

# Rocking The Lyric Cradle

A 20<sup>th</sup> Century American returns to 12<sup>th</sup>  
Century France

*“When , from the spring, the stream  
runs clear, so in Spring  
sun clear the air,  
eglantine appears.*

*The nightingale in brake  
modulates, clarifies his song,  
softens it, reiterates,  
polishes and sweetens it:  
only right that I my own song soften”*

Jaufré Rudel <sup>1</sup>

The town of Sens, en route to Dijon from Paris , has a secure, if dubious, foothold in history. It was at the Council of Sens that, in 1140, philosopher/troubadour Peter Abelard came to grief. On that calm evening in mid-June, 1984 my reflections about Sens were not, little more than his , predisposed to gentleness. Laden with baggage and books and instruments of the troubadour trade, it was here that the day’s hitch-hiking was brought to a halt. It was that time of the daily round, when the paling western light has yet to be replaced by kindred fires in the street lamps of the public thoroughfares, when I, like the circling

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<sup>1</sup>All quotations of troubadour writings are from Proensa: *An Anthology of Troubadour Poetry* Paul Blackburn, translator, UC Berkeley Press , 1978

birds, seek a nest for the night. Nor do I ever expect as much as they in the way of comfort or hearth.

Not, mind you , that the day's encounters had been stingy in granting of gift or gold, nor chary in those miraculous displays of comradeship such as only the road bestows.

With diligence had I labored, from the moment when the ice crystals of ungrateful dawn ( "*I am dawn's enemy*" - *Raimbaut de Vaqueiras* ) spattered on the casement window of my Parisian refuge, ( a friend's generous invitation ) , to the streaking twilight, hectic like a dancing hag. Eagerly did I traverse the many stations where a troubadour of merit and craft, no mere *jongleur* , nor *histrion* , nor baiter of bears or cheater at cards, may accomplish bold deeds: Issy-les-Molineaux ; Melun ; Juvisy, ( where many a *vilain* gave good coin for cassette and fiddle ) . A break at Fontainebleau, heir to the wondrous traditions of musical art, such as those of the chapel of St. Leonard of Limoges, and of the legendary Noktar, he of the monastery of St. Gall. It was in this citadel that, in this century, Nadia the baker's daughter trained the composers of my nation in *Ars Nova* and *Plainsong* , *Motet* and *Cantus Firmus* .

Between Fontainebleau and Sens stretches a desolate caravan route, grimy and bitter. It was on this road that so many bad memories were earned , of wasted hours fretting on hillocks and grassy banks, with no aid of lift from trailer, truck, car or van; or drinking in sad wayside bars, where language and merchandise proclaimed me foreigner to the local churls.

Nothing I witnessed in Fontainebleau had prepared me for such *dolor* . It was there that , onwards of 1 PM , laying my instrument case on the hot stones of the sidewalk of a busy street, I'd inserted a Music Minus One tape cassette of the Vivaldi A-Minor Concerto into my portable Sanyo ghetto-blaster, lifted *rebec* to collarbone and *archet* to flight even as the lark's wing, to flood its streets with glorious sounds not heard there since the days of Pompadour and the *Roi Soleil* .

May Marcabru curse me in one of his wormwood verses if some in-law, cousin , or collateral relation of Nadia Boulanger didn't pause in her passage along the street, long enough to stoop down and place a 100-franc note <sup>2</sup> in my fiddle box! An antique duchess, eyes sharper than crow's-beaks, visage filled with mischievous humors and befriender of troubadours, bearing that air of complicity that identifies all lovers of serious music against an ignorant society!

Alas! How could I have divined that this warm gesture of fellowship was to be followed by the misery of those 6 hours of hitch-hiking the 60 kilometers from Fontainebleau to Sens! The road to Sens begins just outside of Fontainebleau, at the foot of a celebrated obelisk, memorial for the honored dead of endless military ventures . More than one descent into the French countryside has come to grief at this plinth. It must be the worst place to hitch-hike from in all of France, although it is invariably indicated by the locals as the place at which to begin one's

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<sup>2</sup> About \$20

travels. Army convoys, tanks, jeeps, khaki vans and other vehicles holding squadrons of infantry and knights-at-arms predominate. Most of the remaining traffic consists of oil tankers and industrial trucking . Furthermore the eyes of soldiers fill with sour brine at the mere sight of a hitch-hiker on their road. His independence is too painful a reminder to their own state of captivity. The obelisk itself is no tribute to the internationalist creed of vagabonds!

Finally a salesman stopped and drove me as far as Montreaux. Opportunities here were equally lean, though in a pleasanter landscape. I was too overtaxed with luggage to be a good hitch-hiker. My preparations had been based on the experiences of an earlier decade, when I might allow myself to be blown across the map of Europe with a mere back-pack and a notebook holding addresses in various cities.

But my calling of troubadour required that I carry far too many bags and boxes for easy travel on siroccos, tramotanas or mistrals:

First the violin in its delicate case, no hacker's schnoodle-box either, but a worthy instrument! For who does not take to heart the adjuration of the Monk of Montaudun, when he writes:

*“ And it irritates me, I swear by Saint Salvat, to hear a vile violinist in a good court!”*

Next came the sturdy Sanyo ghetto-blaster with twin speakers, a yard long and more than a palm high, its chrome

glistening like the sweat of a sleek black stallion in the thick of the tournament.

And stacks of tapes , music by Vivaldi, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Senaille, Sinding, Pessard, Nadaud, Bohm, Kreisler ..... . Also replacement batteries, books of music and verse and light reading, and clothing for a journey of a month or more . Those days are long gone when the art of song could be had for a mere song! Such things have not been seen since the reign of Guillem IX of Poitou, when musicians did *vers* only and no *canço* , and the *Ars Nova* had not gotten people in the habit of expecting so many lines of music to move in different directions at the same time.

Yet Dame Fortune, like the faithful wife of a knight who follows her sire to campaigns in distant lands, sat patiently in wait for me in the marketplaces of Sens, as she does for all wayfarers who have the courage to go the road and take their comfort in a high wind at their backs. It is put this way by Bernart de Ventadorn:

*“When I see the lark stir her wings for joy  
against the sunlight, forgetting herself  
letting herself*

*fall*

*With the sweetness that comes into her  
heart*

*So great and envy comes on me to see her  
rejoicing*

*I wonder that my heart does not melt with  
desiring.”*

Comfort I found at last, so I knew from the moment when ,  
striding into the lobby of the *Hotel des Deux Ponts* , I beheld on  
the cash register, like an emblazoned heraldic emblem, an  
*Amnesty Internationale* sticker identical to that which I bear on  
my fiddle case. *Brothers of the same knightly fraternity* ! The  
hotel manager gave me a beer on the house and lodgings on the  
second floor at a low price .<sup>3</sup>

*“ But there be another varlet who, like yourself, sings in the  
marketplace , before the Prisunic to be exact , who lodges here the  
same as yourself. ”*

To which utterance I gave reply:

*“Those simple-minded troubadours get off  
on tangents which have the excellent merit  
of leading nowhere”*

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<sup>3</sup>Even today it is possible to find decent rooms in provincial France at 7\$ /night.

-Marcabru



Sitting on the bedstead of my room, content and deeply absorbed, I gazed through the window as evening turned to a twilight which, broken and footsore, hobbled into *crépuscule* , then vanished into night. Rubbing down the body of my *vielle* , cleaning its case and testing the *archet* , my musings turned upon these verses of Guillaume Appolinaire:

## *Crepuscule*

*Frolée par les ombres des morts  
Sur l'herbe où le jour e'exténue  
L'arlequine s'est mis nue  
Et dans l' étang mire son corps*

*Un charlatan crépusculaire  
Vante les tours que l'on va faire  
Le ciel sans teinte est constellé  
D'astres pâles comme du lait*

*Sur les tréteaux l'arlequin blême  
Salue d'abord les spéctateurs  
Des sorciers venus de Bohême  
Quelques fées et les enchanteurs*

*Ayant décroché une étoile  
Il la manie à bras tendu  
Tandis que des pieds un pendu  
Sonne en mesure les cymbales*

*L'aveugle berce un bel enfant  
La biche passe avec ses faons  
Le nain regarde d'un air triste  
Grandir l'arlequine trismégiste*



Ah! How fragrant the frayed garment of Sens , how modest her despoiled visage , weary as the internal flame of a gem drained of vital force , making brave show of its baroque elegance, its antique charm against the corrosive venom of modern *Schrecklichkeit* : smoke, noise, alarms, danger, gases , oil spills , greasy stinks, glue vapors , lead paint, rubbish, rubble, glass fragments, vomiting autoengines, burping helicopters, expectorating Velosolexes , Apocalyptic motorcycles , thundering airplanes , diseased exhausts , crackling lawn mowers , feverish air-conditioners , whistles , klaxons , sirens , blasts from fire truck horns and the universal collapse of solitude or privacy. All this - and much more - passed beneath the mitered window of my room above the sign of the *Hotel des Deux Ponts* .

Quiet descended , upon the Place de l'Esplanade at around 9 PM , outside my hotel window, never. As soon as the sun , ( hinting that I might want to engage in some conspiracy with it ) , stopped squinting at me through the window, I walked down the stairs and back into the town in a search for silence. Real silence, the silence censored by enlightened democracies everywhere , yet necessary to troubadours seeking that part of their soul where all the good songs are .

I gazed, with that slight envy the world requires to kindle desire, at the domestic interiors, illuminated by soft wattage, in the holds of the barges moored by the banks of the Yonne to my left , then at the solemn procession of their dark leathernly bulkheads guiding my steps like a cortege to a burial. Much as I would have liked, I had to resist the urge to follow them

upstream. On the highways laid down in parallel to the river, cars and motorbikes set up an infernal din, shuttling ceaselessly between two nowheres.

That solitude which I sought was discovered after an hour's search, 10 blocks away in the Old City, when I entered upon a twisting alleyway neglected since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Too narrow for the passage of cars, it was in any case a dead end, excepting only myself deserted. No lovesick cat, no bellicose dog. Save for the buzz of the street lamps, there was total silence. Scarcely a whisper hovering in the penumbra of the void:

*“Nous avons suivi l’empierrement que  
notre coeur  
s’était tracé  
Jusq’aux plaines de l’air et l’unique  
silence.”*

- René Char

“ Priceless treasure!” I babbled to myself; for I dared not speak aloud and undo the gift bestowed upon me. Here, in the obscurest part of provincial Sens it was still possible to find an oasis of blessed silence. Despised everywhere, from every great metropolis which prides itself on importing all things from the most distant reaches of the globe, it has been thoroughly eradicated.

I stood there awhile in solemn reverence <sup>4</sup>, until the approach of a distant airplane gurgling out its guts told me that

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<sup>4</sup> Not to exaggerate

civilization had not yet destroyed itself, alas. Then I returned to my room and wrote:

## *Sens*

*\*Baroque summer residence for the decadent nobility*

*\*Parks, canals, deteriorating chateaux, an old hulk of a Gothic cathedral.*

*\*Although sleepy beyond belief, the commerce of the nation, noisy, dangerous, dirty, arrogant, passes over its bridges without pause.*

*\*In a few words: in Sens there is neither life nor peace.*

*\*The beauty of the Yonne, the gypsy call of the barges, the grandeur of the old buildings around the Place de l'Esplanade, the famous Italian baroque theater.*

*\*Pathetic much -disjointed derelict leans, like a figure out of Picasso, in a doorway and strums his guitar. Wine bottle by foot. From dawn to dusk he sings worn snatches of George Brassens ballads.*

That yokel was one of your low caste *jongleurs* , those unlaundered knaves with nothing but a box to bang and scraps of others verses ricocheting in their brains, as starving sparrows will collide against the walls of the *donjon* of some abandoned castle in Provence . He is of the clan of those who hover about the *pissoirs* of the rue St. Denis, gaining their living through scaring francs from the tourists who use them. These are babbling,

logger-headed, rum-soaked, palsied simpletons who can neither scribble their names nor carry a tune!

These are no troubadours! For real troubadours there can be but few in these days, and in France I saw them only in Paris, they none of them today having the heart to take to the road, to fly after the lark of Bernart de Ventadorn, nor test their skill with the nightingales of Arnaut Daniel.

None but I! None but myself did I see, tramping the roads of destiny, the routes of song, the routes of companionship false and true, of pilgrims, and unattainable ladies, and knights, and wandering scholars, of strange beasts, and monsters, and saints, and miracles! Armed with fiddle , Sanyo ghetto-blaster and stacks of tapes, smitten alike with Francophilia and melomania, and graced with a healthy contempt for all those stay-at-home city-bred ways of they who would stew in a sty for endless eons, dreaming of the azure sky that will never come to them!

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