MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 14 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW

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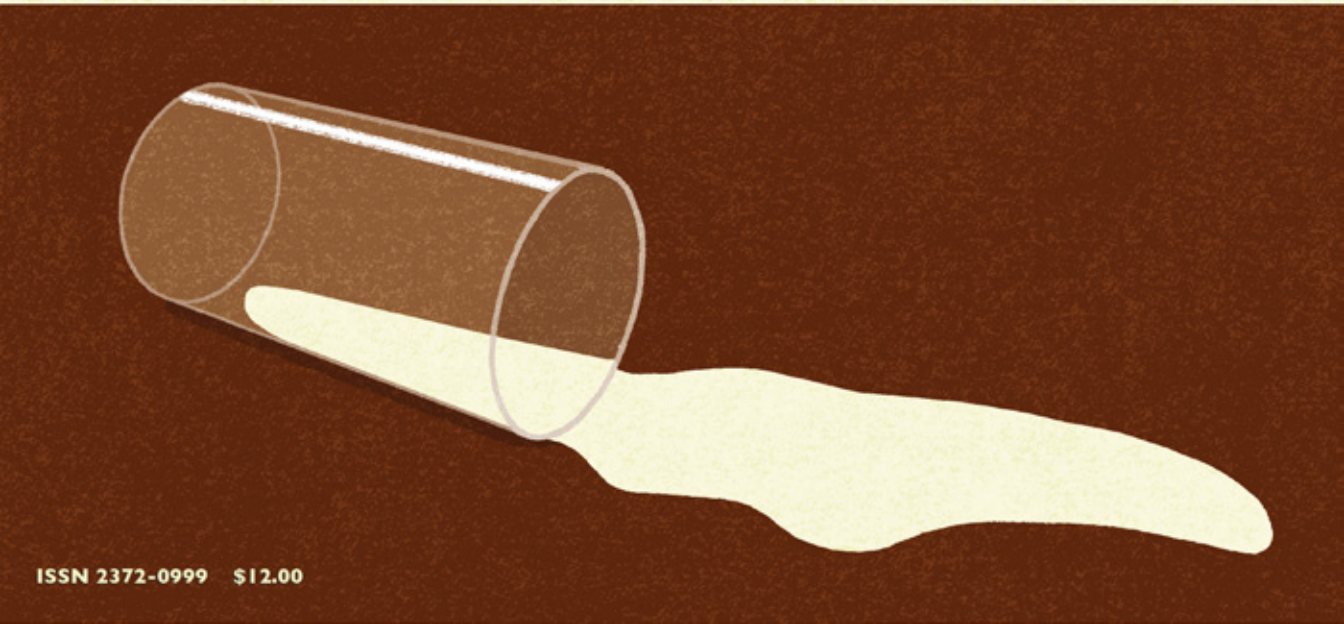

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Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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guest salutations: george lenker

I never really planned to meet up with friends at the now-defunct Sierra Grille in Northampton. It always just kind of happened.

Oh, sure, there were times when there was a general idea that one person or another would probably be there, but that was the point I'm making anyway: There was almost always someone there whom I knew. And if there wasn't, the staff was incredibly friendly and some of them became friends over time, as well. And more than a few times, complete strangers would engage in entertaining chats with me.

In a very different way, the same sort of haphazard meet-ups occurred at the venue's earlier identity, the Bay State Hotel, which held sway as the hub of the local music scene for years. I would just show up to see one band or another – or just show to see any band, as they were usually going to be good – and I'd run onto someone I knew.

Maybe there was just something about that first floor of 41 Strong Ave. that conjured like-minded spirits to gather spontaneously. But I know for a fact that Sierra Grille owner O'Brian Tomalin constructed the place both physically and philosophically to be what he called "a gathering place." That is: a space where people shared not only good food and drink, but laughs and embraces and memorable experiences.

My friends and I would often guess whether certain couples were on a first date or not, and I'd bet more often than not, we were right in assuming they were. It was a perfect casual but classy setting for launching a romance. It also served as a place for birthdays,wedding proposals, retirement parties, political campaign celebrations, and of course, fundraisers, which O'Brian held more than his share of for the community.

But just as important to a lot of people, O'Brian resurrected the old Bay State Hotel's music scene. He couldn't host live music every night (Sierra was, after all, a restaurant), but he dedicated every Thursday to "Reanimate the Bay State" nights which proved to be a success most of the time. I frankly thought the idea was crazy at first, but I have never been so happy to have been wrong.

The Thursday nights featured a wide array of talent, all crammed in the same corner (albeit facing a slightly different direction) as the original Bay State music scene. Old favorites like Ray Mason, Gentle Hen, The Fawns, Home Body and The True Jacqueline played superb shows there, but it was often an out-of-town band that mesmerized me. Such was the case more than a decade ago when I saw The Dig put on one of the most memorable performances I have seen anywhere at any time. I bought the band's "Good Luck and Games" EP (now out of print) and still listen to it.

Now that the coronavirus has laid claim to Sierra Grille as one its latest victim, I hope some new space arises to allow those types of shows to happen. But maybe it was just that space. It served me – and many others – well for decades.

the gathering place

George Lenker

A melodic medley of edibles
Amid a clatter of platters
And a thump of some drums,
As a song's sweat and tears
Drip into deep blood-red wine
Or a tankard of ale
For all that might ail ye

We were all family,
A household of strangers
Gathered like ganglia
With the hot side of frites.

A sizzle of cymbals
A symbol of something
That nothing can stop
Long as memory breathes

Into that long hall:
A haul off a nonic
An echo of laughter,
And smoke's old aroma

Where space can't forgive
And time may forget.
But now raise a glass
To moments well met.


OLD SPECKLED HEN


FULLERS

last day bar service

Franc Kromholz

the meaty record review by Jeremy Dubs

Wishbone Zoe's French of the Bird: A Sierra Grille Performance (In Our Minds)

I have so many memories of personal significance from the Sierra Grille ranging from projectile puking on their carpeted floor after fainting and almost falling out of my wheelchair in the midst of an intense Bunnies set to eating some of the most incredible meals I've ever eaten to meeting my future wife to booking some of my favorite musical acts like Frank Black, Minibeast, Brandee Simone, Hot Dirt, Pussyvision, and a super exciting solid bill that was all set to perform on Thursday, March 26th, 2020: Wishbone Zoe, Sapling, and Landowner. I was really looking forward to this night – for the flier I made a colorful collage out of magazine cutouts with a talking cat at the bottom saying, "That sounds like a plan" to another cat appropriately replying, "Meow." Doors were set to open at 9:30pm with bands starting sharply at 10. The cover charge was going to be 5 dollars, and most likely it would have been very well-attended since all 3 bands were certain to deliver the creatively gooey goods. Then, with just a few weeks until go-time, news of the pandemic began creeping in - I was so bummed that I didn't even reach out to the artists to let them know the gig was cancelled and how disappointed I was, feeling like that was just assumed because well, everyone was disappointed about everything now, and it wasn't really necessary for me to tell them the show was cancelled because well, everything was cancelled everywhere now.

Fast forward almost 8 months to present day, The Sierra Grille's once welcoming doors are shut permanently, and with such a sudden impactful closure comes a lack of closure, mentally. For our collective mental health, let us take a trip through the wormhole in our minds that leads to a parallel dimension where the show happened and the virus didn't, to an evening that would have been purely fantastic, but which is now pure fantasy. Most likely, Wishbone Zoe would have gone on first. The crowd would just be beginning to form when they began to perform the opening track, "Hey I'm, Pt. 1: Signal", from their insane (and insanely awesome!) new album "French of the Bird" which had just come out in late February. Robo with his sound mixer would be all set up in the back booth adjusting the levels on the microphones, musical/artistic visionary and frontperson extraordinaire Saera Kochanski repeatedly chanting "I am receptive because the channel is open, the signal is flowing" as if she might just be just testing her vocal levels but that's actually how the song goes. We're unsure of exactly what's happening when the bass starts plodding a captivating circular pattern that gets faster and faster as more and more layers of Saera's angelically frantic voices build up to a spellbinding crescendo that explodes all over the walls like Pollock paint splatter just as Max Goldstein's thunderous rolling drumbeat kicks in and then cuts off abruptly while the nervous depths of Saera's subconscious announce, "This is the first time learning the thing that I'm learning, I've never felt so ill-prepared!" and Max's drums abruptly storm back in as forcefully as a rocket engine thrust during liftoff, signaling that the time for exhilaration is upon us, and we surrender to the brilliantly composed madness. Perhaps the audience was just as unprepared for this extreme degree of turbulence but, like any experienced pilot, Wishbone Zoe's expertise instantly puts the weary passengers at ease, bringing in an upright bass groove with a jazzy vocal line continuing the inner monologue sung out loud, "Where have you gone, Zoe? Rescue me from me", and we feel safe in their capable hands. Amid the ensuing chaos Saera understandably calls out, "Hey Mister! I threw up" - we can all relate because twisting through the tunnels of any person's psyche is bound to be an anxiety-fueled and bumpy ride.

What sticks out the most to me while spinning this magnificent record and envisioning Wishbone Zoe's existence-expanding imaginary Sierra Grille performance is that this seamless piece of sonic hypnosis is truly modern. Now THIS is the music of the future we've been waiting for, not bogged down by or obligated to any rules, time signatures or pigeonholes, rarely is there a moment when the listener is able to grasp how to count or articulate how what they are hearing is even possible, yet we need not worry about all that because Wishbone Zoe knows exactly what they are doing and how to satisfy (just check out that ripping organ solo in the spooky mangled tropicalia of "Holy Yell/Mandelbrot Jive" or the blood-curdling terrifying screams in "Here I'm, Pt. IV: Receptive" that never become annoying and are, in fact, strangely comforting in their relatability and intimacy). Although we will not be able to go back and make this show happen, I highly recommend picking up "French of the Bird" and as you listen, try to picture yourself experiencing it in 3D, surrounded by amazed friends. It just made sense with Sapling coming in from Worcester that they would be guaranteed the second time slot with the likelihood that this is when the most people would be in the room to witness the out-of-towners' fuzz-laden self-described "bitchpop". The incredible Landowner would have gone on last, rocking out tirelessly well past midnight as our faces melted off, a proper ending to a satisfying, magical night that will be remembered for years to come in that alternate universe where a Thursday night at The Sierra Grille is still the place to be.

Reanimate the Baystate

Jenna Wikler

I have heard a lot of talk about the old Baystate Hotel and all the great bands that played there. It is always talked about in a longing way and it makes me really sad that I was trapped in California for 17 years and I missed the whole thing. Sure I saw bands in CA, but not the bands that played at the Baystate.

The whole time I was in California I longed for Massachusetts and the Western Mass music scene. I was finally able to move back here after my divorce and just in time for Reanimate The Baystate to take form.

I can't count how many Thursday nights I spent at the Sierra Grille. I was almost always there to see my friends' bands. It was one of the only places (and at times the only place) where local bands could still play in Northampton. I am not sure if I ever played there myself or not but I did get into a bar brawl once while I was there to see The Claudia Malibu.

That was not one of my finer moments but I will say that I was not the instigator.

collage from O'Brian Tomalin's personal Sierra Grille photos

the night animals could talk

Aaron Wiegert

Caribou screamed
At truckers from icy roads,
Pining for crossings.

Lane closures, meat with teeth
Staining road signs.

Off in the warren,
Rabbits refuted stereotypes
Abstaining in assembly
To munch the greener grass.

With a processor's surprise,
Ground beef groaned,
Caged chickens openly envied
The pigs' muddy sausage fest

And the cock from Cornflakes
Woke everyone on Sunday
To be served with bacon.

ed estlin

Aaron Wiegert

He grew up in
A pretty wife

Stars and necklaces
Hanging on horizons

Stray letters sealed
With golden tongues

The rising teeth
Of drowned dogs

Fusing for biography.

long walks
Sofiya Levina