

# LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

PERFORMING in New York hardly invites a dull moment. It's enough that strings and fingernails can break unexpectedly or that once you step out of a taxi, the cabbie can hit the gas pedal before popping open the boot that holds your guitar. This actually did happen to me once. Screaming and arm-waving to no effect, I'd hurled a compact umbrella at his back windshield and the driver hit the brakes and burst out of his cab like an irate banshee.

Not long ago I was asked to perform at a fundraiser in downtown Manhattan at the new 7 World Trade Center. Built as an entirely new structure after 9/11, the environmentally green office building has opened with fanfare that included the unveiling of a Jeff Koons sculpture followed by an outdoor Lou Reed concert. I was expected to perform indoors on the 25th floor, a fashionably-hip set-dressed maze of white, chrome and grey colour schemes from a movie set left behind from Bruce Willis and Halle Berry's upcoming film, *Perfect Strangers*.

I'd spotted a tall, blonde, muscular host dressed in a white shirt and jeans and assumed he might give me directions on where to set up. He looked vaguely familiar, definitely a pretty-boy. He gazed at me with his hands clasped casually behind his back without offering any greeting or instruction on where I ought to go. He did not even offer to lend me a hand with the guitars. Torn between ignoring him and concocting some clever whiplash of a hint that I could use some help, I swung around and spotted the plastic tub on the floor that read, in hastily scribbled black marker, 'Box 1: Brad Pitt's hands, feet, torso, white shirt, jeans, shoes - Madame Tussauds Wax Museum.'

This might have been embarrassing if I didn't overhear the caterer doing an echo of Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* moments later, 'You're lookin' at me? You're lookin' at me? Well, I'm tawkin' to you, buddy...' A minute later, the caterer was waxy Brad's best buddy, borrowing a disposable camera.

Other perils of performing late at night in downtown Manhattan on a Friday night include hailing a cab as grease-engorged trash bags are flung to the curbside from restaurants at closing time. I'd given up one night and waited for the light at Pearl Street on the block where William Kidd, aka Blackbeard the Pirate, used to live. Distinct rustling from the corner trash basket revealed a not-so-small, dark shadow skittering in manic circles at the very bottom. I had just read *Rats* by Robert Sullivan (Bloomsbury), an elegantly-written, if slightly depraved account of this city's rodent behaviour. Sullivan had spent an entire month of evenings in downtown

Manhattan performing a field study of the vermin with night-vision goggles in an alleyway here in my own backyard, so all the unsavoury details remained fresh in my mind.

As soon as the light changed, I hurried along Pearl Street, passed a cluster of livery drivers arguing with each other beneath a cloud of cigarette smoke, and sagged at the sight of a bulging blue pyramid of trash bags piled beneath building scaffolding. The pile left me with little clearance on the sidewalk ahead. There was no way around it but to make a dash straight through with my guitar and wheeled suitcase. My sprint along the corridor of trash set off a flurry of scrabbling plastic and scratching sounds that only seemed to intensify the faster I ran. I looked over my shoulder to catch a sign of my tormentors, like William Wilson, expecting to see an entire legion of snaggled-toothed *rattus norvegici* in hot pursuit. Instead, I discovered the furious rustling had come from a stray plastic bag caught under the wheels of my suitcase.

Ben Verdery tells the story of being very tired while riding the Hudson Line twenty years ago to teach at SUNY-Purchase with his Gilbert guitar, which he kept in a big grey coffin-sized Ruyer instrument case. 'I'd flung it on the rack overhead and when the train arrived at my stop I'd picked up my handbag (thinking somehow this was my guitar. I'd gotten about twenty steps down the platform when it hit me - my guitar! I turned right as the train was pulling away and completely freaked out. It was a completely sick feeling because there was nothing I could do about it.'

'I did know what town the next stop was going to be in so I grabbed a cab and ordered him to go as fast as he could, whatever it took, to get there. Of course along the way, we ran into a construction roadblock. I bolted out of the car and yelled, "My wife is having a baby!" and the construction crew actually moved aside to let us through. When we made it to the next station, I ran up the stairs, panting and out of breath, and asked the station manager if they'd seen a guitar. He shook his head and said, "Yeah-yeah. I think we've got somethin'." He led me to a guy who was seated with his legs propped up on top of a chair, smoking a cigar. "Is that your banjo?" he said. I was so happy I nearly peed in my pants. Then he started yelling at me. "You're lucky you got your @#\$\$\* head screwed on. How couldya forget somethin' that big?"

Sharon Isbin reports the last time she checked a guitar, which happened to be a Hauser, it was sometime during the late 1970s. It arrived cracked inside its Mark Leaf case after coming

down the airport luggage carousel instead of being handed to her at the gate. From this moment on, she's been inventive about finding ways to carry her guitar on board when unable to book a seat for it.

'This will tell you what an ever-changing world we live in with the airlines industry: I recently returned to New York from California on one of four United commuter flights. Though I had researched the overhead bin sizes, the information was inconclusive so I figured I would take my chances. I discovered on the first of the four flights that my guitar did not fit the overhead bin by two centimeters in depth no matter how I tried to angle it in. The stewardess was nice, however, and since there were no closets she strapped it to a seat. I was not so lucky on the next three flights - they were overbooked, which made it impossible to purchase an extra ticket.

'On the second flight, I'd thought perhaps if I took everything out of the upper pouch the case might fit. It still didn't. I managed to slip it under my window seat extending under the seat in front. Fortunately, the guy sitting next to me had long legs which helped camouflage it, along with a newspaper spread across my lap. No one noticed. Of course this was stressful to think I had become a smuggler of my own guitar, with still two flights left to go.

'I investigated taking a taxi instead for the Santa Barbara-LAX leg, but learned it would cost several hundred dollars to cancel the flight. Once again, I had to sneak it on. While I fumbled to do so, my seatmate, a nice man who happened to be the U.S. marketing director for Bose, aided and helped cover for me. The stewardess on this flight was very busy checking on everyone, intent on discovering something, anything, awry. She walked up and down the aisle at least twelve times before take-off. Fortunately, she did not spot my guitar.

'After landing, the same stewardess looked at me as I walked off and exclaimed, "I didn't see you get on with that guitar!" I answered, "Yeah, I know."

'A few days later, I looked carefully at my summer itinerary and noticed six of those CR7s. After fifteen years of problem-free aircraft overhead bins in and out of Aspen, United had switched commuter carriers a month earlier and all aircraft from now on would be those from my recent nightmare. It took me two weeks to re-ticket all the flights with seats for the guitar.'

Isbin finds when traveling from New York to overseas that she has the advantage of learning about pending transportation strikes from the *Herald-Tribune*.

'Italy is always a landmine because there are always strikes at one time or another. Trains, public transportation, air traffic controllers - you name it. If you're lucky it won't be the day you travel.' Reading the papers and keeping



Sharon Isbin in Rome.

tabs on this information had helped her save the world premiere of the Tan Dun concerto in Germany when she was traveling from France.

'Of course, there's always the kind of mistake you make only once in life,' she says. 'I was flying from JFK Airport in New York to London and stood in the queue of the wrong carrier because I'd become confused after booking several flights at once. A representative told me, "Oh no, you're not on British Air ways but Continental." So I found the end of the other queue and by the time it came my turn, I discovered I had forgotten my passport. They sent me home and agreed to put me on the plane the next day. As further punishment for my mistake, the cab returning me from JFK started to smoke under the bonnet. It pulled over at the toll booth and I had to hitchhike from the toll booth back to my apartment.'

This reminds me of another almost-too-strange-to-be-true story about travelling in New York with a guitar, and being noticed with it when you'd least like to be: three years ago I was studying with an instructor who lived on the other side of the island, an hour's ride away, so my roundtrip excursion on the A train became an exercise in people-watching. One passenger was a man with a slouchy rucksack who looked to be about mid-40s or so with a curly, greying crown of hair and distinctive blue eyes. There was something about him that struck me instinctively as dualistic. He appeared to be something he was not and I was trying to figure out why and what it was about his appearance and demeanour that caused me to feel this way. I had him pegged as a mystic, an artist or a con man. Of course, it was just my luck that he caught me looking at him.

He asked me what instrument I had inside my case. I carry my guitar in a Travelite case, a lightweight nylon and styrofoam version of an old Mark Leaf, so the unusual, sloping shape makes this a common question. He'd asked offhandedly if I knew of anyone who might be interested in purchasing a sketch of Salvador

Dali's Christ. He said he owned one of only a couple sketches of it that Dali had made and was looking to leave the country soon.

I don't know what made him think I looked like a person who could afford to purchase a Dali, unless, like my guitar lessons at the time, he was up for bartering it. Before getting off at his stop, he handed me a folded piece of paper with a printed prayer on it from the Indian spiritual teacher Ammachi on one side and, oddly enough, handwritten notes on the other side of lyrics from Donovan's song, *Hurdy Gurdy Man*.

While writing this article, I decided to do an online search on Dali's Christ sketch to see if there is even such a thing, because the only images I can conjure up at the mention of Dali is his curled and waxed moustache, the melting clocks of his *Persistence of Memory* and his *St. John of the Cross*. The first item that pulls up is a news item, dated 3 March, 2003: 'Surreal Theft as Dali Sketch Escapes Jail.'

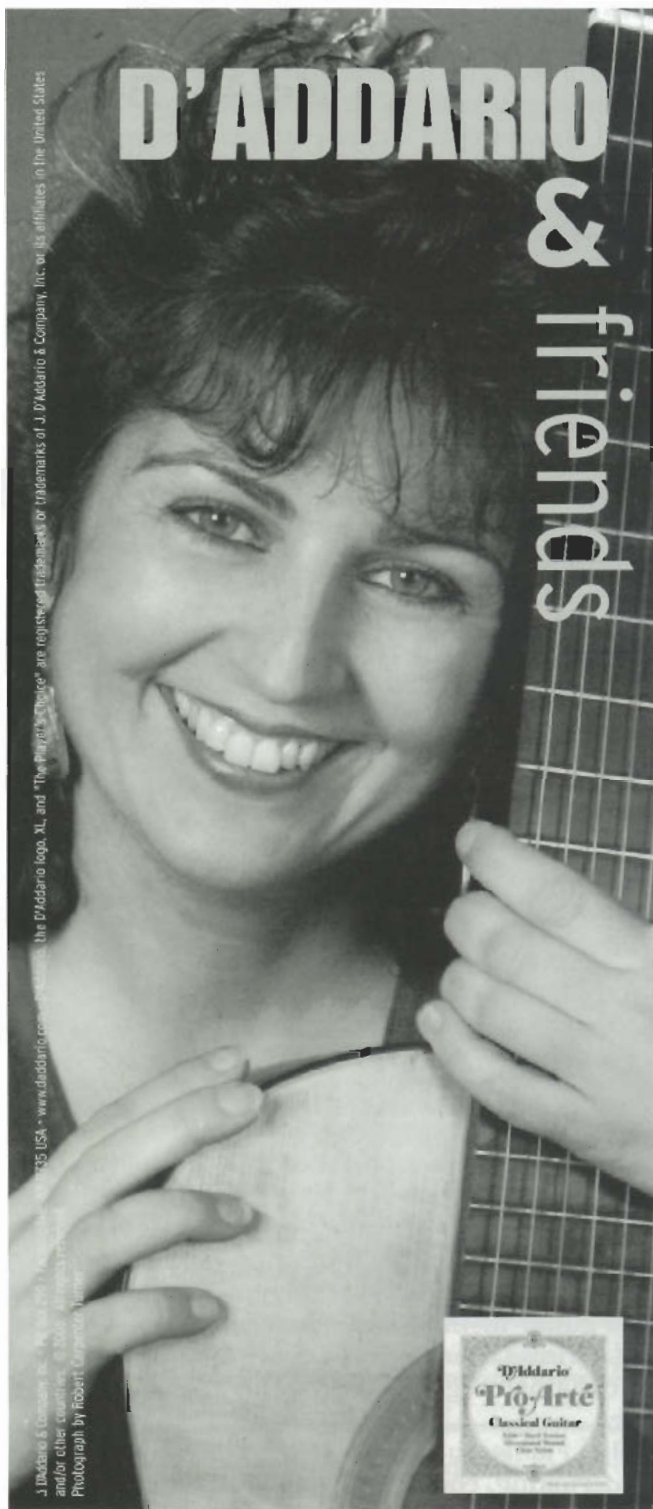
The article says an obvious forgery had been discovered in place of the original sketch of Christ on the cross which Salvador Dali had presented to inmates of Rikers Island as a gift in 1965. With further research I find an article dated September 2004, reporting that one of the Rikers prison guards pleaded guilty to being one of four guards who participated in the theft. To date, the real sketch remains at large and is feared to have been destroyed.

It must have been late summer of 2003 when I'd encountered this man, whoever he was or really might have been. The only reason I remember any of this at all is because I still have the piece of paper folded in the same configuration as he'd given it to me three years ago, tucked inside my purse. I had been at a depressed-but-determined stage about three months into my lessons, which is likely to happen when you're asked to devote yourself exclusively to Abel Carlevaro exercises and nothing else for two hours a day. At the time, I'd found some solace in those lines from Ammachi:

*Love Each Action  
Don't Worry About the Future  
Wait Patiently  
Dwelling in the Present  
Performing Your Actions  
With Concentration and Love  
Action is the Present.  
Love Each Action  
Find Bliss in All that You Do  
That is the Most Important Thing  
When You Can Live in Each Moment of Action  
Then Good Results Must Come.*

This doesn't sound like it came from a man who could have stolen a Dali. What do you think?

**Classical Guitar Magazine**



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