



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

San Antonio Rose and Moonlight Sonata

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The bar at the Georgetown Inn in Washington D.C. was full of customers. The time was late evening. Not yet midnight, but close. A man seated at a baby grand was pounding-out tunes of the 1940s and 1950s. Nearby, a small dance floor grudgingly accommodated its patrons, as they danced to the old standbys. A typical Saturday night at an up-scale piano lounge.

It appeared the evening's music was to be the standard fare. But after a while, a recurrent set of chords caught the partons' ears. Altered only by the rhythm of different dance steps, the pianist had begun playing the same melody time-and-again: "San Antonio Rose."

Foxtrots, waltzes, sambas, and mambos, all to the tune of the famous Texas song. My friends and I wondered why he had chosen such an eclectic mix of music until we discovered a patron was placing one hundred dollar bills on the piano each time "San Antonio Rose" was played. This man belonged to a table occupied by six Texans. They were dictating the musical menu of the evening.¹

The crowd in the lounge had also caught-on to the bribes. No one cared. The music, the Texans, and the one hundred dollar bills made for amusing entertainment. We wished we could be so generous. The piano player was especially pleased. He improvised "San Antonio Rose" scores as if there were no tomorrow, at least a tomorrow populated with generous, drunk Texans.

As for myself, I had begun to wish I had taken piano lessons as a child. In the spirit of the evening, my date and I joined the fun on the crowded dance floor. If you want to experience a different dance routine, try keeping step to a "San Antonio Rose" rumba.

The piano player took a break. We watched him gather up his newly-found wealth, which we estimated to be a thousand dollars. He thanked his audience, especially the Texans, and exited the room, most likely destined for the Georgetown Inn safe or a bank deposit kiosk. The piano player deserved his payday. He had performed a single song with at least ten different beats.

After the pianist was gone, the room remained a lively assemblage of revelers, all caught up in conversations at their tables. The absence of music lent an air of aural relief to the lounge.

My companions and I had spent the first part of the evening at the Kennedy Center, attending a classical music concert. Due to the serious music of the concert, we were dressed in serious clothes: coats and ties for the men, refined dresses for our mates. Two couples were seated next to our table, dressed in formal wear. The men wore tuxedos and the women were in evening gowns. We had seen them at the Kennedy Center earlier in the evening.

The lounge settled into a hiatus in between what we expected and what the pianist hoped would be successive "San Antonio Rose" music sets. At this time, one of the tuxedoed men next to us left his seat. I noticed his movements because I moved my chair to allow him to pass between our tables. I paid no more attention to him until a few seconds later, when the lounge was once again filled with music. Our table neighbor had seated himself at the piano and was playing Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata."

The noise of the lounge pushed this music into an audible background---just faintly discernable to the ear. The people in the lounge were paying little or no attention to the new pianist. His music was competing with the on-going conversations and laughter. But not for long. Gradually, the voices in the lounge became silent, as eyes turned toward the source of this

¹ How did we know these men were Texans? First, they wore cowboy hats. Second, they were not asking the pianist to play "Oklahoma!"

plaintive, beautiful, simple tune. Shortly thereafter, except for the piano music, the lounge was silent. Not a sound could be heard beyond Beethoven's masterpiece. No one was moving or speaking. Even the Texans were quiet. In less than one minute, the lounge had undergone a transformation from a boisterous bar to a subdued concert hall.

The "Moonlight Sonata" is not a long piece, running only a few minutes. But during that short time, I think the people in the bar shared an intimate experience. It appeared to me our common encounter of listening to the "Moonlight Sonata"---its abrupt, beautiful interruption into the evening---had bonded us together, if only for a brief time. I do not wish to be maudlin in describing the scene, but I am sure I was one of many who had chills running down our spines as we listened to the music and watched the reactions of the other people in the lounge.

The pianist finished the tune, and without further ado, left his seat at the piano to return to his table and his friends. For a moment, his audience remained silent, still enthralled by the musical interlude. Shortly, a smattering of applause could be heard---coming from the Texans' table. The hundred dollar bill man stood up as he clapped, which led to most patrons joining in the applause, some also standing while they acclaimed the beautiful performance of one of our fellow bar patrons. During this ovation, the pianist smiled a bit, bowed his head ever so slightly, then turned his attention to his friends.

Gradually, the room returned its normal revelry. The talking and laughter increased to the Saturday night prescribed decibel levels. The lounge pianist returned to the piano for another set of music. But to his chagrin, and to the probable relief of everyone else in the room, he played no more versions of the "San Antonio Rose." Like Elvis, the Lone Star State citizens had left the building for the evening.