

STEVE LOPEZ / POINTS WEST
From Skid Row to Disney Hall
Steve Lopez
Points West

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Nathaniel was in a panic over what to wear.

"I can't wear these grubby things," he said, taking stock of clothes that bore the stain of the streets. "I've washed them over and over, and that's the best I seem to be able to do."

For months, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers had been excited about an invitation to see the Los Angeles Philharmonic in action at Disney Hall. "The anticipation is horrible," he told me a week before the designated day. He'd started showering daily at a shelter, he said, to gussy himself up as much as possible.

Nathaniel was a music student more than 30 years ago at the prestigious Juilliard School when he suffered a breakdown. Today, as he continues to battle the schizophrenia that landed him on skid row, music is one of the few things that inspires and consoles him.

He plays violin and cello for hours each day in downtown Los Angeles, lifting his instruments out of an orange shopping cart on which he has written:

"Little Walt Disney Concert Hall - Beethoven."

Thursday was the big day. Nathaniel had decided it would be best to attend a rehearsal rather than a concert, because he didn't want to make a scene - a homeless man in the company of well-heeled Angelenos. He was particularly excited because the orchestra would be rehearsing Beethoven.

Nathaniel finally decided on fresh-washed burgundy sweatpants, a black T-shirt, a blue cardigan and white sneakers. He tied a red sweater around his waist and parted his hair in the middle, pasting it down neatly.

But something was still bothering him Thursday morning before we left skid row. Nathaniel was talking to himself more than usual, spouting something about how a cockroach doesn't give orders to a thoroughbred. He refused to leave his cart at a shelter, as arranged, insisting on hauling it to my office parking lot, a 30-minute trek guaranteed to put us behind schedule.

I drove to my office to make the arrangements and then waited, fearing he'd get distracted and lose track of time. But just as I was writing him off, Nathaniel appeared in the distance, lugging his cart west on 2nd Street. He parked it in the garage, pulled out his violin and headed jauntily toward Disney Hall like a student on his way to school.

Steve Lopez

Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

At 2nd and Hill, where Nathaniel often plays against the clatter and percussion of incessant traffic, I mentioned that Itzhak Perlman would perform at Disney Hall later this month.

"Oh, my God," Nathaniel enthused. "He's like molten lava on violin."

The angry man I had seen on skid row continued to soften as we approached Disney Hall, the Frank Gehry creation Nathaniel referred to as an iron butterfly. The mysteries of his illness are so profound that I still find it impossible to reconcile the poetry with the madness. This is a man I've heard many times carry on incoherent conversations with someone who isn't there, only to then rhapsodize on the structure of a Mozart composition.

When he reached 1st and Grand, Nathaniel studied the performance schedule outside the hall, awed at the thought of the world's greatest musicians playing a mere two blocks from where he takes a bow and "saws away," as he calls it.

Adam Crane, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's director of public relations and an amateur cellist, greeted Nathaniel as if he were a visiting dignitary, handing him a copy of Gehry's book on Disney Hall. Crane reminded Nathaniel that the orchestra would be rehearsing Beethoven's Third Symphony.

"The Eroica," Nathaniel said, asking if they would play each movement, and delighted that they would.

Crane asked Nathaniel when he had last set foot in a concert hall.

Nathaniel laughed bashfully.

"I haven't been in a concert hall in 4 billion years," he said.

Crane, who had read about Nathaniel's rise from Cleveland's public school music program and his ultimate fall, gave him a VIP tour.

"We're right behind the stage right now," Crane said in the bowels of the auditorium.

"It's like a dream," Nathaniel said. "I don't know if this is a dream or purgatory."

A voice came over the P.A. system as we entered a long hallway, which Nathaniel said reminded him of the announcements in a Cleveland mental hospital.

Nathaniel asked about famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, intrigued to know if he was a regular guy. Crane said he seemed quite nice, indeed. Nathaniel also threw out the names of the conductors he remembered from his days at Juilliard: James Conlon, Lorin Maazel and Herbert von Karajan, no longer seeming like the man who an hour earlier had delivered a skid row rumination on cockroaches.

"Do you know Dvorak's Cello Concerto?" Nathaniel asked.

"It's one of my favorites," Crane said. He told Nathaniel he had a Czechoslovakian cello made in 1875.

Nathaniel was impressed. "I don't wanna mess with it," he said. "I don't even want to look at it. I'll just wear dark glasses."

It was almost as if he were a student again, joshing with a classmate. Was Nathaniel being sly, fishing for an invitation to have a go at Crane's cello? If so, it worked. And when Crane offered, Nathaniel didn't hesitate. He sat in Crane's office tuning up, the PR man marveling at the sharpness of Nathaniel's ear.

And then he played, without the bow at first, picking the strings with his right hand. It was

Bach's Cello Suite No. 1: Prelude. Several Philharmonic staffers heard the music and wandered over, peering in to see a man of the streets, tattered and elegant, close his eyes and drift into ecstasy.

Nathaniel was still floating as we made our way toward the hall, where the orchestra was gathering.

"Stage Level Door 1," read the sign in front of us.

"Are you ready?" Crane asked.

Yes, he was ready, and he was certainly impressed by the hall - a stunning monument to his sustaining passion. But it was the musicians who drew his eye, the hallowed messengers of the gods he worships.

A cellist named Peter Snyder came over to say hello to Nathaniel, whom he had read about. Nathaniel mentioned a resemblance to Hungarian-born cellist Janos Starker and marveled at Snyder's 33-year career with the orchestra. Snyder returned the compliment, mentioning Nathaniel's own record of survival on the streets.

"I just want to play," Nathaniel said. "I'll live underneath a rock."

Nathaniel took a seat front and center in the orchestra tier for a rehearsal that would amount to a private concert.

"They look so happy," he said as the musicians tuned. "I would be happy too, if I was going to play the Third Symphony, especially with good players. You look over at the next player and say, 'Wow.'"

On most days, Nathaniel goes to Pershing Square to study the Beethoven statue for inspiration. On this day, he leaned into me during the first movement and whispered that Beethoven was with us in Disney Hall.

"He's in the room," Nathaniel said later as the funeral march began, a low, creeping dirge. "If his spirit was in the room, it would be somewhere around there. Do you see the conductor? That's Beethoven. He will interpret Beethoven. He is Beethoven."

Nathaniel listened intently, a student at times, an unabashed fan at others. He nodded, swayed, giggled with joy, and now and then conducted the orchestra with an imaginary baton. The Third Symphony is charged with thunderous bursts that collapse in tender reflection and then rage again, the song of Nathaniel's life.

"They are flawless, flawless, flawless players," he whispered in unabashed awe. "Every single note is there. There's not any nonsense. Of course, this is a world-renowned orchestra."

When the rehearsal ended, Nathaniel had one word for the triumph he had witnessed.

"Bravo."

Yes, he said, he'd be delighted to meet the conductor. Esa-Pekka Salonen graciously accepted Nathaniel's compliments and gave him an autograph.

Nathaniel also chatted up Ben Hong, assistant principal cellist, on the genius of Beethoven and the physical and emotional challenges of the Third Symphony.

As it turned out, there had been no need for me to worry about how Nathaniel would handle the day or whether he would be troubled by the sight of people living a life that once seemed within his reach. He was gracious and self-assured, a perfect gentleman.

I now know, after several months of trying to coax him toward a safer and more productive life,

that Nathaniel won't be saved any time soon.

The man who was back in his element at the concert hall on the hill is also comfortable sleeping on skid row, where he chases away rats with a stick on which he has scrawled Beethoven's name.

But Nathaniel has his own idea of salvation, and he removed it now from the violin case he had been carrying. He stood near the stage after the musicians had left and tuned his instrument.

Then Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, in the concert of his life, tucked the violin under his chin and played Disney Hall.

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