing wrong with whatever it is you are singing.”

“Yes there is.” Brandon straightened up. “I studied opera in college. I’m a trained opera singer. And I deliberately misled you because what I am singing is garbage. I’m a hack who sold out just to make a buck.” He paused for a moment, with a grim look on his face. “It’s all my roommate’s fault.”

“Your roommate?”

“Yes” said Brandon. “I told you about him. The idiot with all the wind-up record players? I had been going to audition after audition without any luck, and I was beginning to get desperate. I started with the major opera companies. Then the minor companies. Finally I started auditioning for amateur companies that didn’t pay anything and they still didn’t want me. Then I saw a sign-up for an orchestra that toured with off-Broadway musicals. They weren’t doing any musicals at the moment, but for some reason they wanted a singer. I had no idea why they needed a singer when they didn’t have a show, but it was a paying job so I auditioned. I sang Mozart’s ‘Il mio tesoro intanto’ from *Don Giovanni* and the director just stared at me. ‘How about something a little jazzier’ he asked. So I started into a Rossini piece from *The Barber of Seville* but he waved me to stop. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘but that’s just not what we’re looking for.’ Then he turned his back on me and started talking to his assistant. I was just standing there, onstage, with my mouth hanging open. ‘Jazzier?’ I thought. ‘Four years of opera training and you want something jazzier?’ Then something really strange happened. I swear I wasn’t in control. My mouth opened and I was amazed to hear my own voice coming out.”

“If you knew Susie, like I know Susie, Oh! Oh! Oh what a gal!”

Brandon paused, with a far-away look in his eyes. It was as if he was no longer at the restaurant. He was back on that stage at his audition.

“The director stopped talking to his assistant, turned around, and stared at me again. I didn’t know what else to do, so I kept singing until I finished the song. The director folded his arms in front of him, then raised his right hand and touched his lips with his index finger as though he was in deep thought. ‘Sing something else’ he said when I’d finished. “Something like that last song.” I sang ‘Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby.’ He motioned me to keep singing and sent his assistant out to bring some more people in. I sang ‘Old Man River.’ Not a legitimate version, like Paul Robeson’s. I sang the Bing Crosby version. From Bing’s early days, with The Rhythm Boys. When he sang jazz.”

I had no idea who Paul Robeson or The Rhythm Boys were, but I didn’t think it mattered so I nodded my head in agreement.

Brandon continued. “Of course, that led me to sing the Crosby version of ‘Sweet Georgia Brown,’ complete with the scat singing at the end. I was singing all this acapella, of course, which is trickier than you’d think.”

Again, I didn't really understand the musical terminology. I knew from Boy Scouts that animal droppings were called scat, and I assumed that acapella singing was a style that originated on a beach down in Mexico, but I just nodded sagely and let him continue.

"Well," Brandon continued, "to make a long story short they hired me to sing with them. Originally it was just to sing a novelty song once in a while, but people really seem to like this crap so they brought more and more old songs into the set. They hired my roommate as a consultant, to help them find these old songs, and now he's helping with the arrangements. He plays records for the orchestra and helps them come up with similar arrangements. They call it a '1920s Revival' and I'm the featured vocalist."

"That sounds great!" I said sincerely. "And you're obviously very good at it. I don't understand why you didn't tell me what you were doing right away. I think this is something to be proud of."

"But it's not Art!" Brandon protested. "I studied a form of art. This is just, it's just, *commercial!*"

"I don't see the difference" I said.

"Art is truth, it's beauty, it's light. It brings joy to people and makes the world a better place. This is just something you do to make a buck."

"Don't people make money singing opera?" I asked.

"Well, yes. The great opera singers make a lot of money." Brandon replied. "But's that's not why they do it."

"How many of the truly great opera singers sing for free?" I asked.

"You're missing the point" Brandon said with exasperation. "They're creating art. Making the world a better place."

"Yes, that's what you said. They're making the world a better place by bringing joy to people. And how do people feel when they listen to your singing?"

"Well, I guess it makes them happy" Brandon said grudgingly.

"And you said yourself it's not easy to sing these songs. It seems to me that you're creating art just as much as an opera singer is. Some people like opera. Some people like heavy metal. And some people like 20's jazz. It's all music. And it's all art."

Brandon sat absorbed in his thoughts. Then the waiter brought our entrees, and the conversation turned to other things. We didn't mention music again until we were leaving the restaurant and going our separate ways. Just before we said good-bye, Brandon looked at me and said "You know, those old songs are kind of fun."

I think I helped Brandon come to terms with the way his life turned out. I hope so, as I recently heard he will be starring in a revival of the musical *Good News* on Broadway. Among other things, he will be singing "The Varsity Drag."