



## Stark's Reality

### Playin' in the Band by Thom Stark

I'm very proud of my friend Dot.

Last Summer, for the kind of unexplainable reasons that lie at the intersection of motivation, aspiration and ambition, she suddenly was seized with the desire to learn to play the stand-up bass -- a stringed instrument that looks something like a fiddle that's been through several centuries' worth of inflation. So she went down to see Cousin Jack, who owns the only music store in Mariposa, and she bought one.

Cousin Jack gave her a very good deal on her purchase. He threw in free lessons to make the bargain even sweeter and Dot immediately commenced the long, arduous process of mastering her new instrument. (It was not a completely altruistic gesture on Jack's part, since it just so happened that we needed a bass player to add a little bottom end to the sound of our Sunday afternoon jam sessions.)

It's true that Dot comes from a musical family, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was easy for her. Mastery of the upright bass is a formidable challenge, both musically and in a strictly physical sense, because its fingerboard lacks the frets upon which the guitar players of the world so heavily depend and because, to coax music from them requires a not inconsiderable amount of plain, old muscle to hold down the thick, heavy cables it uses for strings.

But Dot persisted. When her schedule permitted, she showed up on Sunday afternoons to add her increment of sound to our informal and ever-changing ensemble and she faithfully visited Cousin Jack's tiny, intensely-crowded shop for lessons. And, after a few months, her playing improved to the point that she started to sound downright musical.

Not that what we played together was particularly challenging. Mostly it was folk songs, an occasional country standard and a few blues and rock tunes that I'd sneak in when nobody was paying attention. Virtually all of them consisted of three or fewer chords. But Dot kept expanding her repertoire -- where, at first, all she'd been able to manage was to play the root note of each chord, she started throwing in thirds and fifths, doing walkups and patterns.

By the turn of the year, she was getting good enough that, when I wangled a Friday night gig at the White House in beautiful, downtown Bootjack, I asked her if she'd be willing to help me out on bass.

Dot has always enjoyed the stops I insert into "This Land Is Your Land" and she likes my bluesy arrangement of "Amazing Grace", too. She'd essayed her first walkup on my rendition of "The Streets of Laredo" and she always gets a kick out of rocking out with me and Cousin Jack on "Staggerlee". And it wasn't like I was asking her to sing or anything.

So she decided she'd take the gig.

We had a month's grace before our performance and we were both determined to be prepared when the day arrived. Accordingly, every Tuesday and Thursday night, we got together for rehearsals in my living room. (My wife was taking a computer class those evenings, so our patient, long-suffering dog was the only one who had to endure our repetitious drill sessions.)

Dot taped those practices and she listened to the tapes every day on her two-hour round-trip commute to work in Merced. She made it a point to snatch five or ten minutes here and there to hone her grasp of the more demanding songs on our list, too. It wasn't easy for her to find the time, because, in addition to the demands of her job as a guidance counselor in the Merced school system, every day she also had to feed and clean up after three donkeys, two horses, a couple of goats, a coopfull of chickens, a gang of semi-feral cats and a pot-bellied pig.

Needless to say, Dot didn't get a lot of sleep that month and, since we rehearsed every night during the week prior to our White House gig, by the time our big night rolled around, she was about three orders of magnitude and a teasing-comb short of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. But, after five hours of sleep and a full day of work, she showed up at the White House in time to do a quick sound check and we hit the stage three whole minutes early.

Fortunately, my friend Kurt, who used to play for audiences of 10,000 before he moved to Mariposa, was kind enough to join us on 12-string guitar, so, even though he was only able to rehearse with us twice before showtime, we managed to create a fair amount of noise together. Cousin Jack added his harmonica to the din during our second set and, with Dot accompanying him, he even covered for me with a smoking-hot romp through "The Crawdad Song" after I broke a string near the end of "My Darling Clementine".

And, despite the fact that, as luck would have it, we had to compete with the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics, it turned out to be a darned good gig. There was a decent crowd through most of our first two sets. (Although for the last five songs of the third one, we were playing to just two people -- one of whom was my darling wife. But that lone civilian seemed to be having a swell time. He even bought us a round of drinks.)

When it was all over, Dot confessed that she'd been nearly paralyzed with stage fright through our whole first set. It was the first time she'd ever performed on a stage and the first time she'd ever played through a PA system.

It was also the first time she'd ever gotten paid to perform -- and, for someone who's played bass for less than nine months, I'd say she did a fabulous job, stage fright or no stage fright.

Yes, I'm very proud of my friend Dot.

I think I have good reason to be.