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L.A. STORY

Jamie Foxx stars as a homeless musician in *The Soloist*

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Nathaniel Ayers, shown playing violin in Disney Hall, is now closer to the profession he once pursued as a student at Juilliard.

STORY L.A. FI

by Josef Woodard

Nathaniel Ayers, a onetime Juilliard student who spent many years living on the streets of Los Angeles, has managed to reconnect with the classical music world he loves. His story has been chronicled in a newspaper series, a book, and now a Hollywood movie starring Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr.

High in the ranks of stubborn cultural stereotypes is the notion of classical music, and particularly the symphonic institution, as the House on the Hill. Pop culture—in all its glitz and overpaid noise and the hurly-burly of urban life—carries on below, the stereotype goes, while orchestras go about their elite ways in closed, detached quarters. Since 2003, the Los Angeles Philharmonic has been ensconced in its sparkly architectural showpiece that is the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall, a civic crown jewel nestled, yes, high on Bunker Hill in Los Angeles, in close proximity to decrepit areas just down the hill.

But the L.A. Phil's reality is anything but closed-off or elitist. Apart from the orchestra's concerted efforts in community engagement and in marketing to new audiences, the remarkable saga of suddenly famous homeless musician Nathaniel Anthony Ayers plays into the seeming paradox of high culture and down-on-luck human circumstance. These days, Ayers, who plays double bass, cello, violin, trumpet, and piano, has a strong and abiding connection to the orchestra. He regularly attends concerts at Disney Concert Hall, enjoys camaraderie with those involved in the organization, and takes periodic lessons from its members.

Now the subject of a book—Steve Lopez's moving *The Soloist*—and a March 2009 feature film starring Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr., Ayers has come a long way in a relatively short time from his days as an unknown musician practicing in the reverberant subterranean quarters of the Second Street Tunnel, a block from Disney Hall. Ayers called this unceremonious tunnel his “Little Walt Disney Concert Hall.” At this point, Ayers is a curious kind of celebrity, hiding in plain sight.

Only a few years ago, Ayers was a homeless man scuffling around downtown Los Angeles, moving in and around its infamous Skid Row. Diagnosed as a schizophrenic and given to occasional erratic displays of paranoia and rage, Ayers joined the city's discouragingly dense population of mentally disabled and homeless residents. But his back story was especially compelling and poignant, as *Los Angeles Times* columnist Lopez discovered upon investigating, befriending, and championing the musician. Lopez first heard Ayers performing in the Second Street Tunnel, and soon discovered that he had been a promising double bass student at The Juilliard School in the 1970s, when the onset of mental demons derailed his musical course.

A few decades ago, Ayers had been a model musician with a promising future. He rose from an impoverished upbringing in Cleveland. His father had left the family when Ayers was eleven, but a supportive high school music teacher, William Moon, recognized young Ayers's gift and became a catalyst for the path to Juilliard. Another important early contact and inspiration for Ayers was teacher Harry Barnoff, a member of The Cleveland Orchestra.

At the time Lopez first encountered him, Ayers had been living in Los Angeles for decades—partly because his father once lived there, partly because of the somewhat surreally placed statue of Beethoven that stands a few blocks from Disney Hall in Pershing Park. A community fixture since 1932, the monument to Ayers's favorite composer is one that he regards as something of an omen, an anchor for his otherwise unmoored existence.

In 2005, Lopez wrote an immensely popular series of *Times* columns on his connection with Ayers, as well as Lopez's

Los Angeles Times Photo by Damon Winter

attempts to get him help and into the downtown rehabilitation and residential facility known as Lamp Village.

In the process of befriending Ayers and chronicling his existence, Lopez got a firsthand view of a blighted area of the city, rife with disenfranchised denizens, mentally disabled persons, prostitution, homicides, and rampant drug use. In an effort to get inside Ayers's reality, Lopez spent a night sleeping on the street with him, but was kept away by the image and the actuality of scurrying rats. Ayers had learned to inure himself against the rough aspects of street life, and his irascible temper worked as a shield.

"In more than 30 years as a journalist," says Lopez, "I can't even recall all the great adventures I've had, but yes, this ranks among the most challenging and rewarding. It's also the story in which I became the most invested personally. I've learned patience and compassion in new ways, and I have come to better appreciate the power of art and music as a healing and sustaining force."

Another aspect of Lopez's role in the drama was introducing Ayers to the L.A. Phil, starting with Adam Crane, then the orchestra's public relations director. Through Crane, Ayers heard one of the orchestra's rehearsals, met Yo-Yo Ma (who extended considerable warmth to his onetime Juilliard schoolmate), and struck up relationships as friend and student of orchestra members including cellist Peter Snyder—who first gave him lessons—cellist Ben Hong, and his most recent contact, violinist Robert Gupta.

From the beginning, Ayers was welcomed into the L.A. Phil family, as Crane recalls. Like many Angelenos, Crane was a regular reader of Steve Lopez's *Times* column, which he says was his introduction to Ayers. The idea of having Ayers attend a rehearsal was cleared with Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, and Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen. Lopez made the arrangements to get Ayers inside the hall, but much coercion and finessing was required, with Ayers refusing to part with the shopping cart that held his instruments and other worldly possessions.

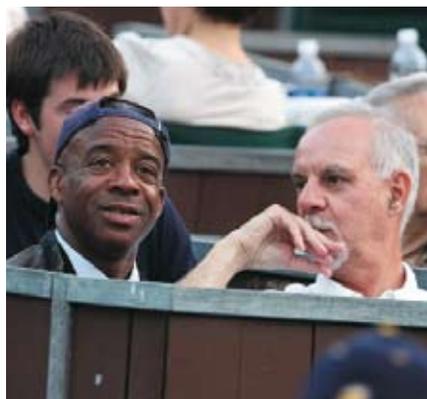
Ayers was almost instantly transformed upon entering the hall. "The Nathaniel I met was gracious and engaging," Crane

recalls. "It was remarkable. We snapped into discussions about conductors, and then we went from there. We just clicked."

After being given a tour of the hall in 2005, Ayers was invited into Crane's office to try out his own cello. (Crane had studied that instrument in his hometown of St. Louis before moving into public relations.) "We both spoke the same



Matthew Imagrig



Gilles Mingasson

Above: At the Hollywood Bowl in July, Nathaniel Ayers (second from left) was welcomed by some of the L.A. Phil's "Team Nathaniel" (left to right): cellist Peter Snyder, P.R. director Adam Crane, violinist Robert Gupta, conductor Lionel Bringuier. Left: Ayers at the Hollywood Bowl with Steve Lopez, author of *The Soloist*

language," Crane says. "But for Nathaniel, it was an opportunity to go back to his college mind, when he was at Juilliard, and he was able to talk about conductors. He knew a lot. I was shocked." Their rapport, says Crane, "was obviously very genuine on both sides."

Crane reports that he still gets phone calls from Ayers every day, sometimes in rambling messages in which Ayers pays his respects to every member of the orchestra's bass section. This summer, Crane was worried about Ayers's response to news that he would be moving to St. Louis to take a new job as director of communications with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. For a time, Ayers decided he, too, would move to St. Louis. So far, L.A. remains his home.

also the power of Nathaniel. When you're with him, there's a special presence. He pulls you in. The way he speaks is brilliant and totally creative and difficult to follow, but engaging and absorbing."

Borda says she's watched Ayers since his first day inside Disney Hall, "coming to rehearsals and to concerts, and really enjoying music, studying with various members of our orchestra, and sort of being adopted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. When he gives concerts, he'll go out on the street and play in front of the Walt Disney Concert Hall."

Social Responsibility

Ayers's personal attachment to the orchestra, says Borda, "perhaps wouldn't have happened at an institution that didn't think a little bit differently. At the Los Angeles Philharmonic, we constantly are thinking not only about how we are living now but how we imagine ourselves in the

future. What we feel is a tremendous sense of musical responsibility, but also social responsibility. The other thing is that this organization has a heart and feel to it. You can feel it in our relations with the musicians and the musicians' relations with their audience and as they work as teachers and with their conductor. It probably reflects what is a very open and wonderful

group of people. One of the things that I noticed when I moved from the East Coast to the West Coast—one of the things I loved—is that if we had an idea, we just tried it. This is sort of in that same spirit.”

Assessing Ayers's playing, Crane comments that “in his mind, it should be at a level that he can't get to yet, and may never get to again. It's frustrating for him.

He does work at it, though. He practices and is clearly determined. He's studying violin with Robert Gupta. He gets his assignment and goes out and practices, and will have it down. He hears the notes. His pitch is good. He was a Juilliard-trained bassist, so he clearly is talented. I noticed that instantly when he sat down and played the cello. He was very rusty. He has improved. It's like night and day compared to where he was when I first met him.”

Gupta, a twenty-year-old violinist new to the L.A. Phil, was asked by Ayers—through Lopez—to give him violin lessons. For the first lesson, in a Disney Hall practice room, Gupta had planned to run through the Bach Double Concerto in D Minor. “Nathaniel came in, and he was decked out in this flag he had strapped to himself. There was a violin hanging from one shoulder, and a trumpet hanging from the other shoulder. I don't think he had his cello with him that day. But he had a chair with him and a towel. On the chair was written ‘no smoking, Steve Lopez, Adam Crane, the Los Angeles Philharmonic.’

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In a scene from the movie, Jamie Foxx (Ayers) and Robert Downey Jr. (Lopez) look for a place to stash Ayers's shopping cart, which he could not bring into Disney Hall.

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That's how I first encountered Nathaniel, in my capacity as his violin teacher. That became, for me, one of the most special, moving, and inspiring experiences of my life, because I saw from the very outset, the very beginning, that this is a man who had a tremendous musical knowledge. The playing was far removed from the point when we started the lesson. He wanted to talk about music. And so we got to talking about the Mozart symphonies and the Brahms *German Requiem*, and then works of Beethoven. Beethoven is Nathaniel's favorite composer and also my favorite composer."

Like other musicians who have established relationships with Ayers, Gupta found in him an astonishing clarity about musical matters, in contrast to his fragility in other settings. "His memory is so sharp, and when he talks about music, it reminded me of my professors at Yale. He is the most erudite and sophisticated and clear conveyor of the subject. It's a miracle to behold. It's very emotional for me sometimes, because I can see what he could have been, as a musician, as a bassist, but also I think he could have been more than that. He could have been a maestro."

Hong, who was an adviser on the film and part of the L.A. Phil's supportive "team Nathaniel!"—as Crane dubs it—also feels that Ayers's link to Disney Hall and the orchestra has been a critical element in his recent well-being. "In some ways," says Hong, "I believe it has been his salvation, his drug that keeps him focused on something. I know that he really loves music and in some ways he needs the music to carry on every day. I know he used to play on the street for seven or eight hours. This is just who he is."

Getting Ayers off the street and into subsidized housing is a big part of the Lopez-Ayers friendship, as was reestablishing contact with the music world he loves so much. "When he was on the street," Gupta says, "he was doing it all by himself. For him to be reconnected with professional musicians at Disney Hall, he thought it was a great and rare opportunity. Because of that, I think he was really grateful and happy to have this kind of opportunity and to talk to somebody else about music. One thing for sure is that the street can be a potentially very dangerous place. One needs to be

very vigilant and tough. In some ways, you need to build up a wall around yourself. You can't be very trusting of everybody who approaches you, when you sleep on the street. For him to come to Disney Hall and feel safe has been a very important social outlet for him."

Dramas On-screen and Off

To be the highly public subject of columns in the *Los Angeles Times* and a book is one thing. Having one's story told in a Hollywood feature film is another.



Los Angeles Philharmonic cellist Ben Hong: "Ayers used to play on the street for seven or eight hours. This is just who he is."

Unlike some Hollywood films with orchestras—one recent example being *Get Smart*, with a climactic scene in Disney Hall shot with a glaringly unrealistic orchestral scenario—this film, directed by Joe Wright (*Atonement*, *Pride and Prejudice*), has avidly sought authenticity. For two days in Disney Hall, the actual Los Angeles Philharmonic, with Salonen in charge, was filmed for a key scene in which Lopez and Ayers had their first cathartic encounter at a rehearsal. Foxx—who played Ray Charles in the biopic *Ray*—joined Downey Jr., while the actual characters sat in another corner of the house. Semi-fiction imitated reality, with reality peering in from the wings.

Those around Ayers worry about possible fallout from the film's release, especially if *The Soloist* attains even modest popularity by Hollywood standards. "I

don't know that he fully grasps what's going on," Crane says. "He'll often say the movie's not about him. How can it really be about him? And then, in a way, he appreciates it. He's getting attention for something he never succeeded at, and is now being recognized for it—in a very strange way, but this is what's happened. It's fascinating. I could have driven through the Second Street Tunnel this afternoon and he could have been there. He still lives in his own world. This is not going to change him. Fame and fortune and all of that don't mean anything to him. He still lives as if he were on the streets, which he kind of is, still, except he's in housing."

As Lopez says, "We all worry about the effect of the movie on Nathaniel. It's our job, mine in particular, to shield him from too much intrusion. On the other hand, though he's not interested in TV and movies, he appreciates the book and movie as a resurrection of a career that went off a cliff. In some ways, he's being acknowledged for his talent, promise, and courage. I think he appreciates that, even though in his world popular culture means little.

"There is indeed a risk in having agreed to a movie, as there was in writing a book and columns about him. The prevailing motivator was to take a powerful human drama and present it in a way that changes the way people think about the guy standing on a corner, and about the way this society has abandoned some of its most vulnerable citizens. In humanizing Nathaniel, I'd like to think we can humanize thousands like him, help de-stigmatize mental illness, and draw a sharp focus on the failures of public policy and social service."

For the last few years, Lopez has grown accustomed to regular inquiries from people as to Ayers's well-being and general condition. Asked once again late this summer, Lopez reports that "Nathaniel is still a sick man. The disease doesn't go away. He has good days and bad. For the last couple of months, he's been particularly well, mellow and more social than usual. He still builds his days around music, constantly switching from one instrument to another. His latest favorite is the piano in his studio at Lamp Village, near where he lives."

One profoundly inspiring aspect in the still-unfolding Nathaniel Ayers story is his enveloping involvement with music that soothes his soul and, on a good day, fends off demons. It's a state of grace, in a way, and a paradigm of what most true artists in music aspire towards.

As Gupta observes, "Nathaniel is living proof that art for art's own sake can survive and be healing and redemptive. I think that's the whole message of Steve's book, that music has this quality of redemption. I believe it saved Nathaniel's life. It brought him to the place he is in now. If he didn't have music in his life, he would have been a very different person—one we would not want to associate with.

"It's incredible that this story happened in our beautifully materialistic city of Los Angeles, that we have this truly human story. The Philharmonic is an organization that supports the arts, that is artistic, and this is why we play. This is why we exist. I'm honored to be a part of that." ❏

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