

Birdland

1678 Broadway, NYC

1.

A nest full of thieves of lost chords,
is a priority for shepherding news
held together by subway tokens
and flounder smells wrapped in brown paper.
The microphone is held by a stork
wearing suspenders,
crooning to the chickadees
and they swoon,
hearts fluttering with traffic noises.
Bebop toe-tapping, glitter notes,
hang on wash lines.
The night crew is never off-key.
The bar tender polishes the countertop
from whispered lies, tossed-back, like shot glasses,
by pride-filled bantam roosters.
The spot light is on
sweat of musicians
as they roost
upon chicken wire of whole notes.
You get an earful.
The band is cooking stewed jazz.
The bird takes his alto sax,
finding free association
in yellow corn,
feasting on what is before him.
Farm silos have no place here.
Tractors cannot plow what is sown.
This is a big city, but not big enough
to hold all these perched whole notes.
Men's hats fly.
Women's hearts ricochet.
Days are blown off calendars.
Sidewalks want to know who the headliner is ---
then hear the truth ---
Only bird can get that sound
out of nowhere, and play it
so everyone hears it.
Bird can fill the 400 seats with half notes.
It would be packed and no room
for half-hearted music.
Among the caged finches is Pee Wee Marquette

mispronouncing names
if you don't pay him enough to remember.
Even he can name any bird tune.

2.

I was there the night it closed.
I will never forget.
It was 1956 and Judy Garland stood outside,
or someone who looked like her,
kicking at the pad-locked door,
soused to the gills, testifying,
"I've been kicked out of better joints than this."

The door did not respond.
Her eyes were dull diamonds.
Her mascara was rivers of ruin.
She lost one high heel shoe.
She whirled around and dropped kicked the door.
The door did not say a word.
Somewhere, in an alley, was a man with a sax,
on the ground his hat had loose cash.
He spoke like swamp bottom, "*lady,*
The bird done flew the coop."
He played one note that became a sewer cover.
The door remembered notes like that,
and smirked, cock-eyed,
like a bet gone good.

"It ain't fair," she snapped,
her fists closed
clenched full of leftover days.
"It just ain't fair. The party's over."
"*Lady, it's just begun.*"
He played another note,
big as a skyscraper. The kind
you write home about.
The kind of letter you never send
because you don't want to admit
how everything turned out.
The door has gotten an eviction notice like this.
And suddenly, she wasn't washed up,
she wasn't on the way out.
She was on the way back
to center stage,
a white gardenia in her hair,

she is Billy Holiday
singing, *Lover Man*
Where Did He Go Away
the stage lights focus on the lost note
like it was the size of a dime
but big enough to swallow
the universe, because pain always does,
and the audience sits in her palm,
on her every word,
hoping the music does not go away.
Then that door opens,
she walks in,
everything lights up,
applause is a rumble of wings.
There is a difference of carrying a torch
and being a torch singer.
One sets the audience into crystal clear blue flame.
The other waits for things
that ain't about to happen.

3.

Anything can happen in Birdland.
All you have to do
is pay the man
to remember your name.

Martin Willitts Jr was nominated for two *Best of The Net* awards and his 5th *Pushcart* award. He has 15 poetry chapbooks and two full length books including *Why Women Are A Ribbon Around A Bomb* (Last Automat, 2011), *Protest, Petition, Write, Speak: Matilda Joslyn Gage Poems* (Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation, 2011), *How To Find Peace* (Kattywumpus Press, 2012), *Playing The Pauses In The Absence Of Stars* (Main Street Rag, 2012), *No Special Favors* (Green Fuse Press, 2012). His chapbook *Secrets No One Wants To Talk About* (Dos Madres Press, 2011) was favorably reviewed in the *Boston Small Press and Poetry Scene*.