

A duet, for musician and writer

When newspaper columnist Steve Lopez stopped to hear a homeless man play a violin, the music he heard changed both of their lives

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
STREET NEWS SERVICE

You never know what you'll find when you walk down the street. And there was Steve Lopez, in 2005, doing just that, making his way through L.A. when he heard it: music. Nearby stood a man — homeless, playing for what seemed to be beauty's sake — drawing his bow over the strings of a beat-up violin. Lopez stopped and listened. He introduced himself to the violinist. And from that moment on, both men's lives became interwoven.

That violinist was named Nathaniel Ayers and Lopez, a columnist for the L.A. Times, wrote about their encounter. Soon after that, he wrote another column. Then another and another. As he continued, over the months, to chronicle their relationship, a complex portrait of Ayers unfolded: a childhood in Cleveland; a scholarship to Juilliard, the premier New York arts academy; the onset, in his early 20s, of paranoid schizophrenia; homelessness; nights on Skid Row.

Readers loved the columns and, buoyed by support from a newspaper editor, Lopez, already an author of books, wrote another one: "The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship and the Redemptive Power of Music" (Putnam, 2008), which detailed their at times chaotic yet inspiring relationship. From that, a recent hit movie was born. All of which has kept Lopez busy and humanized Ayers.

We tried to set up a time to talk. But scheduling those minutes to chat took some work. So, while in a cab en route to the airport, Lopez revealed, via cell phone, how his life has been affected by a man who lives on the street, a man for whom Beethoven provides salvation, and praised the gifts that can arise just from stopping to hear the music.

Rosette Royal: I heard you came across Nathaniel Ayers when you were out looking for material for a column.

Steve Lopez: Yeah. I was in downtown Los Angeles and I heard music. So I turned

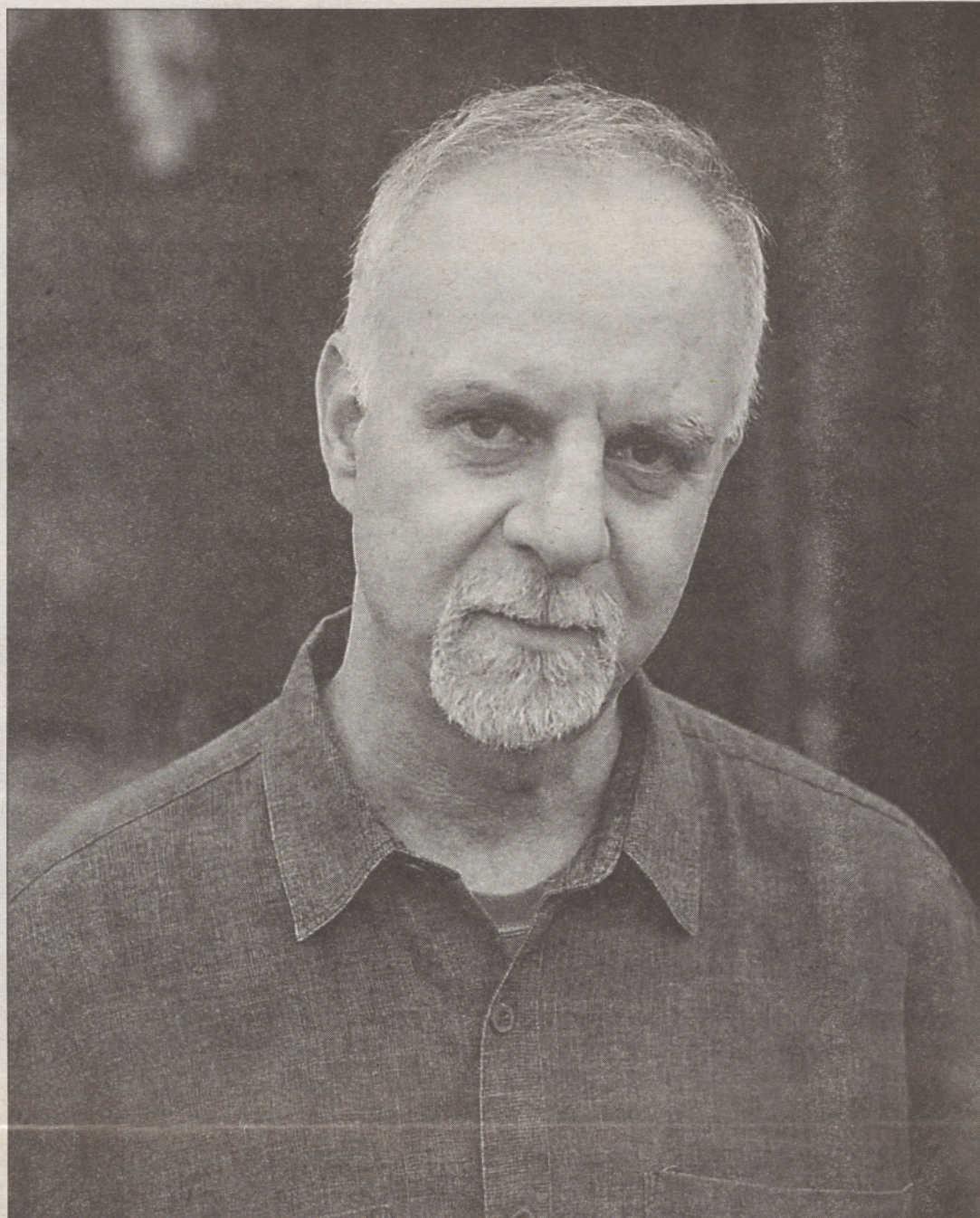


PHOTO BY GILLES MINGASSON

and looked and here's a guy living out of a shopping cart and he was playing a violin that was missing two strings. And he looked very determined. So it just begged the question: Who is he?

So all of that made me very curious and I went over and introduced myself and that was how it started. He was very wary of me and he looked a little frightened, but he calmed down a little bit. I said, "Why do you play right here?" And he points across the street and he says, "There's the Beethoven statue and I play here for inspiration."

I realized — because he had some clear mental issues — that it was going to take a while. So this just began a series of meetings over the course of several weeks, and every time I met with him he was a little more comfortable and a little more forthcoming. I wrote my first column with no idea that there'd be a second one, or a third one, or a 20th one. Or a book. Or a movie. It all happened organically.

And when I wrote the first column, readers responded in a huge way. They sent e-mails in the hundreds, and letters, and

they wanted to buy the missing strings. My desk at the L.A. Times was surrounded by boxes of instruments that people had sent, and when I took them to him, I realized that I had just complicated his life — I was afraid he would get mugged for those instruments, and I thought he could even get beaten to death on Skid Row where he lived.

I felt it was my duty to try to get some help for him and keep him out of harm's way. That's when I started this dialogue with a mental health agency called Lamp Community and it took me into this world that I knew virtually nothing about: mental illness and homelessness and public policy regarding those issues.

R.R.: Had you had any interactions with people on Skid Row before?

S.L.: When I moved to L.A. to write a column for the L.A. Times, I was certainly aware of it. And the word on it was: It was Skid Row, it had always been Skid Row, it

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