

LETTER FROM LOS ANGELES

STREET SCENE

Hollywood arrives on Skid Row.

BY DANA GOODYEAR

Nathaniel Ayers, a mentally ill man who lived on the streets of Skid Row in Los Angeles for several years, pushing a cart and playing a two-stringed violin in a tunnel that runs almost directly underneath Disney Hall, is considering an attempt to record all five Beethoven sonatas for cello, an instrument he has only recently started to study seriously. Bass was the instrument he grew up with, in Cleveland; his mother, who owned a beauty salon, used to play classical music in the shop. In 1970, he went to Juilliard on a scholarship, but he had to withdraw after a breakdown. (He was given a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia.) Today, in addition to cello, he is learning violin; his teacher is Robert Vijay Gupta, a young violinist with the L.A. Philharmonic. Ayers, who is fifty-seven, is also teaching himself piano and trumpet, and wants to try the drums. He has wide-set hazel eyes and high cheekbones. Wavy lines radiate across his temples, like dune patterns viewed from above. He wears a camouflage jacket and, over it, a bright-green crossing-guard vest with reflective silver strips. In the front pockets of an apron tied around his waist are packets of cello and violin strings, and a ticket stub from a recent performance of Tchaikovsky and Schumann.

Ayers's story, documented by Steve Lopez in a series of columns in the *Los Angeles Times*, is now the subject of "The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music," a book by Lopez that was published earlier this month. It is also the basis of a fifty-million-dollar DreamWorks movie, scheduled for release around Thanksgiving. In the film, Robert Downey, Jr., plays Lopez; Ayers is portrayed by Jamie Foxx. Not long ago, in the course of shooting a scene in which Ayers attends a concert with Lopez, the filmmakers staged a perfor-

mance of Beethoven's Third Symphony (the "Eroica") at Disney Hall, with a cameo by the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. During the filming, the real Ayers remained outside the hall and played cello. He was interrupted by producers stopping by to say hello, and by a stranger who pulled up in a car and asked him for his autograph. When he eventually went inside to hear the music, he saw Jamie Foxx, dressed in a camo jacket and a bright-green vest. Foxx made eye contact and pointed to himself and then to Ayers, as if to say, "You are me, I am you." Foxx told me afterward, "It was a great moment to see his face light up smiling. 'Cause sometimes you're not sure what he's grasping. Those are the beautiful sheds of light when he seems to make sense of things around him."

Ayers told me that the fuss being made over him was "kind of taxing." Of Foxx, he said, "He's somewhat musically inclined. I don't know that much about him. I'm not crazy about acting, to tell you the truth. It was flabbergasting to be right in the middle of a Hollywood movie, though. It had nothing to do with me, whatever they say. I was following the 'Eroica,' conducted by Mr. Esa-Pekka Salonen. They kept stopping and starting. I think it was a film about a film, about how things happen in Hollywood."

Since the nineteen-eighties, Los Angeles, one of the most expensive cities in America, has been known as the country's homeless capital. Skid Row, a fifty-block area covering less than a square mile between the Los Angeles River, on the east, and the office towers of downtown, has the city's highest concentration of homeless people. The neighborhood's official name is Central City East, but the police who work there call it the Box, and the people living on the streets or in the shelters or

in the old S.R.O. hotels call its worst patch the Bottoms. Near a set of railroad tracks, at the edge of an industrial zone, it is cut off from the rest of Los Angeles, and most residents of the city never see it. Starting in the late nineteenth century, it was a point of disembarkation for a transient labor force, primarily made up of single men,

The heart of Skid Row is San Julian Street, between Fifth Street, known as the Nickel, and Seventh. Lamp Community, the organization that funds the apartment where Ayers now lives, has a building there. San Julian is a startling place. Amputees roll through the street. People tote their things in jury-rigged contraptions or in wheelie

businesses—toy wholesalers and mom-and-pop electronics shops—rolled down their gates. Some of the structures were makeshift, built from wooden pallets or joined-together boxes that the police called cardboard condos. There were hundreds of store-bought tents. Earl Wright, an officer for seventeen years in the L.A.P.D.'s Central Divi-



Playing themselves: "The Soloist," with Jamie Foxx, will feature hundreds of the city's homeless as extras and in bit parts.

and for nearly that long it has been home to a great number of the city's missions and shelters and homeless-services organizations.

A January, 2007, street count showed that there were just over five thousand homeless people living in the area, thirty-three hundred of them in shelters and nearly eighteen hundred on the street. Many suffer from mental illness, drug addiction, or both. Black men are represented disproportionately. But the population of Skid Row isn't uniform. Some of the people there are day-trippers; some have been there for decades. A good number are veterans. Thousands are in recovery. Low-income working people live alongside the homeless; pinochle-playing gang members hold dominion in San Julian Park.

bags. One day, I saw a young, heavyset woman wrapped in a small blanket with nothing underneath. Another day, I saw a scrappy-looking man with a paperback copy of "The Corrections" tucked under his arm. Volunteers serve meals from vans; afterward, white paper bowls line the streets. (There are few trash cans.) As elsewhere on Skid Row, there is urine, there is shit. Plastic outhouses were removed because people were using them for sex and drugs and deals, and now there are several self-cleaning, European-style public toilets whose doors automatically open after an interval.

Skid Row looked far worse three years ago, when Lopez started writing his columns, than it does today. At night, a tent city grew as soon as the

sion, which encompasses the area, said, "Every street in Skid Row was like an underground city."

Meanwhile, downtown was gentrifying rapidly, with block after block of loft and condominium conversions, and business associations were growing impatient with the ongoing visibility of the homeless. At the end of September, 2006, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who had toured Skid Row with Steve Lopez, announced that a program called the Safer City Initiative, which had been tested in MacArthur Park, would be brought to Skid Row. "We will be targeting the drug dealers and other criminals that prey on the homeless to reverse the culture of lawlessness on Skid Row, while leading those who need help to housing and services," he said. A

statement from the Mayor's office announced that fifty additional officers would be deployed to "target narcotics-related crime as well as misdemeanor offenses like littering, the defacement of property, and theft."

The new officers successfully disrupted the gang drug trade in the area; the bulk of the enforcement, though, seemed to be for minor infractions that would have gone unnoticed in any other part of the city. In an analysis of the first year of the program, Gary Blasi, a U.C.L.A. law professor, noted that there had been, on average, a thousand citations a month, most of them for pedestrian violations, such as walking against the signal. Often, the violators were unable to pay the tickets; warrants were issued for their arrest, and they were jailed. In one case, according to Pete White, a community organizer, a man was handcuffed for littering when he flicked the ash from his cigarette on the street.

Garden-variety addicts were caught up in the drug sweep, and those arrested with, say, a five-dollar rock of crack cocaine were charged with possession for sale, which is a felony, rather than the lesser charge of simple possession. Anat Rubin, a writer for the *L.A. Daily Journal*, reported that there was a new policy in the D.A.'s office—not to plea-bargain on Skid Row drug cases. (The D.A.'s office said that it had previously been more lenient with Skid Row cases, and had merely brought its policies in line with those of the rest of the county.) Those convicted of drug sales will, upon release, no longer be eligible for food stamps and some federal housing programs. According to the L.A.P.D., which regularly conducts night counts of people on the street, since the implementation of the Safer City Initiative the population has dropped from eighteen hundred to seven hundred. Tent city is no more.

This year, on April 1st, Mayor Villaraigosa held a press conference to announce a new dimension of the program: a hundred new street lamps on Skid Row. A block away, sitting against a building, a Hispanic woman was smoking crack. She got up and executed a jerky dance, pulling faces that made her look deranged. It was payday, which for some people on Skid Row means

the day they get their checks from General Relief: a maximum of two hundred and twenty-one dollars, to last them for a month.

The Mayor's podium was set up across from a locked park paved with concrete. Red-shirted public-safety officers, hired by a local business association, circled the block on mountain bikes. A homeless woman in flip-flops and a red hooded shirt pushed a cart covered with a silver tarp, with two flattened cardboard boxes secured to the top. A small group of protesters from the Los Angeles Catholic Worker's soup kitchen, known as the Hippie Kitchen, appeared, carrying signs that said "House the Homeless, Don't Harass Them" and "Antonio: Lighten Up on the Poor." As the Mayor began to speak, they shouted, "Ten thousand people arrested for jaywalking!" "O.K., thank you," Villaraigosa said, and attempted his speech anew. "More lights means more visibility, and more visibility means less crime. It also means we're shining a light on a part of the city that hasn't been invested in. . . . When we launched the initiative, conditions on Skid Row were out of control."

"Still are!"

"The homeless were being preyed upon—"

"Preyed upon by the police! Safer city for who? Who's it safer for?"

The Mayor tried to articulate other aspects of his work on Skid Row—he has committed fifty million dollars a year for five years to permanent supportive housing, and a hundred and twenty-four million in Section 8 grants to move homeless families out of the area—but the protesters made it virtually impossible to hear.

Ten days later, he was on Skid Row again, announcing a five-hundred-thousand-dollar plan to train and help employ local residents. "There were homeless people hugging, kissing," he told me afterward. "They see that they finally have a mayor who cares about them." As for the policing aspect of the initiative, he said, "Look, there's been a thirty-five-per-cent drop in violent crime. Rape is down forty-four per cent. Robbery is down thirty-eight per cent. Homicide is down twenty-five per cent. There's no question that we have done a great job of reducing the victimization

that comes with that kind of criminal activity concentrated in one area." He said that after Blasi's report came out he asked the police department to review and modify its practices. He reminded me that he is a former president of the Southern California chapter of the A.C.L.U. and that he believes policing must be "respectful of the Constitution." Nonetheless, he said, "Cities have to address the wanton crime you see in some of these areas."

By the time Gary Foster, a soft-spoken producer, met with Lopez to discuss making a movie about his columns, the hellish scene that Lopez had described was quickly disappearing. It was fitting, then, that Foster and DreamWorks, the studio he was working with, sought to hire Joe Wright, the director of historical dramas such as "Atonement," "Pride and Prejudice," and a television series on the life of Charles II, to make the film. Wright, a thirty-six-year-old Englishman, with fair skin and bright-blue eyes, had never made a movie in America. He decided that he would take the job on one condition. "What I felt very, very strongly was that I wanted to make it *with* the people from Skid Row, and not just *about* the people from Skid Row," he said. DreamWorks nervously agreed. "I think they probably thought I was joking."

In the fall of 2007, Wright began to spend time at the Lamp Village, a few blocks from the San Julian branch, and also operated by Lamp Community. Lamp was co-founded by a former nun in 1985, and was an early proponent of the "housing first" model: it finds accommodations for its members, all of them mentally ill and most of them addicts, whether or not they're in treatment. (The Village has fifty cubicle-like living spaces; the San Julian Street facility has thirty; and Lamp provides private apartments and services for nearly six hundred more people.) At the Village, a bright place decorated with its members' art work, Wright made the acquaintance of Kevin Cohen, a six-foot-five, forty-eight-year-old black recovering crack addict and ex-con, and his close friend Leann Levin, a tiny, sixty-four-year-old white woman with a dowager's hump and a tendency

toward pronouncements like “They have fabulous clothes, Saks Fifth Avenue does” and “You got to eat a lot of cucumbers and cantaloupe—that’s low-calorie.” Levin, who pushes carts of garbage and castoffs, not for recycling but because, as she says, she “collects designs and patterns,” is known as the Cat Lady. She spends all her money on pet food, and every night around eight o’clock takes it to a bleak street of warehouses and factories, where she calls out, “Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,” as dozens of feral cats stream from the shadows. Levin has been sleeping outside for twenty years—when we met, her spot was behind a fish-processing plant—but last week Casey Horan, the executive director of Lamp, told me that she had agreed to move into an apartment. Cohen, who also recently got an apartment through Lamp, is Levin’s protector, and became Joe Wright’s assistant on the set.

Susannah Grant, the screenwriter (“Erin Brockovich,” “In Her Shoes”), met Levin and wrote a character, Mari-belle, based on her. Then Wright asked Levin to play the part. “In the movie, I’m feeding the feral cats,” Levin told me one afternoon at the Village. She was wearing an oversized white oxford shirt and had a blue tartan cashmere scarf tied over her head like a bonnet. “They’d employed these cats with no balls. They looked pretty rough, all right. They were very well trained to come to dinner when I was feeding them. Two were alley cats. One was a Himalayan-Siamese-Persian mix, very fancy.”

Open casting calls for extras in the movie, advertised with flyers on the street and in the missions and community centers, were held on San Julian Street, and hundreds of people turned up. A core group emerged from Lamp: the Lamp chorus, who would be considered actors, and paid at a higher rate. During rehearsals, which were held at the Village, Wright had Levin and Catherine Keener—she plays the Lopez character’s editor and ex-wife—put on a ten-minute improvisational play. Wright said, “Leeann’s play was one of the most surreal pieces of theatre I’ve ever seen in my life. I’ve never seen a clearer depiction of a schizophrenic mind.” As they worked, the cast could

hear Ayers, in a music studio that Lamp had built for him, playing through the walls.

Robert Downey, Jr., told me, “Joe said, ‘I really need you to be at every single rehearsal with the homeless and mentally ill people.’” Downey says that he was dubious at first. “I’ve been in more therapy circles, with more assorted crazies, than you can shake a stick at. But this has been the hugest trust exercise.”

Two miles east of the real San Julian Street, across the river and the railroad tracks, on a clean bland street of wholesalers and warehouses, a set was built. Under the Sixth Street Bridge, in a place where many homeless people used to camp, a tent city rose again, this time with new tents that had been professionally distressed and aged. Scenic painters covered the buildings in religious murals; a union graffiti artist tagged over them. Sarah Greenwood, the production designer, who came with Wright from England, said, “Our San Julian Street was a hybrid of all streets, a microcosm of all the downtown streets. Our version is much denser and more colorful. We wanted to get some Mexican in there. San Julian Street itself is actually very boring.” She went on, “We found the beauty in it. The amazing low L.A. sunlight going across the portaloos—you tell me that’s not a beautiful picture. It’s not ‘Atonement’ beautiful,

but it’s got a beauty of its own. There is a palette.” She and her colleagues built the Lamp Village, the missions, and the S.R.O.s, and used photographs of Delhi to help them re-create the filth of downtown L.A.

The Skid Row cast members were asked to play recognizable street types. “I played an addict, smoking, lighting the lighter,” Patrick Michael Kelly, a black man in his fifties, who is now a d.j., said. “There was a broad there who was supposed to be a prostitute begging me for crack.” Instead of crack, he said, the set dresser put chopped-up Altoids in the pipe. This was an accidental touch of realism. “They used to do that out on Gladys Avenue, lay an Altoid on you!” Kelly said. Cast members also contributed their expertise—how to make a crack pipe, for instance, from a Brillo pad and a little glass tube that Skid Row delis sell flowers in. Bam/Bam, a punky ex-New Yorker, said, “First, they gave us pot pipes to smoke ‘crack’ from. The next day, they got it together—sembled them themselves. Some of us pulled out our own stuff.” Subtle but important details made it in—where the dealer sits in relation to the user, for instance, and the positioning of the runner who acts as a go-between.

The Skid Row actors told Wright that in the evenings on Skid Row, when people are lined up outside the missions waiting for a bed or for a bus to take



“Goodbye, Arthur—this marriage isn’t big enough for two high-energy motivational speakers!”



“And, when we come back, Liz will be here with lots more lip gloss.”

them to a large shelter several miles away, vendors walk up and down the streets calling, “Ice cold *bee-er*,” as if it were a baseball game. Dealers approach cars saying, “Cavvy, cavvy, cavvy,” short for “caviar,” which means “good crack.” “One time” is code for “The cops are on the block.” “Can you help bail Shorty out of jail?” means “I need a drink.” The only quibble I heard was over the presence of abandoned cars on the set. “I think that was the British sensibility of the director,” Orlando Ward, who works at the Midnight Mission, just off San Julian Street, said. “That’s more of a South Bronx kind of thing. We have some industrious recyclers here.”

Some days, there were four hundred extras on the set, the vast majority of them from Skid Row, a few of them recruited from the streets by mission employees that morning. Detroit, a glamorous, brash woman in her mid-forties, who had a prominent role in the Lamp chorus, told me that she was sleeping on the sidewalk when production began. She is black and often wears a white beaded cuff around her wrist. She came to Skid Row two years ago, having been a mother, a grandmother, and a working taxpayer. “This production was like a mirror for a lot of us,” she said. “Playing the role of a crackhead, dopehead,

prostitute, you get tired of it after two hours, and you think, How in the hell did you do that for two years?” She started to cry. “You’re reenacting your whole life. It’s so repetitive, hot, and bad—but you were doing that on the street every day.” Several days into the shoot, Detroit got a cubicle at the Lamp Village. Wright has encouraged her to pursue acting, and she plans to spend two thousand dollars of her earnings on the SAG initiation fee.

In late March, I went with Steve Lopez to Disney Hall. He told me that he had worried from the beginning about how his work would affect Ayers. “The humanness of the story has given people a rooting interest in Nathaniel’s life, and to that extent it has destigmatized homelessness,” Lopez said. “But Nathaniel pays a heavier price. He has to deal with the attention. I can’t cut him loose—I got him into this, and I’ve got to help him through.”

Ayers, who, because of Lopez’s columns, had been invited to the hall many times, has started turning up there unexpectedly. That morning, he was in the office of Adam Crane, the director of public relations for the L.A. Philharmonic, enchanting three women by singing a Tchaikovsky score. A copy of

“The Soloist” was on Crane’s desk. Ayers wore the camouflage jacket and, around his neck, a hand-decorated bra and a faded silk lei. A violin case was slung over his back. He didn’t seem happy to see Lopez. He wanted to attend a rehearsal that afternoon, and Crane was struggling to explain that the rehearsal was closed: there was a guest conductor who, because of the “Soloist” filming, hadn’t yet had a chance to rehearse inside the hall. Furthermore, Ayers wanted to go to the performance that night, but Lopez wasn’t available to sit with him, and Crane had to attend to a visiting photographer from the *L.A. Times*.

“What’s wrong with the concert tonight?” Ayers asked. “Have you answered my question? Why don’t I listen to the concert tonight whether you’re with me or not? Is that permissible?”

“We’re their guests—” Lopez began.

“You’re their guest. I’m asking you, Mr. Crane, what’s wrong with seating me and then you meet up with the photographer and you meet me at intermission?”

Finally, Crane convinced Ayers that the following day would be better. Crane typed out a schedule and handed it to Ayers: 11 A.M. concert, followed by lunch and a private lesson with Mr. Gupta, and then another concert in the evening. Ayers walked out of the office to the guard station, where he retrieved his cello case—painted with the Dodgers’ “LA” symbol, in large white letters, and Lopez’s name—and a brown metal folding chair, on which he had written “No Smoking.”

Crane, seeing Ayers’s unwieldy burden, offered to help him. “No—I think you better stay off my chair, son,” Ayers said. Then, gentling his tone, he added, “It’s a strange chair, but I found it, so I have to make do.” Crane made eye contact with Lopez and said, “Will you call me?”

Ayers walked outdoors, to a landing at the top of a flight of stairs. He was ready to be rid of company. “So I’ll catch you later, got something to do,” he said, not looking at Lopez.

“Is there anything you need?” Lopez asked.

“Naw, man, I don’t need anything.”

“I have a package for you from Jennifer.” (Jennifer is Ayers’s sister, who

lives in Atlanta, and is the conservator of a trust established for Ayers after the sale of the rights to his life story.)

"Damn. That's pretty rugged. I'll tell her not to send anything to you anymore."

"Is something bothering you?" Lopez asked.

"Ain't nothing bothering me, man."

"Can I give you a ride, with the package? It's too heavy, you can't carry it."

"How do you know what I can carry? I'll tell that girl Jennifer to stop bugging you with packages."

"It's not bugging me."

"Well, it's bugging somebody."

"I just brought this for you—"

"And I don't appreciate it, I suppose! Drop my pack off and cool it!" Ayers shouted. All the muscles of his face were tensed.

"Before I go, I want to tell you something," Lopez said.

"I want to tell *you* something. *Your book sucks!* O.K.?"

"Are you bothered by the book?"

"The book is something he's got in his office, and I put under a sink somewhere. Why are you always trying to get behind someone and squirm? Drop my pack off, and you can buzz off! I'm a grown God-damned man, mother-fucker. If this is too fucking God-damned realistic for you, you can get out of my face."

"Mr. Ayers—"

"Mr. Ayers, my ass!"

Lopez, backing down the stairs, said, "I came here your friend, and I'm leaving your friend."

Ayers followed him, shouting, "Drop my shit off, man. Drop my shit off, man! Fuck all that shit. Drop my shit off right on the street."

A few days later, Ayers was speaking to Lopez again. He was looking forward to going to a Dodgers game with him. He played piano for me—lovely, crashing, major-chord improvisations—in his music studio at the Lamp Village. Afterward, as we were eating a dinner of pork chops and collard greens in the dining room, he said, "I don't go to movies. They're making a movie about some things related to my life, but I'm pretty sure it would lead to disaster if I were ever to go to a movie and take my eyes off those key-

boards." He took a bite, and abruptly changed direction. "I'm slowly beginning to realize all that Mr. Lopez has done for me," he said. "He is a very human person."

Ayers was nowhere to be seen for the night shoot two weeks later on Winston Street, a rough Skid Row block that had been cordoned off for filming. A black canvas folding chair printed with his full name—Nathaniel Anthony Ayers—sat unoccupied next to one for Steve Lopez, who was chatting with Downey. Lopez's wife and daughter were there, too; unlike the character that Downey plays, he is happily married. The set had been decorated with scores of dusty tents and tarp lean-tos, some of them rigged with electricity and lined with cardboard insulation. The call sheet specified three hundred and forty-five homeless extras, two drug dealers, "fetid garbage," a pair of mangy dogs, cockroaches, and five rats. The creatures waited their turns in a truck marked "Talented Animals."

At dusk, Wright, wearing Converse low-tops and smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, walked briskly to a large warehouse owned by a silk-flower business, where the extras, many of them from Skid Row, were congregated. He picked up a bullhorn. "O.K., O.K., O.K.! Hello, everyone!" he said jovially. Noticing a middle-aged, nearly toothless black man wearing a backpack and holding a cane, he said, "Charles! What fucking happened to you? I thought you were dead or in jail. Lovely to see you." (The Charles in question, who rehearsed with the Lamp chorus, explained that he'd been arrested for selling drugs and had spent several days in jail before being ordered by the judge to a rehab facility, where he was currently living.) Wright resumed: "You are playing yourselves. Now, the time we're dealing with is 2005, so that's before Operation Clean Up, before the attempt to put everyone on the street in prison and thereby increase the price of housing down here." He asked them for their help in conveying authenticity, and explained about the Altoids. After the pep talk, the extras lined up to have their brows and clothes brushed with fuller's earth by a pair of ager-dyers from the costume department. ♦