The Blue Check Republic

Good news, my pretties: there's free music in this post to quench your thirsty ears!

Last June, I ambled out to the countryside to Komplex Studio for an afternoon of convivial, improvisatory meanderings by two string ticklers under the watchful eyes/ears of an ace engineer. Shorter: I hung out with cool people and recorded loose jams for a couple of hours.

It was a lovely afternoon that was long overdue. And, thought I, that was that. I had a great time, but nothing I played felt special. Truth: I felt a bit embarrassed by my feeble noodlings.

But my pal Tracy Chow and her hubs Chan had designs. Six months later, I received a message:

> *Wanted you to hear and give your feedback/approval/disapproval. I can easily take it down or make adjustments.*

So I listened. And then again. And I am pretty knocked out by the production T/C put together here. They imagined the larger picture in ways that were invisible to me. And after a dozen or so listens, I gotta say this is one of the most satisfying recordings of my playing I've ever listened to.

And it's available here, for free (or if you'd like, for an optional donation to keep Komplex Studio in tall clover). It

falls pretty squarely in the ambient vein, but it has a great deal more structure and definition than I would have expected. All props to T/C for their imagining the greater whole and giving me the gift of golden ears interpreting my work in a way that makes me feel very proud.

And for helping me realize that the thing my playing needs more than anything else – including practice, of which there can never be enough – is collaboration with other people.

So as the year winds down (or up), I'm all about shocking a few new and revived music projects into life for 2016.

Long wished for by tens of people, the Jake Legg Trio is rising from the ashes with some local Tallahassee players. This is long overdue, but look for us soon. Natch, an active local trio also mean the Jake Legg Half Quartet will also be available for service.

As it has for the past 11 years, RoboCromp remains available to active duty. Cromp and I began playing together in 1989, far and away my longest musical partnership. And we're still in love. What does it sound like?

And yet another: an old pal from the glory days of the Center for Creative Aspiration lives an hour or so away, and we have planned some material to work on together. Distance is a pisser for rehearsal and consistent work, but if we can overcome that obstacle, this could raise some neck hairs among the unsuspecting, innocent listener.

Who knows what else lies in wait?

The Shadow do.

All in all, some good prospects looming. It's a good way to end/begin the year.

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola

Posted this almost exactly a year ago. I've been making at least a batch of granola a week since then, and today finds me making a couple of batches for holiday gifting. Seemed a good time to share this one again. BTW, the Bitter Southerner has a new Best Of list up for 2015. Check it out.

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola

Looking for an activity that'll cure what ails you? Cook something.

Alas, my kitchen chops are just enough to keep me from starving, and to get myself in trouble once in a while, but there are a few go-to recipes that keep me from being a cliched, *Leave It To Beaver* era patriarchal putz.<fn>There are plenty of other areas where I qualify, but I'm nearly redeemable on this score.</fn> If you are generally kitchen savvy, this post is likely beneath your notice, save as an opportunity to point and laugh as I wobble on toddler legs through the world of food.

This one is an amalgam of lots of different granola recipes

I've made/bungled/burned over the years. I've finally learned the guiding principles, though, and now I can whip this out at a moment's notice, as long as I have all the ingredients:

Oatmeal – 4 cups

Sunflower seeds – 1 cup

Flax seeds – ½ cup

Coconut flakes – 1 cup

Tupelo Honey – ¾ cup (any other sweetener will do, but this is my fave)

Vegetable Oil – ½ cup

Salt – A couple two three pinches

Vanilla extract – A scoche

Then, if you’re like me, you’ll realize you forgot something, so off to the market to get:

Pecans – 1 cup chopped

Dried fruit – A fistful (cranberries today). DO NOT put the dried fruit in the oven or they will turn to stone.

Mix all the dry ingredients (except the dried fruit!!) in a big pan. You can substitute or add any kinds of seeds or nuts, but if you add much more than I use, you might want to add another cup of oats to keep the granola from becoming too seedy. Add the salt, oil, honey, and vanilla. Then stir like crazy. I use a pan with high side walls because I’m clumsy and spill a lot otherwise.

Put the mix in a 300* oven for 30 minutes. Make another pot of coffee after SOMEONE drank the rest of the first pot.<fn>I’m not naming names.</fn>

At the 30 minute mark, pull the pan out and stir well. Put it back in for another 15 minutes or so. Keep your eyes and nose peeled for any hint of burning.

After 15 minutes, or around the time your kitchen begins to smell like heaven's garden, take it out and stir again. Let cool for a while, stirring occasionally. Once it cools, add a fistful of dried fruit <fn>Exactly, no more or less. Be precise.</fn> and stir it in.

That's it. If I can do it, any prat can make it work. Half a cup of this mixed with a half cup of yogurt makes this My Favorite World.

Today's Music

This morning, Bitter Southerner posted their 25+1 favorite CDs to come out of the South in 2014.<fn>I wrote this last week, so the date's off.</fn> With just a couple of exceptions, I had not heard of the musicians on the list. So I pulled one up to provide the soundtrack for granola wrangling: Curtis Harding's *Soul Power.*

An ATL-based guitarist/singer, Harding serves an updated take on one of my favorite styles – late 60s/early 70s soul and R&B. Isley, Curtis Mayfield, Issac Hayes, Al Green…not that he *sounds just like* any of these folks, but that you can feel the through-line from the pioneers up to more recent R&B authenticos like Prince and Cee Lo. (Harding was in Cee Lo's band for a while.) He also reflects the great blues vibe of Muddy Waters and the like. And then comes "Cruel World" to wrap things up and I'm reminded of Los Lobos and the great guitar of David Hidalgo. All in all, I really love it. Just one more surprise puzzle piece that fits right into MFW. I'm sure it made the granola more better.

And now we're into Amy Ray's *Goodnight Tender*. I've met Amy in passing a few times<fn>Not that she'd have any reason to remember.</fn> and she's truly one of the world's good people. Loving this album, a heaping helping of pure country. And all respect for the incred harmonies that pal Kelly Hogan is dropping here. M. F. W.

I'm looking forward to checking out the whole list, especially the latest Lucinda Williams, whom I adore, yes I do. And if you don't know the Bitter Southerner, get to know them. They provided more than a little bit of inspiration for establishing this here little bloggy vineyard.

The Management Wishes to Apologize

It appears The Writer slipped a fast one past Standards and Practices a few days ago. The Mgmt. wishes to apologize for the overly harsh tone The Writer took when discussing the food of the irresistibly delightful and perky Rachel Ray, whose food deserved better than the snide dismissal she suffered in our last post. We beg the forgiveness of the perkyperkyperky Ms Ray, and of our readers.<fn>Sincerely, we like the perky Ms Ray, and find her food to be perfectly fine, albeit unspectacular. The Writer is an embittered wretch, however, and is prone to unseemly outbursts. Again, we apologize.</fn>

What kind of monster would be cruel to this bubbly sprite?

As penance, The Writer has been chained to our kitchen counter

where he will be forced to create this dessert twelve times a day for the entire twelve days of Chrismakwanzkuh.

And he will be forced to eat every. damn. bite. That oughta learn him.

Sisyphus, upon hearing of this punishment, said “Wow, that’s kind of harsh, doncha think?”

No. We most certainly do not.

Food Porn

One of the best movies I watched in the past year is *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, a 2011 documentary about Jiro Ono, the 85-year-old proprietor/chef of Sukiyabashi Jiro. This 10-seat, sushi-only restaurant in Tokyo – in a subway station, no less – is allegedly the greatest sushi restaurant in the known universe, and Jiro-san is sushi’s greatest artist.

Take a look at these hands.

The movie delves into the single-minded pursuit of perfection that drives the Master, and by extension, his two sons, both of whom live under his shadow and dominance. One son has opened his own successful restaurant; the eldest remains chained to the old man as apprentice-for-life (or so it must seem to 50-year old Yoshikazu), or at least until the old man kicks and Yoshi can take over the subway sushi empire.

The movie is gorgeously shot, and slow, and lyrical. The depiction of the Lear-esque intergenerational dynamic is subtle and clear. The director (David Gelb) manages to let the story unfold at a leisurely pace that matches the pace of the diners who savor every bite of the $250 prix fixe menu.

More than anything, the movie is about dedication to craft over a lifetime, the single-minded pursuit of excellence in a single-task. The results emerge in the food. It really looks glorious, and the meticulous care the chefs take in selecting ingredients and preparing and presenting the end product is captivating. It is truly worth the couple of bucks you'll pay to watch on iTunes or Amazon.

So we were pretty excited to see that Gelb was putting

together a six-part series for Netflix called *Chef's Table*. Each hour-long episode profiles a chef from a different part of the world, with each one notable for his or her innovation and brilliance in the culinary arts. Most of them have developed creative interpretations of their own culture's food legacy. They are all faithfully honoring their heritage through innovation. They are all critical and financial successes after the obligatory years of struggle and failures, veritable icons of forward thinking foodery.

Crouton garnished with organic yard sprigs on a bed of hair with guitar pick.

And as we watch the full series, something about it just stinks.

It could be that top tier chefery remains such a boy's club, with LA-based Niki Nakayama the only woman in the series. It could be the generalized arrogance of the chefs themselves; Jiro may be imperious, but he's never arrogant. But mostly, it could be that the food lives in a world apart from 99% of us; this really is food for the one percent. And the food experts delivering incisive analysis of why this chef or that is *so critically important* are the masticant version of fashion mavens who sniff at *pret a porter* and congratulate

themselves for acknowledging the existence of so-called "regular-sized women". It's like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. You can never be too rich, or too thin, or have your foie gras or veal raised in such a humane manner, fed lovingly on grass that was pre-masticated and glazed with a balsamic-and-baby-tears reduction! Gaze upon our privilege, peons, and imagine yourselves so fortunate.

A more realistic dream…

Funny thing, though. None of the food in *Chef's Table* makes me wish I was there to eat it. And to be honest, none of the chefs makes me wish we could hang out. And as such, it fails as food porn at the fundamental level – it does not engorge my desire to be in the action.

Food porn, like regular porn, is a substitute for the real experience. Food porn makes you hungry. Regular porn makes you horny.<fn>YMMV.</fn> Food porn makes you think, "hey, I could enjoy that, too". Regular porn? Same sort of thing. In the end, one wonders what it might have been like to actually participate in the antics on-screen.

We like to watch.

But not all food porn is created equal. *Chef's Table* falls short because it is so fussy and privileged. It's a soft porn *Downton Abbey*. You are probably sort of sure there is something happening, but the attitude is so detached and stuffy that you can't be sure. Having contemplated *noblesse oblige* for the better part of an hour, Lady Mary's hand accidentally grazes the sleeve of Mr Bates' jacket leading to sexual tension, guilt, and, alas, no resolution. Some Maggie Smith commentary would help, but only just. That's the food experience at the *Chef's Table*.

The High Priestess

I really enjoy cooking shows, have loved them since I was a kid watching Julia Child and *The Galloping Gourmet* on public television.<fn>Your Narrator has always been something of a dweebnerd.</fn> Even their snobbishness – that hint of the genteel in accent and demeanor – somehow added to their charm,

and we had the idea that we were with someone who truly wished us all to become great cooks. And their food always looked kind of amazing and tantalizing.<fn>Plus sport! Watching the greats chop vegetables was like watching Baryshnikov or Federer. Jacques Pepin is bone fide Mack Heath with a blade. Watch Jiro-san slice sushi. Behold Julia poised before a duck, cleaver raised for the *coup de fowl*. Can we run that again on instant replay super slo-mo 360* telestrator?</fn>

The Galloping Punster

(My most enduring memory of Graham Kerr involved one of his intro stories. He was a shameless punster {“with fronds like these, who needs anemones?”}, and one day he told a nearly endless shaggy dog story that ended with him sticking a hypodermic into the top of a coconut, coinciding with the line “a furry with a syringe on top”. Well.)

Not for nothing, both of these icons were pretty liberal with the wine during filming.

The food shows of my youth were primarily instructional. We were intended to go forth and re-create what we had witnessed. In this sense, the oldie food shows were less porn-like and

more akin to a Human Sexuality instructional video. The mechanics were depicted, but one was expected to put one's learning into action.

Eventually, purveyors of foodie shows realized that most people can't be bothered to actually, you know, cook food. Like exercise videos, most viewers take the food shows as passive entertainment. Sure, some of the current crop of celeb chefs offer recipes and such, but most programming on the food networks are given over to spectacle, to travelogue and *Survivor*-style competitions where wannabe chow jockeys frantically yell at one another and sweat into the food they are handling in hopes of capturing the holy grail – a chance at their own food program.

But more than anything, modern food shows revolve around the Celebrity. Some actually cook, some just eat. Almost all of them paste their names on cookbooks and pots and pans and knife sharpeners and citrus zesters &c. Like Marylin Chambers and Jenna Jameson, our celebrity foodies have become franchises, interchangeable with brands like Trojan or Cuisinart, their photo on the cover a guarantee of a certain….something.

Latter day celebrity chefs run the gamut from sniff-sniff high society to here's how to make weenies in a blanket for a last-minute dinner party. Who do we love?

How does she not have

a headache from stretching her face like that?

Giada De Laurentiis is the chef with a 2000 watt smile. On camera, Giada has the miraculous ability to come off as your girl-next-door bestie, which is exactly who she is if you happened to grow up in the most exclusive neighborhood in Beverly Hills. Her food is every bit as utterly divine as Giada's smile and wardrobe. You can almost smell the garlic coming through the electric picture radio box. One could almost forget that she lives behind high walls and guarded gates. Almost.

Alcohol is a very important part of a balanced teevee diet.

My favorite high-tone food flinger is Hamptons-based Ina Garten – the Barefoot Contessa. She has the most soothing teevee voice since Bob Ross. Really, watch her some afternoon when it is raining and you need to relax. Have a glass of wine

or three – or maybe one of those pinkytinis pictured above – and let Ina's dulcet descriptions of produce and process float you away on clouds of imagined gustatory delight. Better than Xanax, guaranteed. You might even pick up a recipe or two that you have no intention of ever actually making.

Both of them make you feel like you'd be welcome to dine at their tables, though in fact you'd probably meet a couple of very serious security guys if you actually tried. Their food looks yummy, too. Let's consider them the purveyors of art house food porn. Very plummy, very luxe. Out of reach, but certainly delicious. An impossible fantasy. Let's watch another episode and pretend we're Jeffrey.

Others in our constellation of culinary heroes are more, um, proletariat. Rachel Ray brings the perky energy of an ex-cheerleader to her single-minded mission to dominate the food of the masses. She is just goddamned adorably cute, and did I mention that she is perky? Perky, perky, perky!!

Fresh fruit is an important part of a balanced diet.

Her food is basic, easy to replicate, and frankly, perfectly revolting. This combination is even less appealing than you might think. But nobody works harder than Rachel. Her routine of filming up to a dozen half-hour episodes per day

can lead to some pretty bizarre performances. It often seems as though she's suffered a blow to the head with a board. Her perkiness never lags, even when she is slurring her words from exhaustion, and it's always a suspense-filled mystery to find out if the unlikely ingredients she's mangling will turn into something magical.<fn>That's a lie. It never turns magical. But somehow, still, it's hard to turn away.</fn> This is more mass-appeal fare, something more like *Debbie Does Meatloaf* than *Story of O.*<fn>Credit where due. Rachel had the Galloping Gourmet as a guest on her talk show (yep) where she asked him to tell the furry with a syringe on top joke. Respect.</fn>

Then there are our travel guides, intrepid globetrotters in search of, well, something.

Andrew Zimmern (*Bizarre Eats*) seems a nice enough fella, but jesus hitler, that guy would eat sauteed dingleberries with poo garnish if someone served it out of a filthy kitchen with a camera watching, and then his face would contort into the foodie equivalent of oh-baby-you-have-such-big-thing that makes regular porn so, um, convincing. He even moans a little bit when the food is especially disgusting. Let's not even get into the episodes where he eats actual testicles; the parallel is getting uncomfortable even for me, and I'm behind this increasingly horrific metaphor-cum<fn>See what I did there?</fn>-critique.

That is, in fact, exactly what you think it is.

Bizarre Eats is sort of like watching the kid in middle-school who would eat a live cockroach on a dare. You're not gonna look away, and you're gonna get grossed out, but there's no chance you'd pass your bottle of Jack to that guy. Put this in with the X-rated *Frankenstein* that Warhol produced mid-70s, or maybe one of those *Faces of Death* shitshows. A very little bit goes a long, long way.

Guy Fieri? Probably the less said the better. This lands squarely in the amateur, homemade porn realm, kind of gross, a matter of some curiosity at best. Watching this peroxided hipster wannabe chow his way through a three-pound burger with some inexplicable sauce is to watch a pimply couple with mullets slapping flab in the grainy light of a double-wide trailer. To be fair, though, Fieri brings superior production values, so you can really see the disgusting thing you want no part of.

The food is even less attractive than Guy himself.

Fieri is an actual restaurateur, ~~just like~~ not at all like our favorites from *Chef's Table*. Where the *CT* foodies might offer

a thin slice of radish on a bed of peat with sea salt reduction for $60, our pal Guy is all about huge quantities of alleged food at allegedly low, low prices. One of his joints offers something called “Gringo Sushi”, which is apparently just like sushi without the fish, rice and seaweed, subbing in french fries, crispy fried onions, and iceberg lettuce for that nasty foreign stuff. Iceberg lettuce in your sushi. No. Shit.

He is, as you may well imagine, a huge financial success, with his own Times Square “bistro”<fn>If by bistro one means a sub-Applebees botulism experiment with $18 dollar frozen burgers.</fn> that was the subject of one of the greatest restaurant reviews in the history of forever. Much like snuff films and Olive Garden, the mere existence of Guy Fieri is enough to convince one of the existence of a dark and malevolent force in the Universe, a sure sign of the decline of Western civilization.

Anthony Bourdain’s another story. Man, I’d love to travel and hang with that guy, though I’d probably suffer irreversible liver damage within a week. His tastes run from high to low, from bizarre to pedestrian. He’s as much at home in front of the most high-faluting avant-gastro as he is eating his way through the menu at *Waffle House*. Even better: Bourdain keeps his eye on the fact that food is an essential ingredient of human interaction, a basic glue that binds cultural identity.

Drunk as a skunk at the Waffle House. As it should be.

Bourdain is food porn a la Henry Miller and JP Sartre and Terry Southern. It's raw, it's dirty, it has that certain *je ne sais quoi*. And then you have to think about it a bunch and spill a lot of words agonizing over what it all means in the larger scheme of things. And drinking. Lots of drinking! With normal people! My kinda food porn!

Bourdain was at one time an actual chef, but he has, like most of our heroes here, transcended actual kitchen work in lieu of a more profitable career in celebrity. More than anyone else mentioned here, Bourdain's heart and soul is about a good story, well told. Even though food (and drink) is still the common thread, Bourdain's interest is in the mechanics of food and drink as social and cultural signifiers. He'll take you 80 miles out into Gullah-land to find the best barbecue around, but he's going to be sure you understand why the people behind that Q do what they do, and how they do it, and how it fits into a larger narrative about economics and politics and social stratification. Unlike the knobs of the *Chef's Table*, Bourdain invites us to enjoy the food while we also take account of the classist balance sheet of the whole endeavor. On *CT*, they're too busy congratulating themselves on their

commitment to holistic-eco-fetishism to bother noticing their inherent privilege and material excess.

Bourdain’s focus on character development would be enough to disqualify his show as porn if it weren’t for the fact that the food and drink and landscapes he brings us are exactly where you want to be at that very moment. No matter if he is in Charleston or Cambodia or Coney Island, you want to be there in his place, eating and drinking and smelling exactly what he is smelling. And talking about what it means over that fifth or sixth glass of bourbon.

Porn. It’s what’s for dinner.