

EAST SIDE, FAR SIDE—ALL AROUND THE SOUND

a/k/a

IT'S NOT WHERE YOU'RE *FRUM*, IT'S WHERE YOU'RE AT

By GARY LUCAS

I'm looking over yonder's wall into the valley of the shadow of the (partially) fallen Eden known as the Lower East Side from the vantage point of 30 years residence in the West Village. You're probably wondering why I'm here...as in, what the heck is an unreconstructed denizen of the far West Village doing in a book devoted to the Lower East Side?

Well, as an avant-garde musician who has toiled for years in the vineyards of myriad transient clubs/watering holes du jour/toilettes situated on the Lower East Side, I gotta right to offer my two cents plain on what is basically a very boring cultural turf

war conducted on the rapidly shifting grounds we New Yorkers walk on—grounds once abounding with the jouissance of spontaneous space for all, as opposed to the present-day manicured playgrounds reserved as the exclusive purview of millionaire bohemia...grounds currently being auctioned off/offered up/plundered anew by the great historical leveler/gross revisionism of the developer's wrecking ball...all this in the name of progress/urban gentrification/capitalism run amuck.

But despite not actually living there (traitor!), I do have a deep genetic/historical connection with the LES, beginning with my peripatetic grandfather Samuel Goldman, née Pekarsky.

Born in 1892 in Jedwabne Poland, my grandpa was smuggled out of the Old Country at the age of 5 dressed as a girl. Had he remained in Poland, he would have had to face the heavy hand

of eventual conscription into the Polish army, which was mandatory at the time for all male citizens. He arrived at Ellis Island with his mother on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, circa 1897, speaking only Yiddish and Polish. She intended to move immediately upstate to Syracuse, where family awaited them.

But due to the ban against travel on the High Holy Days, they were detained a couple of days on the LES. The local Hebrew Aid Society gave them temporary shelter on the Bowery, an experience my grandfather was never to forget. It was a primal memory

emblazoned in his consciousness, wherein he first tasted the hitherto unknown sybaritic pleasures of life in these United States,

On his first night at the temporary, the Hebrew Aid Society folks running the shelter made a gift of bananas to everyone there. It was an exotic delicacy my grandfather had never seen before in Poland, let alone tasted. He tried to eat one, skin and all, with predictably disastrous consequences. The result was a lifelong aversion to the offending fruit. But boy, did ever he grow to love the Lower East Side! The great banana scar notwithstanding.

Over the years throughout my childhood, he constantly sang the praises of the neighborhood's Yiddish Theater, its naughty burlesque houses, its fine kosher restaurants, ascribing a magical aura to the place, imbuing it with a patina of rosy nostalgia.



Gods and Monsters debut at the old Knitting Factory on Houston Street in July 1989, l to r: Paul Now, Gary Lucas, Tony Thunder Smith, and Jared Nickerson

So when I eventually moved to New York City in 1977 with my newlywed Chinese/Jewish bride straight from Taiwan by way of San Francisco, I immediately gravitated to the LES, having inherited his curiosity and love for the vibrant Jewish and general immigrant cultural fermentation. There, new art was busy being born daily like so many yeasty loaves of bread, new ways of thinking and being swelling skyward, new mornings shining down on a resurgent artistic community—and I was truly tempted to settle there.

But our best friends lived in the West Village—and consequently we moved to an apartment to be closer to them. And in the West Village I remain some 30 years later... (turncoat! interloper!).

Anyway, always the maverick, I oppose the chauvinistic viewpoint of many inveterate Lower East Siders and continue to side with Groucho Marx (an original Lower East Side boychick if ever there was one) on this issue—namely: I really don't want to be a part of any fraternity that would have me as a member... (No, just kidding...and truth to tell, I don't really feel a part of the West Village community, either. I feel a most excellent outsider wherever I walk the earth.)

In any case—it's not where you're *from*, it's where you're at.

Still, I have clocked many, many man-hours on the Lower East Side over the years in my capacity as a professional guitarist/songwriter/composer/experimental music maker and short order chef of amusement.

The Lower East Side is essentially where I further bolstered and burnished my reputation as an avant-garde musician, a rep first established after spending five years before the mast with Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band. That was a gig where I earned my avant-stripes, to be sure, but a gig where I had to more or less totally subordinate myself to Beefheart's cranky visionary genius.

You might say I rose up to be Me—Gary Lucas—out of the fertile compost/slag heap abutting and abetting greater Houston Street.

My first foray into the public eye and ear of downtown NYC as a solo guitarist—my coming out under my own name as an artist in my own

right, as it were—was at the old Knitting Factory on Houston and Mulberry.

In June 1988, a year or so after the Knit opened its doors, I was asked to mount a show there, based on my credentials as “Captain Beefheart's guitarist.” And despite every imaginable catastrophe that could befall my debut (for instance, my name getting left out of the Knitting Factory ad in the Village Voice that week), I managed to sell out the club through word of mouth alone.

And after playing an hour-long set—in which I literally turned myself inside out, wringing all the changes in my soul and then some—I received multiple encores, was handed a fistful of dollars from the proceeds of the door take. I remember coming back home to the West Village that night, marveling at how I had entered the sacred artistic lists of the East—a landscape looming large in my imagination fecund with all its received mythopoeia/jasmine and garbage scent and sensibility. I had more than stood my ground. I had smote everything and everyone in my path. That night I pledged to devote myself to music full-time. Shortly thereafter I left my day job of 13 years uptown for a nonstop life in music, and I have never once looked back with regret.

That was a true turning point in my life. It all happened one long hot summer night forged in the rickety retro-fitted crucible of a former Lower East Side sweat shop turned neo-boho clubhouse—the dear departed old Knit.

But the Knitting Factory wasn't the only stickball game Downtown.

I remember playing the Gas Station that same summer of '88, tucked away on the corner of Avenue B and 2nd Street, an actual old Shell Station gaudily bedecked like a small-scale version of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers.

One mid-summer night's daydream I was wailing away to no one in particular on my '64 Strat (audience size being always unpredictable, particularly at many of these underground clubs), having myself a high old time, fueled on whatever, amped and strapped and cranked up to 11 and broadcasting my particular message to the neighborhood-at-large at large decibels, sound rebounding and wafting 'oer the street sur les rooftops du Loisaïda, when a gaggle of elderly

black winos came shambling up to the fence that surrounded this particular gasoline alley like so many George Romero zombies and began whooping it up in response to my guitar pyrotechnics, lustily shouting encouragement to me after one particularly snarling, vicious blues—"Play it, man! Play it! That's the TRUTH!!"

At that moment I felt totally validated as a musician... even more so than when The New York Times came a' calling to the old Knit and wrote me up as the "Guitarist of 1000 Ideas" after a show at their "What is Jazz?" Festival that same summer.

I was free, white and already late 30-something, but like the cat in Steely Dan's "Deacon Blues," I was riffing existentially on a much higher plane than before—I was playing just what I was feeling in the moment, exercising those constitutional liberties guaranteed to all Americans (and particularly New Yorkers) but rarely acted upon by most, partaking of that same spirit 'o jazz madness that has flourished way down East from the days when raucous klezmer music spilled out of LES tenements at midnight to the era when Charlie Parker lived right around the corner from Tompkins Square Park to the night Lee Morgan was shot at Slugs... There was something so wild and untamed and Rousseau-like about the vibe that shimmered off the greener pastures of the Park that summer of my coming-into-my-own as a Downtown musician. There was a whole different feel and atmosphere about it, far, far different from the relatively uptight West Village where I had labored for years in relative secrecy on music I rarely got to perform in New York—only in studios on the West Coast, and in concerts in Europe and the US with Capn' Beef.

For a long time then, the Knitting Factory was my base, their musical habitués my peeps. There was a very enjoyable downhome downtown bonhomie/ultra-Jewish vibe about it all that connected to my grandpa's tales of his early adventures on the Lower East Side.

And the food was always so tasty around there. I loved traveling over from the West Village just to sample the culinary delights of the LES, especially the strip down Houston Street.

From Yonah Shimmel's knishery to Russ and Daughters fancy fruits and nuts to Katz's

pastramarama, I was usually in kosher Pig Heaven. (Another long ago and far away LES eatery, one exterior wall of which originally sported the prominent painted tuchis of un petit cochon pointed south across Houston. It was visibly marred by the pelting of paint-filled balloons hurled from the far side of the road by some decidedly offended kosher neighbors.) I fondly remember walking over to Katz's one chilly fall day in 1993 in the company of Michael Dorf, then owner and chief mover and shaker of the Knit, with several other Jewish avant-musicians, and sitting down en masse at a table all ready for the ritual downing of massive marbled slabs of corned beef on rye, silver bowls brimming with half sour pickles and sour tomatoes in brine abounding—all to be washed down with copious amounts of Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray and Black Cherry—to consecrate the beginning of our soon-to-be-embarked-upon tour of European cities under the aegis of the Knitting Factory's JAM tour (which stood then for Jewish Avant-Garde Music—but of course!).

A few years later, around 1994, the Mercury Lounge opened up farther East on Houston, and that soon became my second musical home away from home, for a while became my other favorite place to play—in fact, my band Gods and Monsters, a free-floating collective of insane experimental rock and jazzers which I had debuted at the Knit in the summer of 1989, rapidly became kind of the house band of the Merc Lounge for the first couple years of their existence. (The proprietor Michael Swier had operated several other LES bars before his first foray into music; he had brought the club up from scratch and literally built the stage by hand.)

With my expanded Gods and Monsters lineup boasting three singers at that time (Richard Barone, Dina Emerson, and the eponymous Emily), along with Jonathan Kane on drums and Jean Chaine on bass, we used to really pack them in there on the weekends. I remember Richard Barone, an excellent and underrated singer and performer, trundling his actual original '60s mellotron (think the intro to "Strawberry Fields Forever") over from the West Village where he lived not far from me in order to play with us—what a trouper!

More rockist than the Knit, the Merc Lounge

suiting me fine as a place to try out new songs and new players. One night I went down there to perform with Peter Stampfel, former Fug and one of the founders of the legendary Lower East Side band The Holy Modal Rounders, shortly after we'd made our debut as The Du-Tels at the Knitting Factory 2 months before. A whole battalion of Village Voice music critics were there, plus all the old LES folkie sentimentalists and many of the up-and-coming freak-folk brigade. I remember getting up on stage with Peter after my traditional Katz's double frankfurter with kraut pre-show chow-down, picking wurst fabrik out of my teeth—and yea verily we came, we saw, we played every song in our repertoire and then some twice as fast as we ever had before...and the gleeful shouts of joy and pleas and requests for more more! more! came thick and fast. It was a triumph for me to play that night with Peter in his old neighborhood. It felt absolutely glorious to be alive and making music for the friendly folks on the Lower East Side...

Couple years later Tonic opened its doors right off Delancey Street across from Ratner's (later the Lansky Lounge). This former kosher wine emporium started out proudly as the anti-Knitting Factory, an appellation arising over a dispute concerning Michael Dorf having surreptitiously set up mini-spy cams in the Knit main space to broadcast 24/7 the comings and goings and bleatings and nose-pickings and generally irreverent behavior of any musician in rehearsal or performing there in the mainspace over his short-lived Knit-TV streaming video channel. When John Zorn found out about this he brought der Zorn Gottes down hard on the Knit, and pledged to boycott playing that club ever again. He set up camp just down the road apiece in the former Kedem wine and juice emporium, transforming it instantly into the mega-hipster hotspot Tonic.

For several years, Tonic became the in-spot for the nomadic downtown crowd who had become suspicious of the swollen Internet era boom Knit juggernaut and their ambitious plans for world domination...I liked playing both the Knit and Tonic just fine...Feh on "which side are you on!?"... Under the benign auspices of Melissa and her husband, the former Kedem

kosher winery morphed over the years from bagel and coffee Sunday morning klezmer-klatch, to full-service boho book and record store with a little music on the side, then to expanded refurbished performance space and stage. Sadly, it was later bedeviled with problems of plumbing, heat, rising neighborhood rents, and the general change that scarred and mutilated the face of much of the Lower East Side, post 9/11, as realtors and developers began grabbing up as much available space as they could while the grabbing was good, ripping the neighborhood asunder in the process.

They closed down the premises of Tonic in 2007 after a last gasp sit-in and multiple media protests and manifestos that failed to convince the Bloomberg administration to offer the full weight of its civic support to one of the last outposts of musical art for art's sake on the Lower East Side. (And did you really expect the Bloomberg administration to act any differently?).

And yet, one door closes and another door opens...

For me, the opening a few years ago of NYC poet emeritus Bob Holman's Bowery Poetry Club—a charming performance space and bar, quasi-coffee shop and browsing nook, situated directly across from the recently shuttered CBGB's—came right on time, to say the least...This particular club still preserves a fair simulacrum of the spirit, the heart, a certain *je ne sais pas* of the best of the Lower East Side clubs of yore, with resident poets and NYC bohemian fixtures such as Taylor Mead guaranteed a permanent residency. Political and poetic and literary and aesthetic discussion groups get free reign to commingle there with agit-prop theater groups and free jazzers and rock operas...And I can (for the moment, anyway—keep watching this space!) still play whatever I feel like playing, on the cozy, comfortable stage of the Bowery Poetry Club.

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