

The Music Man

Mozart-Playing New Yorker Learns a Secret, and Laughs

By Neil Henry

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Allie, a young New Yorker I met at the Central Union Mission here, was the only man to discover my true identity in his two-month Baltimore-Washington odyssey.

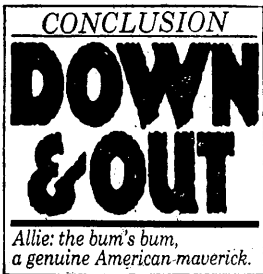
As time passed in the journey, the original fear I felt about being uncovered was supplanted by a sense of shame, the ignominy of sharing bread and swapping stories with homeless derelicts while knowing I had alternatives that these men could only wish for—a warm place to sleep at night, steady work, food to eat.

My uncovering happened one March morning at the conclusion of the assignment when I finally came in from the cold. I was dismayed when Allie discovered I was a reporter, but on hindsight I think I willed it to happen, for Allie had become a friend.

For a moment he was stunned, "bugged out," as he put it. But then he smiled, reassured me, chuckled uproariously and actually apologized. Another man might have been bitter and insulted. But not Allie. This man was a bum's bum, a drifter, a genuine American maverick.

To him, the last part of this series is devoted.

Allie could not be stereotyped. There



are no labels such as "engineer" or "jogger" that could be pinned to him and thus impart his goals, desires or pedigree. You knew Allie only by spending time with him. And at the most unlikely moments you discovered the most extraordinary things about this man.

Allie once wandered across Europe and the Middle East. He did not tell me this, though. I learned it one afternoon at George Washington University when Allie, panhandling, spoke in flawless Persian to a group of delighted Iranian coeds. He also knew bits of Hebrew, Swahili, Italian

and French. But his extensive knowledge of languages was not something that could be tacked onto a resume like some kind of merit badge. It was solely a tool he used to know people, which was Allie's reason for life.

Music served the same purpose. Late one night at the mission, Allie told several old men that he taught himself to play the piano, flute and guitar. The old men sighed, "sure, sure," and rolled over and went to sleep.

They should have been with us the night Allie and I caught the tail end of a free U.S. Navy Band concert at Departmental Auditorium.

When the concert was over, and as the musicians packed up their instruments, Allie gleefully glided to the piano. He lightly ran his fingers across the keys once or twice, then, with eyes closed and body bent, played Mozart and Scott Joplin so effortlessly and dramatically that he had the sailors humming and whistling along.

Like most bums, Allie had a promised land, a place where he visualized the fulfillment of all his worldly desires. His dream was Hollywood. From the time he was a teen-ager, Allie said, friends and strangers told him he had the face, the grace, the

See ALLIE, A8, Col. 1

DOWN & OUT

ALLIE, FROM A1

zest to be an actor. Whenever anyone asked Allie where he was headed in life he would spread his arms wide and beam. "Hollywood! I'm gonna be in pictures."

But Allie, like other bums, wandered everywhere except to his promised land. "Dreams," he once said, "are very important. They're the only thing that keep you going, right?" He hoped to find sunshine, peace and perhaps fame, but deep down he expected Hollywood to be just like Las Vegas, a city that depressed him terribly.

So he drifted across the country from New York to Miami to Chicago to the Far West and back again, but carefully avoiding Hollywood, for he didn't want his dreams shattered.

"Heaven," he only said, "Hollywood. I want, anyway, but he didn't just go to California. He just wanna go to heaven with a little dog and a piano."

In the West, however, Allie wore a blue and white plaid, a gray sweat shirt, faded jeans and hiking boots. He was curly-haired, thick-set and broad-shouldered, and was blessed with a striking Romanesque face. He grew up on East Broadway in Lower Manhattan, the third son of an unsuccessful Italian grocer who spent half his life in jail on various criminal charges. When he was home, his father beat Allie severely, once sending him to the hospital with a deep gash in his head that required 12 stitches.

He was one of the whites in public schools that were mainly Puerto Rican and black. His best friend in grammar school killed his second grade teacher in the back. The night I met Allie at the mission he was telling another man that he grew up learning how to avoid fights.

"All you gotta do is pick your nose a lot and drool," Allie said. "Just act crazy enough and nobody'll bother you." Apparently the method worked well enough for him. For, of all his gifts, Allie was proudest of the fact that he never landed in jail.

As a child, Allie loved one person, his grandmother, who migrated from Sicily to Ellis Island in 1909. Unlike most other first-generation Italian families, who gravitated to East Broadway and worked their way up through the melting pot, Allie's family remained in the Lower Manhattan immigrant neighborhood, stuck in an American time warp.

"Grandma really loved me. She had this little wooden box of pennies she kept in the basement," Allie said. "Every time I went over there she gave me a few and I'd run to the corner five and ten and buy bubble gum. That penny box was the best toy I ever had."

"When she died," he said, "she told my father 'Be good to Allie, be good to Allie.' She was crying."

While Allie's two brothers became West Side street merchants, hawking second-hand clothing and costume jewelry, Allie took up music. For several years he played piano for a West Side band, but became disillusioned when, as his best friend, he ditched his wivits and bled to death.

That was four years ago, when Allie was 17. He has been a vagabond ever since.

He hitchhiked to Las Vegas once

and there fell deeply in love with a show-girl who lived in a spacious desert home and had a \$100-a-day cocaine habit. She was a Venus, Allie said, dark-eyed, blond-haired, with the voice of an angel. He wanted her, to quit that job, to come live with him. He would work at McDonald's or someplace, but at least they would be together. He wanted to save her from the pretense, savagery and decadence that was the Strip. She refused, though, and wept for hours when Allie told her he was leaving.

Allie was a bum because bums were the only honest people in the world, he often said. They had no veneers of class, wealth or comfort to protect them from humanity. He preferred sleeping on a park bench in Las Vegas with other homeless creatures to the comfort of his girl friend's king-size waterbed because "Life... it's in the streets." One day in Washington he purchased a bucket of chicken for an old man who kept him warm the night before with a bottle of whiskey.

"Everything's upside down," he laughed. "These are the important people."

Allie, in a way, has been searching for life's wooden penny boxes ever since he was a child. He was an expert panhandler. One day in Georgetown, after I told him I could justify, we pooled our coins and purchased three rubber balls. While I stood on the corner of Wisconsin and M juggling the balls, Allie called out to passersby like a Barnum and Bailey showman. I collected 55 cents juggling, but in about the same amount of time on the other side of the street Allie earned more than two dollars panhandling.

On Ash Wednesday we attended services at Christ Episcopal Church of Georgetown, which was half-filled that day with silver-haired old women in fur coats who sat still and erect in polished wooden pews with leather-bound bibles opened on their laps, while white-robed priests led them in prayer.

Allie and I took communion there, sipping wine out of silver goblets and drinking waters, and later we went to Missie, the "rector." He was a tall

blond man. Allie spread his arms before him and said, "We're kinda down and out and need a little help. You can't take it with you, you know?"

"Well," the rector answered, glancing at the half-filled collection plate, "you seem to have understood the service better than most of our regulars."

Later, before shooing us away, the rector looked both ways, then gave us five dollars in a hallway, with his back turned, on the women, who munched on lady fingers and discussed the coming of spring.

But Allie didn't like places like Georgetown because they were "too fat"... Rich people think of them and bums more than you, you know." He preferred panhandling downtown, near the bus stations, because there people were people, he said.

Allie was an Elwood P. Dowd whose "Harvey" was all mankind. But unlike Dowd, Allie was disturbed by various inscrutable facets of life and humanity, so, to give them a place in his world, he used several phrases to define them.

"Bugged out," he'd say, upon passing men on heating grates. "Eat too much, you get fat, too many cars, anyway," he said, when a sleek black car turned right on red and nearly hit us. "People are people," he'd say, an all-purpose phrase encompassing children's smiles and grownups' frowns.

Allie effused a paradoxical but vibrant mix of innocence and sagacity. On the subway one afternoon he prompted laughter and joy by putting his arms around grim-faced men and women and murmuring about justice and friendship. It might have been

terribly embarrassing had anyone else done this. But this was Allie's way, and the commuters somehow seemed to sense it.

I watched him collect phone numbers and addresses from more than a score of strangers who were taken by him, seduced by his smile. A George Washington University professor, after Allie tried to panhandle from him, shook Allie's hand with a tranquil gleam in his eye and said, "You're Italian, aren't you?"

"Paisano, yes,"

"I can tell, I just got back from Italy."

The two men talked about Washington, how cruel the city seemed to be, and later Allie refused the dollar this may offer—thats, too, was his way.

Then Allie said, "I like you too much to take your money. Can I hug you?"

And the man's face widened with delight.

One cold night at a skating rink on the Mall we met a lonely Arlington secretary who said she often came out at night to watch skaters, though she couldn't skate herself. Allie and she talked for an hour that night, he trying to pep her up, she grinning in disbelief, and when they parted, after she penciled her phone number on Allie's sleeve, she kissed him and cried.

There were quite a few disbelievers, though. A born-again Christian he met on the Mall outside the Air and Space Museum called him a "homosexual devil" when, as they parted, Allie patted him on the face.

Then there was the night Allie tried to panhandle from a Scientist. The solicitor, thinking Allie

an easy convert, brought him to a plush retreat on S Street NW where two other Scientologists gave him an examination containing 200 methodical personality questions, such as "Does life seem rather vague and unreal to you?"

Allie answered all the questions "sometimes" or "maybe" and the Scientologists quickly diagnosed him as "uncertain... insecure." They suggested he take a Scientology course and asked him to hand over \$10.

"Gee," Allie responded, "I don't have any money. I'm just a panhandler like you." The Scientologists quickly threw him out.

The most baffling thing to Allie was his magnetic sexual appeal. Among the dorellists at the mission he was known as "the American gigolo." But Allie couldn't understand why people desired him. He wasn't a virgin, but at the same time he never had to take sex gratuitously. He once told of a man in New York, another in Alexandria, who wanted him to act in adult films. He told of countless men in New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Las Vegas, who he thought were understanding, ready to shelter him, but later attempted to seduce him once he went along.

One night Allie and I found ourselves stuck in the cold. It was a Friday night on 14th Street, where we spent hours talking to prostitutes and "dorells" and watching a rambly McDonald's security guard shamelessly kick shopping-bag ladies into the cold and play matchmaker between the whores and visiting truckers.

The missions and shelters had closed for the night, so Allie and I

walked to Foggy Bottom in hopes of finding a grate. All of them were occupied, though, so we braced ourselves against the wind and curled up beneath a clump of bushes outside Constitution Hall.

But it was too damn cold to sleep. Finally I suggested we retire to my girl friend's Dupont-Circle efficiency, which I had arranged in my apartment. When we arrived Diana gave several blankets to Allie, who slept on the floor near the bed.

The next morning Allie noticed a Montgomery County high school newspaper on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. I once wrote several articles about the high school and my photograph and title were on the paper's cover.

Allie just smiled and hugged us. He lived with us for two more weeks, looking around town for work, and when he couldn't find a permanent one, he gave Diana considerable over unemployment.

One night he was first in line outside the Washington Post to get work inserting Weekly sections into the Thursday editions. The foreman, though, chose a dozen men in line behind him. It angered Allie so that night he kicked over Post news racks on the way home.

He panhandled, meanwhile, and emptied his pockets on the kitchen table every night with a satisfied smile. Eventually he landed work at a Georgetown cafe, scrubbing dishes and cooking hamburgers.

Then it happened. A mission friend of his came into a little money, enough to buy bus tickets to Florida. Allie, forsaking a \$100 check from the cafe, went with him, leaving behind countless friends among the strangers he met here. Occasionally telephone calls will come for Allie from the men and women to whom he gave our number.

"Oh shoot, that's too bad," one woman sighed disappointingly on the other end of the telephone. "I hope he comes back."

We are still receiving post cards from Allie. The latest came from New Orleans, where he ended up after drifting across Florida for three weeks. It said, in swirling letters: "Left a pretty girl in St. Petersburg. I'm now in New Orleans. Everywhere I go I see miscarriages of justice. There is so much corruption down south. Can't wait to tell you all the stories. Besides that having a great time."

I want to apologize to my friends and colleagues who, upon greeting me back from the cold, asked many questions about this journey—what the places and people were like, was I attacked, was I hurt, did I change?

I apologize for both my inability to answer and the perplexed expression my face wore for many days. It's just that the return to this life was as difficult, at first, as the original transition to homelessness.

I wasn't attacked, nor was I hurt, and I hope these stories told what their significance, perhaps, was that it wasn't a true journey at all. It wasn't a trip to Mars or China and I certainly didn't return with any tangible treasures. The point is I never left this world. I only came to know a bit more about a life we all recognize, but can't or won't comprehend.

There is one footnote. I did not quit smoking. In fact, I ended up smoking more. For among the down and out of Baltimore and Washington there are many men willing to share.

"ONE COLD NIGHT AT A SKATING RINK ON THE MALL WE MET A LONELY ARLINGTON SECRETARY WHO SAID SHE OFTEN CAME OUT AT NIGHT TO WATCH SKATERS, THOUGH SHE COULDN'T SKATE HERSELF. ALLIE AND SHE TALKED FOR AN HOUR THAT NIGHT, HE TRYING TO PEP HER UP, SHE GRINNING IN DISBELIEF, AND WHEN THEY PARTED, AFTER SHE PENCILED HER PHONE NUMBER ON ALLIE'S SLEEVE, SHE KISSED HIM AND CRIED."

