

THE NOT-QUITE-LOST MESSAGE OF TONY FRUSCELLA

By Michael Ventura

May 26, 2000

It was the autumn of 1960, within days of my 15th birthday, in a town of some 25,000 called Waterville, Maine -- a tiny place, if you'd spent all your life, as I had, in New York City. I was a troubled and usually quiet boy, trying to walk tough and look cool -- the only antidote I could muster for my utter and constant dread. As with so many children, beneath the poses my actual feelings were almost unbearably tender, full of yearning and longing, rended by paradox, and consumed with the child's impossible project of trying somehow, in some unimaginable way, to redeem the pain of my family. (In a society like ours, where unhappiness itself is seen as failure, this state of mind is all the more acute.) I'd discovered early what everyone finds out sooner or later: that everything you depend on, everything you assume, and everything you hope for, can suddenly shatter and leave you with nothing, nothing at all, nothing but the look in your eyes. My mother was in a mental hospital somewhere on Long Island; there was no way to call her, and I couldn't be sure she received my letters. My sister and two of my brothers, all younger than I, were in a Catholic home for children in Peekskill. My youngest brother was with my father, but that year my father had apparently lost interest in my whereabouts -- he never wrote or called; I had no idea even if he knew where I was and I certainly had no idea where he was. I was living as a foster child with a minister's family who had generously taken me in; they did their best to make me feel at home, and I did my best to seem at home, but our efforts were awkward, to say the least -- I was then, among other things, a compulsive liar and a petty thief, and awkwardness was all I could manage and, given my defenses, all anyone could manage with me.

My life was desperate but not bleak. Books were my refuge, as they'd been since I was 10 -- they were enticing and insightful, but I still hadn't enough substance of my own with which to meet them fully; I was trying to write poems like Allen Ginsberg's; rock & roll was teaching me (and my generation) how to walk through the world; and all I had to do for adventure was express myself honestly -- that always got a reaction. (For instance, whenever possible I showed off my Brooklyn-style dancing, which seemed to shock the good grown-ups of Maine -- the high-school principal, seeing me dance, once turned up the lights, declared the evening over, fixed with me a Puritan glare and said, "We'll have no more of *that!*") And there were some good friends, friends who shared my urgent questions -- I remember standing on a deserted beach with Dave, shouting poems and questions to the gray sea and the darkening sky, almost joyful in our defiant desperation.

And then there was Tony Fruscella.

I never actually met Tony Fruscella, and yet we "met" at several crucial times, and we meet again still, all these years later.

Our meetings began at a corny movie I attended in Waterville -- *The Five Pennies*, a sentimental biopic in which Danny Kaye portrayed jazz trumpeter Red Nichols. While the tear-jerker tale attempted to efface anything remotely human in the life of that forgotten artist, the movie's music told another story entirely, for there on the screen was a still undiminished Louis Armstrong, age 60ish but playing superbly, and something in his trumpet realigned my insides. How could so much joy and grief vibrate in the same sound, the same note, the same moment? Could life be lived like that? (A

new question for me.) What was this thing called "jazz," that could express our love and pain so freely, so openly, so fearlessly? Who was this man Armstrong, whose face was so happy in expression yet so solemn in repose?

I asked for and received a trumpet -- a beat-up used trumpet, but it had a sweet tone. Joined the school band for instruction. Bought or stole every Louis Armstrong record I could find. And I looked for other trumpet players. I'd vaguely heard of Miles Davis, there he was playing trumpet on a new album called *Kind of Blue*, I haunted the store till I could filch the record. To my enormous surprise, this jazz was utterly different from Armstrong's, just as direct but terribly more complex. (And I will never forget first hearing John Coltrane on the first cut of that album. Even on my little mono record player, it felt like he was playing his notes up and down my spine.) Fifteen-year-old boys need, seek, and require, profound shocks to their systems -- shocks that lift them out of their world, out of their minds, and permeate them with qualities that their preconceptions can't grasp but that their souls cleave to. Jazz, for me, was and is a music of such shocks - - a music, a reality, in which even the discords were harmonies.

And there in the record stacks was a gray album showing a young man in a checked flannel shirt, with his head bent and his eyes closed, who cupped the bell of his trumpet in his clasped hands, allowing the horn to rest on his shoulder. He was listening hard. To what, I had no idea. The album title said merely: *Tony Fruscella*.

He was Sicilian, like me. The liner notes said he'd grown up in an orphanage, like where my brothers and sister were. "Tony subsists without a telephone, and as nearly as can be determined, without an address." Essentially homeless, like me. And he played "a battered hock-shop special," like me. I didn't know then that "Fru," as he was called, was a junkie; nor that this was the only record he'd release in his short life (he would die in 1969, at the age of 42). I knew he wasn't great the way Miles and Louis and Trane were great -- even I could hear that right off. His gift was smaller in dimensions, but no less intimate, no less complex for being smaller. He had a quiet, breathy tone -- he made his horn whisper. His music was lyrical, modest, sweet, bitter -- he sounded lost and he wasn't afraid, in his sound, to admit that. Not lost musically: While not great he was very good and knew his horn. But just ... lost. You heard that, in his whispery, almost shy sound. On the first cut, "I'll Be Seeing You," he made an edgy but quiet search into every implication of the melody, and ended near where he'd begun, the statement of a heart that could not find a way out of itself.

Fru taught me the value of the "minor" artist. He taught me, he still teaches me, that you didn't have to be great or famous to make a mark. Sincerity, honesty, integrity, and an open heart -- that could be enough, in art, to reach out and make a difference to someone. You could be a doomed guy from an orphanage, unable to conquer your demons, and still have a few moments in art that would not be easily erased and that would reach into someone else's needy soul.

Later, at the age of 18, I had a job in the mailroom in Riker's Island prison, in New York, and occasionally I'd read the letters -- and there was a letter about Tony Fruscella! A woman writing her convict boyfriend, reminiscing about how when Fru couldn't get a gig they (she and her boyfriend) would ride with him on the subways while he played his horn for them. And much later, in the late 1980s, nearly 20 years after Fruscella's lonely death, a jazz disc jockey of some obscure station near Albany sent me a copy of an anonymous letter he'd received, a letter from a recovering addict about sharing a pad with Fru and some other addicts in Manhattan, and Fru would sit on the fire escape playing, playing, playing, and it was the only comfort they knew. So, in these strange

ways, Tony Fruscella seemed to be seeking me out, literally sending me letters (albeit written by others), to remind me that art isn't about culture, isn't about critics, isn't about fame; art is about an unending attempt to give what we can, where we can, to whom we can, and that there's always something of value to give, no matter how damaged we are and no matter how much hope we've lost. You never know. You can be playing your horn in a junkie daze on a fire escape, and, if you're *really* playing it (as Fru always did), that can give somebody what they need to go on another day.

Long after he died, a few more recordings were issued: a lovely 1948 studio session that had been thought lost; a live session with Charlie Parker recorded in someone's apartment; a few other live gigs in tiny joints in Manhattan. A total of about four hours' worth of music. Not a lot to show for one lost life. And yet it reaches out. I play those discs now and again -- I'm playing them as I write -- to remind myself that beauty-of-soul is not easily obliterated, even in this massive blaring triviality that we've come to call "culture." And I remember being a lost kid, a kid who knew too much and too little, playing not very well, but with great satisfaction, in a cellar -- accompanying Fru as his solos came out of that small mono record player, trying to find in my horn, in myself, that sound of tender unquenchable longing that Tony Fruscella gave us before he went down.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.