

## Harlan Yarbrough

### Vignette in Blue

Arty was a bluesman and a good one. He thought of himself as broad-minded. Arty enjoyed a wide range of musical styles: classic country blues, Delta blues, Chicago blues, Detroit blues, Piedmont blues, Atlanta blues, Texas blues, West Coast blues, jump blues, and all sorts of acoustic blues—he even liked some rhythm'n'blues.

If Arty had lived in New York or Chicago—maybe even San Francisco or Los Angeles—he could've made a decent living performing the music he loved without having to travel much. Living in rural Oregon made his situation somewhat more difficult. He picked up whatever gigs he could in Eugene and Portland and got the odd one in Corvallis or Salem, but mostly he had to travel to the California cities, occasionally Seattle, or east of the Mississippi for work. He didn't much like travelling and especially didn't like travelling alone. Vicki, Arty's wife, didn't mind travelling, but, even though her job was only part-time and her bosses generous, she couldn't always get away.

The link between work and travel had frustrated both of them for years. If Arty didn't travel, he didn't have any income, and they had to scrape to make ends meet. If he did travel, he'd be away from home for three or four weeks at a time, and neither of them liked that much separation—although Vicki didn't seem to mind as much as she used to. Arty had begun to worry about Vicki's growing lack of concern at his necessary absences.

All that plus three weeks with no gigs made this show at Eugene's WOW Hall particularly welcome. Tonight was the second time Arty had opened for Bob Jones, and Arty felt grateful that the folksinger had specified Arty as his warm up act. They'd met many times and jammed and chatted at the Oregon Country Fair and a couple of festivals they'd both worked, and they enjoyed each other's company and music. In the warm-up room at the WOW Hall, they jammed on some of the tunes they both knew—Jones wasn't primarily a blues player and Arty played almost nothing else, but they knew a few in common.

As they finished jamming on “Sister Kate”, Jones asked, “You do anything by Pete Lewis?”

“He that guy who played with Johnny Otis?” Arty countered.

“That's believable, but I have no idea. You're the blues expert,” the folksinger replied. “I just heard something by him on the radio, drivin' up here—might've been on the 'Blue Plate Special'—and I just wondered if you knew it.”

“What's it like? Play a little bit of it.”

“Oh, man, Arty! I can't do that. You prob'ly can, but I can't. I've got to hear something three or four times at least, before I can remember it.”

“Remember the name?”

“Yeah, I even wrote it down, but I remember it anyway. It's called 'Midnight at the Barrelhouse'. Seems like that'd be a bouncy tune, but it's a slow one—and all instrumental. I was makin' up words to it, while I was driving, and I thought you might want to do it.”

“Cool! I'll see if I can find a record of it.”

“Yeah, good. I'll write out the words and send 'em to you, when I get home. Don't forget to give me your address.”

With that, they slipped into jamming on “Keys to the Highway” but had to stop partway through, because the stage manager called Arty to get ready to go onstage. A stage-hand carried Arty's twelve-string and his three-instrument rack out to the designated spot, as Arty carried his Gibson SJ and his National steel onto the stage. Arty set the Gibson in the rack and sat down with his National, launching immediately into Charlie Patton's “Shake It and Break It”. Before the applause stopped, Arty began his version of Robert Johnson's “Dust My Broom”.

Arty's frequent appearances in Eugene had generated an enthusiastic following there. He had fans in the WOW Hall, and they greeted the opening line of each song with raucous cheers and applause and did the same at each conclusion. About seven songs into the set, someone toward the back of the audience called out "Sippie Wallace!", so Arty went straight into "Woman Be Wise". As the applause at the end died down, a heavy-set woman in the second row muttered something Arty didn't catch but thought sounded disparaging.

Never one to run from a confrontation, Arty launched straight into a song he'd heard Jim Croce sing but had learned from a fellow named Tom Rush while back east for a blues festival three years earlier. The song seemed derived from Blind Boy Fuller's song "Meat Shakin' Woman", and Arty started right in: "Big Fat Woman, get your fat leg off of me!" When he finished and the applause and cheers died down, the heavy woman in the second row called out, "Sexist bastard!"

"No, no, madam," Arty said, "that isn't sexist. This is sexist," and began the guitar introduction to Pink Anderson's "Every Day In The Week Blues".

At the end of the song, after the loudest cheers yet, the heckler called out, "Pig!"

Arty wanted and had intended to explain a little about Pink Anderson and the history of the song and Laurens, South Carolina. Instead, he just said, "I'll take that as a request," grabbed his National, and went into "Blind Pig Blues" from Barbecue Bob. The heavy woman and her slim and rather attractive blonde female companion got up and stomped out of the hall.

As the two women opened the door to leave, a male voice from the back called out, "Good riddance!" When the applause at the end of the song died down, Arty swapped the National for his Gibson and said, "I guess that wasn't the one she wanted. I'll try to redeem myself with 'Pigmeat Stomp'." At the end of that instrumental, followed by the biggest ovation yet, Arty said, speaking and looking toward the back of the hall, "I'm sorry, sir, I appreciate your support but I have to disagree with you. I think it's too bad whenever anyone doesn't enjoy my songs. I hate to see anyone leave." He swapped for the National again, as he said, "Still, I did my best. Anybody want to hear a Robert Johnson song?"

Arty began playing "Come On in My Kitchen" amid the hollers and cheers that ensued. While singing, Arty saw the stage manager discreetly flashing two fingers. Hanging the National on the rack, Arty grabbed his twelve-string and finished with two Atlanta blues numbers from Willie McTell. As the crowd

roared their approval, Arty grabbed his National and his Gibson, bowed to the audience, and walked off the stage and down to the artists' room.

“They loved ya, as usual,” the evening's featured performer said, when Arty entered the room. “Man, you're so good, I don't know if I can afford to follow you after this.”

The two exchanged good-natured banter until, Arty said, “Jeez, Bob, I never know how to handle hecklers. Do you think I did OK.”

“Arty! You did great. I don't know if I'd've handled it as well as you did.”

Arty felt reassured but looked around and asked, “Where's Vicki?”

Bob started to say something but had to excuse himself and respond to the stage manager's call to the stage. That dipstick Danny Gunn, supposedly one of Arty's friends, said, “Was that dyke somebody you know?”

Arty cringed at Danny's language but said only, “I don't think so. Why?”

“Well, Vicki shot out of here when those two walked out, and we could hear her giving that dyke a real tongue-lashing out on the sidewalk.”

“Bless her heart,” Arty said. “They didn't beat her up or anything, did they? Where is she?”

“I don't know where she is,” his friend said, “but they didn't beat her up. That dyke's girlfriend—or whatever she is—jumped in on Vicki's side and called that bull dyke some names even I hadn't heard.”

A commotion caught the two men's attention, and they both stepped quietly out of the warm-up room into the hall—just in time to see Arty's heavy-set heckler walk in and resume her seat.

The headliner, who had sung the first four or five songs of his program, stood quietly until the hall grew silent, then said, “Madam, if Arty Vandever isn't good enough for you, neither am I. You can just go back out the way you came in.”

Two audible gasps gave way to an ovation, as Arty's earlier critic slunk back out of the hall. Arty felt as if he could almost kiss his musical friend for his kind and very public support. Grabbing Danny by the wrist, Arty returned to the warm-up room. “So, where is Vicki now?” he asked.

“Damned if I know, but I'm pretty sure she's OK. I think maybe she and that little blondie went somewhere.”

“The big one's girlfriend?”

“Or whatever. Yeah. I'm not sure, but they were talking all friendly-like. Did Vicki maybe already know her? It sounded like it.”

“Dunno. I couldn't see her all that well, with the lights in my face and all. And Vicki has friends I don't know, of course.”

The two stood silently, listening to the concert from the main hall. Arty worried about Vicki. When he spoke, kept his voice steady with some effort, “It's just that big woman seemed quite belligerent. I'm worried that she might've attacked Vicki.”

“Nahh . . . I don't think so. The blonde was on Vicki's side. Besides, the big one just came back in—we saw her.”

Arty continued to worry and listened to the main show with only half an ear. Once the show had ended, and the two performers sat in the artists' room, a woman Arty recognized came in from the hall and said, “Vicki asked me to tell you not to worry. She went off to have a coffee with Susan and said she'd catch up with you at Tom and Jo's or get Susan to give her a ride home tomorrow.”

He felt relieved—and a little embarrassed that he'd completely forgotten that Tom and Jo had planned an after-concert party. He asked his folksinger friend, “You gonna come over and jam at Tom and Jo's?”

“I might come by and say 'hello', but I can't stay and jam. I've got a gig in Portland tomorrow afternoon, and I'm driving up to my sister's tonight.”

“Where's she?”

“Durham,” his friend replied, as he closed the lid of his guitar case and snapped the latches.

“Where's that?” Arty asked.

“Across the river from Tualatin.”

“You'll get in late.”

“Yeah, that's why I can't stay long.”

The two performers led a small caravan of friends to Arty's cousin Tom's place. After a warm welcome, the two sang one song together before Bob made his apologies and drove away. Arty played and sang until just before dawn, thinking Vicki would show up any minute. He eventually fell asleep in one of

Tom and Jo's spare bedrooms. He woke midmorning to hear Jo asking softly outside the door, "Arty, do you want to wake up to talk to Vicki?"

"Yes, thanks," he said, as he pulled on last night's clothes and hurried to the 'phone.

Vicki assured him she was OK and asked what time he planned to head home. He told her, and she said she'd be at his cousin's by then. She arrived with time to spare, greeted Arty's cousin and his wife, and climbed into Arty's van for the ride to Elkhead. On the way south, Vicki complimented Arty on his performance at the WOW Hall and talked a little about his cousin but didn't say much else. Only after they were back in their little cabin did she say she was thinking of moving out and relocating to Eugene.

The next week, Vicki quit her job in Roseburg and applied for four jobs in Eugene, three full-time and one part-time. She and Arty were both reasonable, and they retained some genuine affection for each other. He had wondered and worried for many months over the ebbing of the passion in their relationship, but their remaining time in Elkhead seemed less strained and more comfortable than one might have expected—although Vicki didn't spend much time at home in those last three weeks.

Two employers offered Vicki full-time work, and another offered part-time work. She accepted one of the full-time jobs and rented a shared house in the Whiteaker neighborhood with three friends—although she and Susan have recently made an offer on a house on Taylor near 11th.

When Vicki first told Arty she intended to move out of his life, he felt sad but not despondent, confused but not devastated. In hindsight, he guessed he'd sort of seen it coming. By the time he loaded her things into his van and hauled them to Whiteaker, though, he felt almost relieved, liberated. He spent a great deal of time on the 'phone for a few weeks and booked a fairly lucrative three months of gigs on the East Coast. Although an amicable divorce had left him single, he didn't return to Elkhead with a new girlfriend. By the middle of the next year, though, he and a waitress from Max's had begun spending most of their nights together.