

NED BALBO

🕒 25 May 2012 👤 Editor 📖 Journal

East of Tin Pan Alley

For Larry Cennamo, Commack, L.I., ca. 1965-1967

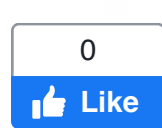
On blank staff paper, five lines parallel,
each named for letters that invoked my creed—
Every Good Boy Does Fine—I drew the circle
(whole note), filled it in: what did I need?
One stem called up a quarter note; connect
it to another, and I had an eighth.
Page after page I wrote. Could I expect
to sight-read soon? I'd struggle, take a breath,
and labor till my mother gave the word.
Mr. Cennamo, what was it you heard

each week, when I returned? My fingers blistered,
anxious, I'd hunch over my guitar,
whole body tensed after half-hours sequestered
with Mel Bay, decoding every bar.
In those first weeks, you stuck some masking tape
beside the tuning pegs, a flat drawn on,
so that, in doubt, I'd secretly look up
to see that flats meant, *Play a half step down.*
My mother sat nearby without a word.
Mr. Cennamo, what was it you heard?

In your split-level home, garage transformed
into your lair and warehouse, trumpets hung,
tarnished, along the wall. Unduly harmed,
a slideless trombone, old guitars unstrung
lay on the workbench. Studying the score,
plectrum in hand, painstakingly I'd play,
wishing, sometimes, I'd practiced even more,
not always sure I'd found the melody.
You sat beside me, offering some word
that gave me hope, at least. What had you heard?

Your own songs, scored by hand in India ink
straight from the Big Band age, on blank staff paper
marked and measured? "So, what do you think?"
you asked, playing us one, the strings' cool quiver
underneath your right hand echoing.
Your black hair, going gray, was neatly trimmed.
My mother, awed, gave praise. You placed the song
back on its stack, almost as if ashamed.
Was it a tune that someone might record,
someday? You didn't know....One day, I heard

something like music issue from my guitar—
my mother turning from the stove to listen
while I practiced. Had I come so far
in so few months? Each week, another lesson,
punished fingers, and some standard stripped
down to its basics by yourself, or Mel,
brought me a little closer as I crept
toward mediocrity—though who could tell
what more might follow if I kept my word?
"Good boy," you said days later, when you heard.



< DAVID AXELROD

DONNA BARKMAN >

> 2 thoughts on "Ned Balbo"

Dave Landrum says:
🕒 2012/05/28 at 9:56 PM

Ned—wonderful poem, one that will evoke memories for anyone who has ever learned guitar. Love the reference to Mel Bay!

Patti Tana says:
🕒 2012/05/31 at 4:36 PM

Ned, I enjoyed reading your poem very much. It reminded me of my piano-practicing days. My husband is learning to play the guitar now, and I especially appreciate the lines "One day, I heard / something like music issue from my guitar — / my mother turning from the stove to listen / while I practiced."

I also admire the way you weave your rhyme, the subtle harmonies.

Comments are closed.

Volume II, Issue I
(Summer 2012)
Index and Contributors

Featured Music

by Barry Tognolini



Ned Balbo's latest book is *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (Story Line Press/WCU Poetry Center), awarded the 2010 Donald Justice Prize by judge A. E. Stallings. His second book, *Lives of the Sleepers* (U. of Notre Dame Press), received the Ernest Sandeen Prize and a ForeWord Book of the Year Gold Medal, and his first, *Galileo's Banquet*, was awarded the Towson University Prize. A chapbook, *Something Must Happen*, appeared from Finishing Line Press, and his reviews of contemporary poetry may be found in most issues of Antioch Review from 1999-2009.

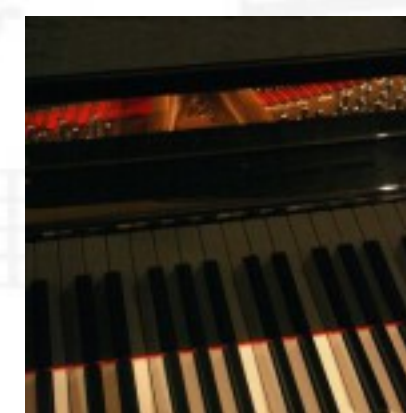
Featured Artist



Robert W. White

Sculptor Robert W. White's work has an Italian sensuousness, a German Romanticism, and an American robustness. It explores the contrast between the romantic and the classical, the luxurious and the austere, faithful to an American tradition that he felt was worth building on.

Featured Musician



Barry Tognolini

Australian pianist and composer Barry Tognolini has been performing professionally since the age of thirteen. In addition to music released by Sony Music Australia, Barry has released a double CD collection featuring both well-known and original compositions. His latest piece, inspired by J. D. Smith's poem, "Upkeep," premiered at the 2012 String Poet Prize Award Ceremony.

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