

# Nyro Fiddles

## F. Paul Wilson

*This little piece - somewhere between story, diary entry and autobiographical episode - may seem quiet on a first reading, but we think it sets up resonances which can be heard throughout the stories collected in In Dreams, encapsulating in a few words the seeds which grow into, say, the stories by Lewis Shiner, Andrew Weiner, or Nicholas Royle. F. Paul Wilson is best known as the author of The Keep, The Touch and other fine horror novels, but he has never been content to settle easily into genre, and his short fiction - collected in Soft - covers an extraordinary range of effects and approaches.*

*“Nyro Fiddles”,’ he tells us, ‘is true. Mostly. For those not in the know or too young to remember, Laura Nyro was a cult phenom of the sixties. Find her old Verve and Columbia records and listen to that voice - she did all her own harmonies; listen to those lyrics and consider that they were written by a teenager. Many of her devotees were other musicians who had hits with her more commercial songs - “Stoned Soul Picnic”, “And When I Die”, “Stoney End”, “Eli’s Coming”, to name but a few. She dropped out of the scene in the early seventies but recently started touring with a quartet. I caught her show at the Bottom Line in Greenwich Village and it brought back the night I dropped in on one of her recording sessions. I wrote the piece as if I had the old Crawdaddy in mind as a market. Here’s how it went down . . .’*

\* \* \* \*

CBS Recording Studios  
The New York Tendaberry sessions  
July 20, 1969

# W

e were supposed to go to Studio A but there didn’t seem to be a Studio A in this building so Mary asks the guard where’s the Laura Nyro session and he says it’s in Studio B on the second floor. A placard by the guard’s desk reminds us that Arthur Godfrey broadcasts from the sixth floor.

We sign in and take the elevator.

The main double door to Studio B opens into a sort of T-shaped vestibule with the sound studio to the right and the engineer's booth to the left. I hesitate outside, not sure we should walk in because it's in use right now and we *had* been told to go to Studio A in the first place. The guard could be wrong (it's been known to happen) and the studio could be filled with strangers and I'd feel dumb walking in and then just turning around and leaving.

Then through the door window I see Jimmy Haskell walk by from the sound studio to the booth and I know this must be the place. Jimmy's arranging the horns for Laura. He's a sweet, easy-going, middle-aged guy with a salt-and-pepper beard and he's wearing a beanie with propellers sticking out each side. They spin deliriously as he walks.

Laura likes everyone to be happy at her sessions.

We walk into the booth and there's Laura and a friend smoking a little pipe. The friend has longish hair and a moustache, both brown, and is wearing one of those knee-length Indian style coat-shirts, and I think he looks a lot like a guy who used to play lead guitar in my band.

Laura sits by the console in her full-length black dress and black lace shawl and that incredible black hair and I think maybe she's put on a few pounds since last I saw her.

There's also this German shepherd bitch running around and it has what looks like an old Sara Lee coffee cake tin in the closet filled with dog food and every so often it goes over and chomps some down. Laura tells us the dog's name is Beauty Belle (or did she say Bill?).

It's eight o'clock and the session was supposed to start at seven but the engineers are having trouble setting up the second eight tracks and Laura Nyro, who's usually fairly talkative, is preoccupied tonight. Dallas - could be the city, a guy, or a gal - is on the phone and Laura's telling he, she, or it how stoned she is. The engineer's on another line with someone named Danny explaining that he doesn't see how he can mix the new album this week because his kids are out of school and he's gotta spend some time with them. Indian Coat was trying to persuade him on this point earlier but Indian Coat is now out in the sound studio talking to Twin-Prop Jimmy while the musicians sit around bullshit-ting, trying each other's instruments, and getting paid scale for it. Beauty Belle (Bill?) is watching Indian Coat very intently through the glass.

A young photographer approaches the console and waits for the lady to get off the phone. He shows her some shots he took of her a while back and she picks out some she likes and says she doesn't want to give this one or that one to *Vogue* because they're very personal-type pictures, you know? Indian Coat strolls in and says he wants that one blown up for his wall and Laura says he's *got* to be kidding. She hates that picture. Well, she doesn't really hate it, it's just that she likes others better and I get the impression she's uncomfortable with the word hate.

Break time rolls around for the musicians so they interrupt their bullshitting in the studio and move it out to the hall where they regroup around the soft drink machine. I go over and hang with one of the trumpets I know who with a couple more years could be old enough to be Laura's father and he tells me it's anarchy, pure and simple anarchy but wait and see... they'll start to play and she'll point things out and say do this and try that and before you know it everything falls into place and it's beautiful, man. The girl's crazy but she sure as hell knows her music.

Back in the booth they're blasting 'Time and Love', the song that's to be rerecorded tonight. The back-up tracks were laid down at an earlier session but something didn't click and so they're going to be done again tonight. Laura's tracks with her piano and vocal won't be touched and the band will play off them. After the second run-through of the tape Mary turns to me and says it sounds familiar and I say I guess it does have a few phrases reminiscent of 'Flim-flam Man', especially in the fade.

After more replays the band thinks it's ready and they try it. It's about nine now and Laura wants to finish by ten (*definitely* no overtime tonight) but the drummer isn't the same one as last time and he's doing some of his own thing (like doubles on the downbeat) and Laura wants to know the drummer's name. Jimmy tells her it's Maurice and she gets on the mike and tells Maurice what she wants. Her speaking voice is soft, almost sibilant, and I can never get used to associating it with the power, range, and clarity that explodes when she gets behind her piano. She tells Maurice to do it like Gary Chester did at the last session, keep it simple and easy and light and happy and no cymbals except for a bam-bam-crash in the chorus and only a one-stroke downbeat, okay?

At first I think the doubles on the downbeat sound better than the singles Laura wants but as the session wears on I come around to agreeing with the lady in black. Many more tries follow and one sounds perfect until Maurice forgets the *boom-boom* on his bass that leads into the fade. It's nine fifty and Laura swears she's not going into overtime again. Everything's

going to stop dead at ten whether 'Time and Love' is finished or not. Okay now, everybody be happy and light, everybody smile, and one of the percussion men sticks his head out from behind some baffling and flashes Laura this hideous shit-eating grin and everybody laughs.

At ten fifteen the musicians take another break and Laura is asking about overtime. At ten thirty all the musicians pile into the engineer's booth to hear the last take. It's crowded and Mary and I have other stops to make tonight so we leave without goodbyes because no one could hear us over the replay anyway. Art Garfunkel comes in as we're leaving and asks if the Nyro session is here and I tell him yes. He shakes his head and says he heard it was Studio A.

Outside the moon is high and bright and I remember hearing that somebody might be walking on it tonight. I also hear that Laura Nyro sleeps in a coffin.

I don't know.

\* \* \* \*