



How Mr. Ayers and Mr. Lopez Became Friends

Morley Safer Reports on a Unique Urban Fable that Happens to Be True

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This is one of those urban fables that happens to be true. Steve Lopez is a newspaper columnist for the Los Angeles Times; Nathaniel Ayers is a troubled man with a brilliant past.

They met by chance on the streets of downtown L.A. - an encounter that would change them both. The story of their friendship is a tale about madness, redemption, and the mysterious power of music. At the insistence of Mr. Ayers, who was taught good manners as a child, they call each other "Mister." We will do the same.

Mr. Ayers and Mr. Lopez were introduced, in a way, by Mr. Music himself, Ludwig van Beethoven.

"I was in downtown Los Angeles. And I heard beautiful music," Mr. Lopez told *60 Minutes* correspondent Morley Safer.

That day three years ago, Mr. Lopez, with a deadline approaching, was pounding the pavement, stumped for something to write about. A few blocks from the office - by a small park where a statue of Beethoven had been erected - he found Mr. Ayers, a homeless man, playing not as a panhandler, but for himself, music to chase away the demons that forever stalk him.

Asked what first piqued his curiosity about this homeless man, Mr. Lopez told Safer, "Desperation. Sweating out another column. Looked like it could work. I thought, 'Okay, where did this all begin? How does this guy end up on this street corner?'"



Mr. Lopez would find that Mr. Ayers, now 58, was once a hugely gifted young musician accepted by Juilliard, the country's preeminent music school. His talent - and future - were crushed by the weight of a devastating, incurable mental illness: paranoid schizophrenia.

His passion for music is perfectly clear. His illness becomes obvious as he tries to describe Beethoven. "And there he is still there, the consternation. And he's complete with another symphony, the elucidation. And you know, my mind goes wild. And the bird droppings are wiped away by the workers. And he's just as real and green as the next tree or beautiful scene," Mr. Ayers told Safer.

After their first meeting, Mr. Lopez tracked Mr. Ayers to the place he called home: a downtown tunnel where he played by day and slept at night, carrying sticks to ward off the rats. Though he was trained to play the bass, he also taught himself trumpet, cello, and violin.

"Playing the music in that tunnel with the cars and exhaust and God knows what, why there?" Safer asked.

"It seemed orchestral," Mr. Ayers replied. "The commotion, the calamity, and the sounds, you know?"

"You were part of the symphony of the big city?" Safer asked.

"Well, schizophrenically, yes," Mr. Ayers said, chuckling.

Slowly, Mr. Ayers opened up to Mr. Lopez about his music and his background. Mr. Lopez brought him home to meet his wife and daughter to offer a glimpse of a settled life.

"With each visit, I got more of his intelligence and charm, and more of the disjointed, all over the place sentences," Mr. Lopez recalled.

"I don't care about Beethoven as an obituary. Just Beethoven as a spirit. And my mother. Just as good as the Statue of Liberty forever," Mr. Ayers said.

A conversation with Mr. Ayers can switch with lightning speed from one fixation to another: Stravinsky, baseball, Barbara Eden, Colonel Sanders. They're tangled thoughts followed by moments of perfect clarity.

"Music is saying, you know, life isn't that bad, you know?" Mr. Ayers explained.

Mr. Lopez began writing columns about Mr. Ayers - his illness, his life on the streets, and before the darkness descended, as a supremely talented kid growing up in Cleveland.

"Did you look up to him at that point in your life? Your big brother?" Safer asked Mr. Ayers' sister, Jennifer Ayers-Moore.

"Always have. I still do," she said. She remembers the family's pride in his acceptance to Juilliard in 1970, when he was 19. And the alarm they felt when he came home one summer.

"He was always neat, always well-groomed. And when we went to pick him up from Juilliard I was really shocked. That he had on an old tattered like sweater. And he just didn't look like the brother that I saw leaving to go to New York," Ayers-Moore remembered.

He was one of only a few black students in his class at Juilliard, where the competition was cutthroat.

"It was really sink or swim," Mr. Lopez explained. "He had to prove himself as a musician, and probably on some level had to disabuse people of the notion that maybe he was there because he was African-American."

His grades were dropping. He was angry and confrontational with teachers and fellow students.

"Nobody knew what was going on with Nathaniel. But in fact, he was losing his mind. He ended up in a police car on his way to Bellevue Hospital. And that was it. His career went off a cliff. This career that might well have landed him in one of the great orchestras of the world was done," Mr. Lopez explained.

He went back to Cleveland to the home that he grew up in. But he eventually drifted away to live on the streets. Medication didn't help. Out of options, his mother agreed to a last resort: shock therapy.

"She felt like this was gonna be it. And I remember that when he came out, he had this look on his face. It was almost like a zombie. She expected him to go in and come out a different person. And it just didn't work out that way," Ayers-Moore told Safer.

As the years passed, Mr. Ayers drifted on to California. Mr. Lopez's columns prompted readers to give him musical instruments to replace the battered ones he'd lugged across country. His story touched a nerve in the Los Angeles area, where - after sunset - as many as 60,000 homeless people wander the streets.

"That's more than San Francisco, Chicago, New York City, Houston and Seattle combined," explained Casey Horan, who runs Lamp, a private agency which provides shelter and services for the large number of homeless who are mentally ill. After a year of trying, Ms. Horan and Mr. Lopez were able to talk Mr. Ayers into coming off the streets at night to sleep in a small room.

"So he sees it now as his home and he really values his home," Horan explained.

But his spiritual oasis is Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Frank Gehry designed building that's home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Mr. Lopez arranged to take Mr. Ayers to a concert.

"And Mr. Ayers said, 'People should not have to pay good money to see great music and have to sit next to somebody like me. I live on the street. I don't have the proper clothing.' And we said, 'What about a rehearsal?'" Mr. Lopez recalled.

And so they became regulars at rehearsals, with Mr. Ayers following the score and telling Mr. Lopez what to listen for. "I knew that Mr. Ayers was home. That being in this concert hall meant a great deal to him," Mr. Lopez explained.

He's a familiar face backstage, and one of idols is conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen.

The orchestra's musicians also took up Mr. Ayers' cause. Rehearsing with him, pianist Joanne Pearce-Martin took him through the music he has loved since his student days.

"When he comes into this building he transforms into a different person," explained Adam Crane, the orchestra's publicist, who became friends with Mr. Ayers.

"Do you get any sense of what his talent might have been, had he not had the illness?" Safer asked Crane.

"You either have it or you don't. He has it. He feels it. He was very rusty. But clearly, he knows what he's doing," Crane said.

To get rid of the rust, orchestra members give Mr. Ayers lessons. Violinist Robert Gupta, a virtuoso gives a master class.

"Mr. Gupta has an incredible genius in the violin," Mr. Ayers remarked.

Will Mr. Ayers ever be able to play at Mr. Gupta's level? It's doubtful. But that, says the young teacher, isn't the point. "The fact that he has people that understand him and that respect him and that wish him well, I think that is incredibly therapeutic for him."

"To no longer be considered some nut on the street?" Safer asked.

"Exactly," Gupta replied.

But with terrifying memories of shock treatment and the medication he was given years ago, Mr. Ayers refuses to try new, more effective drugs now used to reduce the ravages of schizophrenia. So his demons still take charge.

"You want to believe that this man is well on the way to recovery. The next day, he's the devil. His eyes are bloodshot. And there's rage and terror in them," Mr. Lopez explained.

We got a small taste of that at Lamp, where Mr. Ayers sleeps. "Kiss my mother bleepin' bleep. I ain't here to be bothered by anything like that. They keep (bleep) here so I can't have the key to the piano so (bleep) that," he said.

His sister had come from Atlanta to visit him for the first time in months. He'd had an argument with someone about getting the key to a room where he practices. He was enraged.

"Does he know, does he understand, do you think, just how sick he is?" Safer asked Jennifer Ayers-Moore.

"You know, sometimes I wanna say no, he doesn't. But then other times my heart is saying that someday he's gonna just say you know, 'I don't wanna live like this anymore. I need to do something.' But that's just a hope," she said.

It's fitting perhaps, since they met in the movie capital, that a film has been made about Mr. Ayers and Mr. Lopez. "The Soloist" is based on the book Mr. Lopez wrote about this odd couple. Several hundred homeless people were hired to play themselves. Who, after all, could do it better? And the stars are Robert Downey Jr. as Mr. Lopez and Jamie Foxx as Mr. Ayers.

A story that confirms that life is indeed stranger than fiction. "It's very good to be alive right now. It's very good to be able to be in the company of Mr. Lopez," Mr. Ayers said.

"It's the most meaningful friendship that I've had in my life. It's the one I've learned the most from," Mr. Lopez explained.

"In this process did you kind of discover the inner good guy?" Safer asked.

"I think that I did. He grew to trust me. He grew to rely on me. And I knew that he needed that in his life. And I felt good about giving that," Mr. Lopez replied.