

A Quarter of a Man

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Cincinnati Review 2005

Thus it is that ideas, which grow up within the imagination and appear so lovely to it and of a value beyond whatever men call valuable, are exposed to be shattered and annihilated by contact with the practical.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
The Artist of the Beautiful

Let's spin back to the first of those pesky Days of the Locust. From the Harbor Freeway panicky motorists can see Watts burning ("Sidney, get us *out* of here!"), and forty-five minutes east, far beyond L.A. City Hall and the Brew 102 sign, wildfires smolder and flare across the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. All day, ashes sift down from a low, sooty sky, dusting the wilted palms along Foothill Boulevard a charnel gray. Nightfall brings only a stifling, pink twilight. Flames silhouette the hills.

But in the recreation room of a certain bungalow in Pomona no one's concerned about the apocalypse. An ice chest crammed with Olympia beer testifies that the parents aren't expected back anytime soon. It's jam night! Chuck Berry's "Carol" is the tune. A pasty fellow with a defiantly retro DA squalls the lyrics—hey, that's *me* playing an ill-tuned Fender Mustang electric guitar through a sizzling no-name amplifier. The family dog, Buck, a monstrous composite of coyote and German Shepherd, lets out doleful howls as the racket grows louder, and the heart of this roots-rock extravaganza, a grinning kid in horn-rimmed glasses, rocks back and forth at a scarred upright piano, sprinkling triplets over the chugging bass line. A beer mug meanders in lazy Zs across the piano top, and every few measures he grabs it, takes a gulp, and puts it back, all without missing a beat.



Searching the Internet for the late Bob "Frizz" Fuller yields several screens' worth of song credits, a hodge-podge of exaggeration and myth, a few supercilious observations about his appearance, hygiene, and behavior, and the general impression of an amusing crackpot who happened to compose "funny" songs. There's ample evidence too of the sorts of fans who, immune to the enchantment of the music itself, relish at a safe distance the spectacle of human wreckage. It's probably fair to say, though, that most people have never heard of him. But there was a moment when it looked as if he was going to pull it off, carve out a musical niche like that of Tom Waits or Loudon Wainwright III. His work was praised and performed by Jackson Browne, Ry Cooder, Linda Ronstadt, Walter Egan, David Lindley, Leo Kottke, Warren Zevon, and Chris Darrow. Radio stations played his songs in respectable rotation. Yet he ended his days as a resident in a retirement and assisted living center off the Strip in Las Vegas, his songs languishing in shoeboxes, a toothless, delusional ruin who might have shambled from the pages of Samuel Beckett's *Malloy*.

So what happened? Blaming the gods, who, we're often reminded, drive mad those they would destroy, makes about as much sense as any other explanation— genetics, drugs, chemical imbalance, inadequate nurturing, or childhood trauma (my mother, who threatened him with a broken candle and called him an oaf after he blundered face-first into a wall sconce, still blames herself). Who knows? Let's say the gods really did a number on this gentle, nearsighted boy who asked for nothing except to play the piano and sing in return for a little finance, a little romance. Let's say those puckish immortals let him come of age as the Day-Glo dreams of 1960s were curdling, afflicted him with mental illness, pricked him with the ambition to make it in the music business, and waited to see how long it took him to

founder.

It took Frizz fifty-three years. But before going under he composed a body of work astonishing in its originality, songs that will play in my inward ear until I myself catch that Midnight Train.



We grew up in Pomona, not far from where an aging Virgil Earp once pistol-whipped vagrants, and McDonald's first loosed its tallowy blessings on the land.

Atop former citrus orchards, vineyards, and the bones of the original dwellers—the Serrano, the Ute-Chemehuevi, the Luiseño-Cahuilla jimsonweed cult—the Inland Empire links San Bernardino and Riverside Counties into a smog-choked aggregate of strip malls, industrial “parks,” clogged freeways, and subdivisions of fake chateaux and crumbling stucco tract houses, scabbed here and there with patches of adobe and tumbleweed. On the Empire's western boundary lies Pomona, whose beleaguered Babbittocracy finds itself reaping the harvest of bad history: 'hoods like Sin-Town and the Islands prowling with heavily armed factions of the Crips and Bloods, a barrio where sweltering families huddle in front of their TVs and hope to make it though “*Lucha Libre*” without perishing in a 12th Street Gang drive-by. Freshen the region's heritage of land-grabbing, union-busting, class warfare, and racial violence with the great westward migrations of the mid twentieth century, and you have the punch line for a cruel riddle: What do you get when you cross Willy Loman with a pit bull?

Most people associate Pomona with the college, which is in Claremont. Pomona, just to the south, was home to dozens of Kustom Kar Klubs, the Los Angeles County Fair, a drag strip, and a defense contractor where most of our fathers worked. Claremont, though, was a place apart—a simulacrum of a New England university town, with its colleges, art cinema, Folk Music Center, leafy streets named after Ivy League schools. The city offered a faux Mediterranean realm of bohemian gentility where the kids glowed with sophistication and entitlement and the parents were professors or artists. The cultural fault line between Claremont and surrounding towns probably reflects some atavistic schism between the Transcendentalist imperative to live authentically and the more prosaic goals of hot cars and cold brew.

This same fissure shot through the realm of music. In the early 1960s you could have personified the Claremont music scene as a gypsy-haired girl with a nylon-stringed guitar warbling “Silver Dagger” at the Folk Music Center, or some well-scrubbed kid with a string tie solemnly picking “Devil's Dream” on a Gibson Mastertone banjo at the Golden Ring on Foothill Boulevard. Pomona? How about a phalanx of thugs in matching blazers and greasy pompadours crooning “Angel Baby” at the Rainbow Gardens across the street from the YMCA, or fleet-fingered Bakersfield boys with long sideburns tearing up “Buckaroo” at honky-tonks like the Frontier Club on Holt Boulevard?

To folkies, you understand, popular music was the Great Satan. A year or so before Dylan was booed at the Newport Folk Festival for “going electric,” the folk music magazine *Sing Out* voiced the depth of this rancor in an article about the onstage electrocution of an electric guitarist: “Those Who Live by the Sword.” My point here is that I was just such a musical snob. Once a week, convinced that some aura of caste marked me as an interloper, I would trudge up to Claremont for an old-time fiddle lesson from Chris Darrow, an affable multi-instrumentalist who led the Dry City Players, one of Southern California's premier bluegrass bands. Already a major presence in the Southern California music scene, Darrow would soon become a founding member of the psychedelic *Ur*-worldbeat ensemble, Kaleidoscope, and go on to play with acts like Linda Rondstadt and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Meanwhile my parents fretted as I blew off my homework, sawed away at “Sally Goodin,” and listened obsessively to the Stanley Brothers, Jim and Jesse, the Country Gentlemen, the Kentucky Colonels—ecstatic at the suggestion in those keening, tragic voices of a world truer than mine could ever be.



I met Frizz in the fall of 1963 at Pomona High School. I'd noticed him, a pudgy, myopic, preoccupied-looking boy sneaking cigarettes in the boys' room, but we never actually spoke until our chemistry teacher, an owlish martinet, made us lab partners. We hit it off right away, laughing like idiots as we demolished glassware, started fires, and during one experiment gone drastically awry, tried futilely to hide a flask of bubbling, chrome-yellow liquid that ultimately exploded and sent screaming students stampeding for the exit in a spray of toxins and vaporized glass. Our teacher chewed us out at least once a week, and I'm guessing that what chafed him most during these harangues was our fraudulent penitence and poorly disguised amusement. As the semester crawled onward the look in his eyes changed from exasperation to genuine hatred. That we weren't laughing at him, not really, but at our own folly was a distinction obviously lost on the Man of Science. The problem was, once Frizz was overcome by that choking, helpless laughter, you couldn't help joining him . . . well, *I* couldn't.

He lent me Samuel Charter's book, *Country Blues* (the Bible for a whole generation to whom this American musical form was the *zenith* of authenticity), accompanied me to fiddle lessons, during which he impressed my teacher with the breadth of his musical references, and soon we were musical soul mates. Our unheeded chemistry experiments went to hell as we chattered earnestly about Lead Belly and Peg-Leg Howell. Our classmates thought we were nuts.

Anyone who imagines California adolescence as an endless summer will be disillusioned to hear that we didn't surf, and that beach towns like Newport and Balboa played little part in our lives. Music was *everything*. It was Real Life—not some charade of pious drudgery but a glorious lost highway through a realm of passion and danger and tragic beauty. Remember, in those days there were still giants in the earth: At the Ash Grove in Hollywood we heard Furry Lewis, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Doc Watson, Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys. The night Cassius Clay fought Sonny Liston found us in the bleachers of a gymnasium at UC Riverside among an audience of 60 or so souls who'd paid \$2.50 each to hear Bob Dylan. As often as not, we spent Saturday nights at Frizz's house, watching "Cal's Corral," a country music show sponsored by a local used-car magnate.

In the Fuller household lived Frizz, a popular older sister, a football-playing older brother, Buck (the dog), and the parents: Anne, a quiet, friendly woman, and Hal, a portly gent with a lantern jaw, sepulchral voice, and martial crew cut. Hal had once fronted his own band, Hal Fuller and the Tennessee Hoedowners. He'd been a friend of Hank Williams, and in one of many moments that surely tried his patience, Frizz sat on and shattered an autographed 78 of "Hey, Good-Lookin'."

If I learned anything of lasting value during those wretched high school years, it was the richness of *all* honest music, and I learned it from Frizz. Imagine a dark, cluttered bedroom, afternoon light outlining the drawn blinds, odors of socks and coffee long viscous in an enameled cup, Frizz playing record after record: Bix Beiderbecke, Cab Calloway, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ernest Tubb, Blind Blake, Bob Wills, Charlie Christian, Billie Holiday, Fletcher Henderson, Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti, the Coon-Sanders Nighthawks—all that glorious music haunted with surface crackle and beamed across the decades like a heartening phone call from the past. I lifted my first guitar solo from Bud Scott's mean little break on Jelly Roll Morton's "Jungle Blues."

Hal, a superb rhythm guitarist, loved to entertain "the guys," and every so often he'd sing a tune like "Waltz Across Texas" in a resonant baritone, chunking out muted barre chords on his weathered old sunburst Gibson. After a few beers he'd flash us a conspiratorial grin and—*sotto voce*—perform one of what he called his "blue songs":

*Mama's on the bottom,
Daddy's on the top,*

*Baby's in the cradle,
Yelling, 'Shoot it to her, Pop!'*

And one night Frizz, his parents, and I sang “Footprints in the Snow” in four-part harmony, a performance suffused with joy that the odd child, the quiet one, the loner who’d spent his childhood taking piano lessons and listening to old records, now had a friend. Things were working out.



We graduated in the aftershock of John Kennedy’s assassination. Frizz and I drifted through that summer, reeking of Jade East Cologne in our madras shirts and white Levi’s, jamming at his house when his parents were away (the Rolling Stones and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band having granted us dispensation to play electric instruments), driving to Tijuana to hear bands at the Blue Fox play “Woolly Bully.” We’d park among the chaparral and eucalyptus at the head of Webb Canyon with a gallon jug of Red Mountain Burgundy and listen to Sonny Boy Williamson, Otis Redding, and Slim Harpo on a battery-powered record player. With the lights of San Dimas flickering below us we’d talk about bands we would form, books I would write. Somehow, none of the usual options—a trade, university (the local community college had extolled the glories of a career in turf grass management), whatever—none of these seemed satisfactory, not when you wanted to be Lightning’ Hopkins.

Alas, another, crucial difference between Pomona and Claremont: kids from the latter tended to enroll to college or join the Peace Corps; those from Pomona generally ended up working the service counter at Pep Boys, doing time—or drafted. If there be any readers who remember the specter of the War—on the cover of *Life*, on the 6 o’clock news, in the local obituaries—let them raise their right hands. Guys we knew in high school were coming home in aluminum coffins accompanied by cryptic telegrams. At parties you’d see clusters of anxious hippies passing joints in the corners, whispering about draft lawyers and the Canadian job market. Without the 2-S deferment granted full-time college students you had to face it: the machine was ticking down a list of names, and the chances were growing less and less remote that one of them was yours.

Frizz joined the Coast Guard. While he protected our shores from the communist hordes I was drifting, out of work, instruments hocked, sleeping in friends’ cars. Finally in late 1966, inspired by utter desperation and some chuckle-headed notion of the appropriate course for a writer (for so I fancied myself), I enlisted in the army.



Even in hindsight I can’t claim the slightest premonition of the troubles that lay in store for Frizz. I saw him on leave once, and he seemed as resigned as you could reasonably expect to the stringent absurdity of military life. There was even a hint of a nautical swagger in his bearing. Later, though, from letters my friends sent me in Vietnam I gathered that he’d gotten out of the Coast Guard prematurely and was, as we said, wiggling it.

Doubtless there exists in some microfilmed file of the Veterans Administration a laconic account of what actually precipitated Frizz’s breakdown. Since he was never with 7,000 miles of Vietnam, we can grant the PTSD theory as much credence as the irritating legend that he once lived on L.A.’s Skid Row with winos and “liked it.” Still *something* happened to him. He saw and heard things that weren’t there, or at least weren’t apparent to others. Take my word for it, the armed forces don’t provide the idea atmosphere for anybody with mental problems; they figure that craziness is a ploy to get discharged, and they’ll try pretty much anything short of murder to prove you’re faking. Whether it’s precisely true, as Frizz once told me, that a raving Chief Petty Officer kicked him in the ribs as he lay, hallucinating and helpless, on the barracks linoleum, I’ve little doubt that he was roundly mistreated before finally being diagnosed

as a paranoid schizophrenic and granted a medical discharge, with permanent disability.



When I got out of the army in 1969 Frizz was a startling apparition, glasses patched with electrician's tape, ripe long hair, a cigarette case (an approximation, he maintained, of a Pharaoh's beard holder) clamped to his Ho Chi Minh goatee. True, lunacy had a certain prestige in those days, "freak" was a compliment, and 24-karat musical eccentrics like Mel Lyman and Captain Beefheart drew crowds, but even then Frizz drew his share of puzzled looks. A visit to his parents' house made clear that they were no longer sanguine about things working out. Nor had their affection for the guys endured. While a bunch of us listened to a recording of Ravi Shankar at the Monterey Pop Festival, Fuller *père* stalked into the recreation room and, with a bedeviled glare at the bearded, long-haired bums drinking Cold Duck from the bottle, croaked, "Show me a country that meditates, and I'll show you a country that's in trouble."

I first learned of Frizz's music when he played me a tape that Chris Darrow had engineered in a local studio—just Frizz on vocals and piano. I was floored that a kid from down in the boondocks, from *Pomona*, had rendered these dream-powered artifacts from the raw materials of his own life. I wasn't the only one. When David Lindley heard the tape he was equally impressed. A five-time champion of the Topanga Canyon Banjo and Fiddle Contest and another founding member of Kaleidoscope, Lindley had become one of the most respected instrumentalists in the business and was now Jackson Browne's sideman.

Given the approbation of artists like Darrow and Lindley, I was sure that Frizz was poised to be a contender. Kem Nunn, the future California-noir novelist, whom I'd met in a community college creative writing class, shared my conviction, and we published Frizz's song "Living That 1940s Dream" in the literary magazine. Enterprises of great pitch and moment, Frizz assured us, were just over the horizon: Lindley was going to record his songs; the guitarist Leo Kottke had already done so; in the works was a double album, produced by Jackson Browne, featuring Frizz backed up by all-star L.A. musicians; Darrow was going to release a solo album of Frizz and his piano. In anticipation of this last opus I put together a publicity poster—*Dis Wam Me*—featuring Dada text and a photo of Frizz at eleven, disingenuously identifying him as "The Voice of a Generation."

While we waited—and waited—Frizz kept writing songs and performing. He played with Walter Egan (famous, briefly, for "Magnet and Steel"), with Frank Reckard of Emmy Lou Harris's Hot Band, with Jackson Browne, with Darrow, with Lindley. He played spots ranging from The Barn in Riverside and the Whiskey in Hollywood to the Starvation Café, a peripatetic venue in Fontana. But where were those albums?

Trying to determine exactly why none of these projects came to fruition or why people in the business stopped returning Frizz's calls is to encounter a Gordian Knot of accusations and counter-accusations including exploitation, "trafficking in souls," and downright theft. Doubtless some in the industry saw Frizz as a mark, his music as "product," and figured there was easy money to be made, but the fact is, in the age of arena rock, eccentrics were not bankable, especially unstable ones. He'd ring your doorbell at three in the morning to announce that Linda Ronstadt was carrying his child. He'd hold one-sided (as far as I could tell) conversations with Buck. He'd shave his head, industriously gain a hundred pounds, and demand to be addressed as "Streamlined Daddy." He'd claim telepathic communication with Leonid Brezhnev, President of the USSR. He'd assert that all one needed for self-defense was "a butane lighter and a pocket comb." When Edward Kennedy visited Los Angeles, Frizz showed up at the airport to announce that the ghost of Lee Harvey Oswald (or was it Hitler?), speaking through the car radio, had expressed grave concerns for the senator's safety. Not surprisingly, this act of good citizenry earned him a few days in the crowbar hotel.

As for Frizz's business sense, consider that in 1974, at the height of the oil embargo, with cars lined up for miles

behind fuel pumps, he tried to sell a truck with the following ad: GAS HOG—MUST SELL. Then, during the nation's bicentennial, he published at his own expense a songbook, *Spiritus 76*, but balked at paying for transcriptions of the actual music and ended up with a bald compilation of lyrics—rather like a guitarist deciding to save a few bucks before a performance by neglecting to put strings on the instrument.

It would be a miracle if he *wasn't* somehow ripped off. Still, factoring Frizz's shrewd commercial instincts and piquant deportment with the tenor of the music business, which for unregenerate ruthlessness has to rival the trade in human kidneys, I'm more inclined to be grateful that his work survived at all than I am riled up at his failure to profit more substantially from it.

In the early 1980s I finally heard one of his songs on the radio: "Quarter of a Man" from David Lindley's first album, *El Rayo-X*. Lindley had by then parlayed his world-class instrumental virtuosity and calculated *shlick* into a slightly demonic stage persona—Mr. Dave (picture a benign Fagin)—and an enviable career playing anything he chose.

Now, I thought, *this* is it—the boy's finally on his way.

Sadly, age, illness, and high-octane medication had already taken their toll. A friend remembers accompanying him around this time to a club in Duarte where some soul singer manqué, trying to enliven a listless crowd, pointed to Frizz (then in his 30s) and shouted, "Even that old man back there in the corner can tap his feet!" His playing grew, to say the least, uneven, and he blew gigs. Kem Nunn attended one at McCabe's in Santa Monica, a sweaty, terrified performance so conspicuously inept that most of the audience walked out. Lindley continued include Frizz's songs on his releases, but Frizz himself was doing well to get out of bed by sundown much less cut it in a recording studio.

He started performing with a Casiotone electronic keyboard. You'd find him in clubs in Sierra Madre, Upland, Fontana—plaid sport coat, vest, knit tie, hair parted dead center à la Bix—chain-smoking Trues and waiting with a cup of tea, a packet of honey (hermetically sealed, lest it be spiked with LSD), and that trademark scowl for a chance to sit in, one of those Southern California ghosts: broken stunt men, aging child actors with habits, alcoholic lion tamers. Imagine the vexation of some weary pipe welder stepping into a tavern anticipating a cold beer and some Merle Haggard and finding instead an old coot wailing about "April with the aliens" to the accompaniment of a peeping musical toy whose built-in drum track sounds like something from a Taiwanese porn film.

The stranger he became the stronger grew the temptation to think of him as more of a walking cartoon than a tormented human being. "The illness," Darrow laments, "ended up becoming how people treated him." That his unique talent and vision (as well as his income) depended on that same illness—the very notion is a monstrous cosmic joke. And in the end, the cartoon was about all he had left.



So what is his music like?

Most of us can identify songs, roughly, by decade. In this case you can't. You'd have to locate them somewhere on an as-yet-unrecognized axis. Imagine driving from Baton Rouge to Wichita Falls on a thick summer night, overlapping radio stations fusing into a palimpsest of country, blues, ragtime, swing, norteño, doo-wop, primal rock 'n' roll—and all of it making sense in ways that defy rational analysis. How, alone, beset by madness, did he develop this style? How many lonely, lonely nights did it take, alone in that monkish bedroom with only his ancient 78s for counsel? Nothing but a near-religious passion for the music could have let him capture its pulse, assimilate the rollicking elegance of Jelly Roll Morton, Otis Spann, Johnny Johnson, and bend it to accommodate his own vision. Take what I think of as his signature piece, "Martians at the Window":

*Martians at the window, and you in my arms,
Put down that antenna; don't broadcast your charms,
Go on a vacation, move back to the farm,
And in the long run, We're gonna have fun:
Bopping with the Martians and flexing our lungs . . .*

First there's the sheer ingenuity of the tune, which walks up to the bridge, following a chromatic bass line hewn from judicious chord voicings, and modulates from E minor to A7, the subdominant of an E natural blues. Zoot!

Of course it's not just musical craft that distinguishes his work. There are the lyrics, too, presenting antipodal dream worlds bathed in the lurid colors of a Nicholas Ray film, dislocated narrators looking back wistfully to the safety of an illusory past, even as they testify with a damaged adolescent's fervor to romantic yearning. Like the songs of Graham Parsons or Randy Newman, they leave you convinced that *something* has been revealed yet not quite sure what it is. As rooted as the music is in American idiom it offers a tinge of melancholy East European playfulness. "A Quarter of a Man," which narrates the travails of a diminutive *schlemiel* in a fiendishly disproportionate world, could pass as a Gogol tale.

But it's not just their narrative opacity; it's also their transmutation of every experience, including humiliation, into something miraculously untainted by cynicism or self-pity. In "T-Town Saturday Night" I see those careening midnight drives to Tijuana; in "Row, Coco," the bitter quarrels between Frizz and his father; and in so many others, the anguish of my friend's erotic life. The VA's therapy—dosing him with enough anti-psychotic drugs to cold-cock a mule—did little to help him in that department, although there was a brief marriage (quickly annulled) to a rear-echelon groupie with designs on his disability checks. He became bad at, as they say, boundaries. Friends were charged with the grim task of warning him that his courting techniques—sending engagement rings in the mail, leaving sacks of groceries on the doorstep, and so on—were scaring the objects of his affection out of their wits. Think about it: How would it be to know that your condition denies you anything close to a warm, mature, intimacy with another person? What solace could any degree of musical success offer for that? "Hiding in corners," which Frizz performed as a country shuffle, offers the following reflection:

*Just like water on the brain or a sword down in your soul,
A love that's never there never can grow cold . . .*

Notice too that in "Martians at the Window" the specter of rivalry, or perhaps cuckoldry, demands that even an affair with an extraterrestrial remain clandestine. And it's hard not to intuit in "Torchy Lady of Danceland" Frizz's despair as he grew older and watched friends and siblings coupling up, starting families:

*The dames 'round here no one can touch,
They all have pitchforks that hurt very much . . .*

Nor does a sampling of his song titles—"Zombie Hula Flower Leaves Port," "Getting Chummy with a Mummy," "We're Not the Reals"—suggest that writing radio-friendly tunes was his central concern. Composition came as naturally to him as breathing: Once when a friend grouched, less than gallantly, about dropping fifty bucks on a woman only to receive a goodnight kiss at the door, Frizz scowled and said, "Fifty dollars light, and a kiss good-night." Most of us take for granted that we'll wake up each morning knowing who we are. Frizz couldn't, and I think his songs were a way of staving off the inevitable meltdown. As the years passed I watched the ghost of the friend I remembered trying, despite his dementia and the drugs intended to control it, to keep a coherent self together. Although far from indifferent to fame or commercial success, ultimately he wrote songs so he wouldn't disappear.

He certainly never intended to be taken as some kind of musical clown. Admittedly his songs can make you laugh, but characterizing his music as funny is about as perceptive as calling Goya depressing. Despite its pathos, despite the streaks of loneliness and paranoia, it's curiously uplifting. When he took his place at the piano, glanced at you with the expression of a guilty tuna, and played a new tune—say, "Sitting with Beulah at the Breakfast Café"—it was impossible not to grin with simple delight.

So. If his songs aren't simply Delphic parables, embroidered autobiography, expressions of sublimated desire, manifestations of bravery, career strategies, survival tactics, or jokes, what are they? We'll return to this question later. In fact we haven't strayed from it yet, nor will we.



In 1983, just back from a year in Israel, I was visiting a friend in Pomona when Frizz dropped by, to all appearances a polyester-clad octogenarian. He'd lost his teeth, and the set furnished by the VA didn't fit. A faint whistle accompanied his every phrase. Lighting up a Roi-Tan, he went to the piano and banged out a tune, whose title I never learned, involving an alligator employed as a theater usher. I said good-bye at the door.

"No problem," Frizz said. "See you later."

I never saw him again.

Who knows where he was living? He moved as often as once a month, usually to some furnished room with rules posted on the door, once to Ontario's Orange Hotel, where, in a lobby thronged with hookers, visitors had to bribe a truculent *Cholo* for an audience with Frizz. By the millennium's last decade his driver's license had been revoked, and he was staying with his mother (Hal having long since died) in the desert community of Apple Valley. Kem called him there and mentioned that he might drive out from Huntington Beach. "Well, yes," came the portentous reply, "but of course you'll need an appointment." (A long, uncontrolled coughing fit.) "Jackson Browne lost all his money." (Another, longer, more violent fit of coughing.) "It's my fault."

Frizz's last stop was the Charleston Retirement and Assisted Living Center in Las Vegas. A friend visited him there and tried to nudge their conversation toward the topic of Frizz's music, but our boy would have none of it. After swearing his guest to secrecy, Frizz revealed in a rasping whisper that he was "studying Emily Post."

A life-long smoker, he died, after great suffering, of complications resulting from emphysema, in August of 2000. He rests in the Southern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery.



The name: Frizz was never one to let mere facts interfere with a colorful story, and I've heard him offer at least a half-dozen outlandish explanations for his nickname. I kept my amusement to myself when David Lindley told me it was an homage to Lefty Frizzell. Here, for what it's worth, is how I remember it: In 1965 while working as a bus boy at a Sizzler knock-off I convinced the boss, a former Army cook, to hire Frizz as a dishwasher. Overworked and seriously hard of hearing, the boss had little patience with my friend's wool-gathering and one day during the height of the lunch rush discovered him scowling at a soiled steak platter while loaded bus trays piled up around him. "Hey, slob!" he shouted. "What's your name?"

"What? Oh—I thought you asked what my name was."

"*What the hell's your name?*"

"Bob Fuller."

“Grigsby?”

“Fuller.”

“Frisbee?”

The job lasted three days; the nickname, abbreviated to Frizz, a lifetime.



Shortly after Frizz’s death a proposal for a tribute album of his songs performed by other artists was shot down by one musician’s refusal to participate in what he mystifyingly deemed a “ghoulish” project. You can, however, find versions of his songs recorded by David Lindley or Chris Darrow or Leo Kottke and Mike Gordon. You can hear “Martians at the Window” on the recent Kaleidoscope CD, *Greetings from Kartoostan*. You can find his music on CDs by Ben Harper, Corky Carroll, and Patrick Brayer. Sure, it’s great that somebody recorded this stuff, a lot better than its not being recorded at all, but despite these interpretations’ obvious merits they’re sometimes untrue to Frizz’s vision. It’s certainly a performer’s prerogative to create his or her own arrangements. But changing lyrics, updating anachronisms, adding verses, and so on is like trying to improve *La Pietà* with a few elaborate tattoos. It not only smacks of condescension but also throws off balance the songs’ fragile ambiguity. You lose that unique blend of paradox and profundity, the uncanny lack of conventional resolution, the apparently pivotal detail purposefully unmentioned. To appreciate the songs fully you need to hear Frizz perform them with only his piano. You need that plangent, straining voice—part Jelly Roll Morton, part Kurt Weill—crying, *I was here*. And for that, I’m afraid, we’ll have to wait. As I write, Chris Darrow is assembling those original studio recordings, the first ones I heard, and their release on CD by the German label, Taxim, is “in the planning stage.” With any luck, they’ll be available within a year. Keep your fingers crossed.



I was living in New England when I heard that Frizz had caught that *Midnight Train*. Grief is, well, *complicated*. On one hand there’s sorrow and this sharp longing just to sit and listen to him again—in his prime he played a pretty blues—and on the other the impossibility of believing he’s gone, and with him the depth of his talent, the gift for dead-on mimicry, the erudition, the vast musical lexicon from which he quoted at will. Often, just before turning out the lights, I’ll put Jelly Roll Morton, Lang and Venuti, or Bix Beiderbecke on the stereo; at some point I always laugh with that familiar tickle of delight, and I swear I always sense Frizz laughing with me.

Then there’s the futility of trying to reconcile his duplicity, faint-heartedness, and self-importance with his spasmodic loyalty, his valor, his humor. He’d pull some act of petty vengeance for a fancied slight, and you’d be hard-pressed not to smack him one. Then he’d turn around and make you laugh till you cried. For instance, that outing to the desert to film a movie for my philosophy class: Having wisely fortified our creative faculties with hallucinogenic mushrooms, we spent most of our time lurching around beneath a brutally clear sky, dropping cameras, and weeping with laughter as Joshua trees did the Funky Chicken and the desert puckered and boiled around us. “Who,” I gasped between demented giggles, “who left all these stupid rocks here?”

“Teenagers,” Frizz replied.

During the homeward drive he lay in the back of my Volkswagen bus, shrieking hysterically while we repeatedly asked what was so funny. Finally he choked out, “Turf grass management.”

I see him gleefully rooting through an orange crate for a 45 of Tab Hunter braying “Red Sails in the Sunset.” “Now,” he cries triumphantly, “this one will *really* make you puke.”

You'd think I'd have gotten the picture now: When friends die you can't call them anymore. I suppose these midnight impulses to telephone our dead come with getting older. One came to me not so long ago as I was heading back to New England after a semester's teaching in New Orleans. My transmission blew just outside Scranton, Pennsylvania, and I spent the next three days cooling my heels at the local Howard Johnson Inn, waiting for repairs. Outside snow fell relentlessly. My options were to grade papers or watch television, and I made the only sensible choice. After a day of such fare as Saddam Hussein's capture, "The Jerry Springer Show," *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, and (horrible to relate) a PBS fund-raiser featuring Neil Diamond in concert, I suddenly recalled watching late-night schlock with Frizz: Mexican variety shows, movies like Samson vs. the *Vampire Women and Teenage Millionaire*.

In those dark hours, I was so strongly seized by the impulse to call Frizz and propose, I don't know, something preposterous like lobbying to bring spats back into style that I found myself reaching for the receiver. I could imagine his demented, asthmatic cackle. But he was gone. So I never picked up the phone. I just lay there in the flickering blue light and wondered what crossed his mind in those last cold moments. A brief, mocking vision of what might have been? Or a sweating beer glass, zagging in four-four time across the top of an upright piano?

All right, now. What are his songs? They are prayers.



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