

Mrs. Logan and Me

Her mother worked for a Jewish family during the depression. Many fathers committed suicide.

by Toni Schlesinger

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Location Harlem

Rent \$850 [market]

Square feet 500 [studio apartment in turn-of-century brownstone]

Occupant Daniel Bernard Roumain [composer]

This room is so red. I've been here eight years. I was a little cocky. This was the first apartment that I looked at in New York. I said to the landlady, Mrs. Logan, Let me look at a few other places. I didn't know about New York. When I came back, I found out she turned away other people, hoping I would come back. I moved to New York, even before I finished my Ph.D.—gotta start that career. It was a Cinderella story. Philip Glass was a fan. We started performing together. Last night I was composing a piece for Bill T. Jones at Philip Glass's Looking Glass Studios. I live in a very humble place. That's allowed me to invest in my career.

[Crash.] A roll of thunder outside. The deal with the devil.

You left the door open. Shut it. In New York, you have to decide what your career's worth, what you're willing to sacrifice. Next year, I'll buy a condo. Years ago you could buy a brownstone on this block for less than 100 grand. Now, it's close to a million. Terrible?

It's nice for Mrs. Logan. Mrs. Logan was in Harlem when Malcolm X and Ralph Ellison were. It's very personal to her. For me, it's history. I wrote *Harlem Essay* for the American Composers Orchestra with her voice in it. I wanted to make a statement. Do you know Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*? Great title.

Yes! Today, I bet somebody wouldn't use the word *common*, as it can imply "ordinary," though it comes from *communis* and means "shared." Copland wrote the piece in the 1940s, a patriotic wartime fanfare. The word *common* also carries on the spirit of the 1930s, men in the murals wielding hammers. I'm trying to elevate the people around me. I'm more interested in Mrs. Logan and her stories.

Richer, more surprises. I've noticed that when more-publicized people are interviewed, a certain myth starts to take shape. The spontaneity, the unresolved, have become this well-polished tale, images get locked in. Though the same could be



Daniel Bernard Roumain photo: Cary Conover

said about anyone who has lived a long time. Where are you from?

I'm proudly blue-collar, from Margate, a suburb of Pompano in south Florida. My mom's a nurse. My dad's a manager of some electric company. They were born in Haiti. They left after the revolution, came to Skokie, Illinois. No, I've never been to Haiti. There is only one other city I have roots in—Portland, Oregon. I'm in love with a woman in that city, Karina.

Is that Karina with one N? Wait, maybe it has two Ns. I always confuse the Ns. I'm investing in her. I've never invested in anyone but myself, self-consumed artist that I am.

Is she going to move here? No, and I don't want her here. What I love about New York is leaving it and coming back to it. We'll work it out. It will involve a home in Harlem and Portland. In Portland, you can really breathe.

[I call him later.] I forgot to ask you more about Mrs. Logan. She used to own a dry-cleaning business with her late husband. They were very successful. She told me a story of how her mother worked for a Jewish family in Harlem during the Depression. Many of the fathers started committing suicide. Her mother was going to the basement to get food. There was the father hanging. She had to make a choice whether to run up the stairs and stop children from coming down or take this man off this rope.

[I call him back.] What did her mother do? Wait, I'll call Mrs. Logan. [*He calls back.*] What happened was, the brother of the father was living with them. The brother had hanged himself in the bathroom. Miss Logan's mother, with the husband and wife, cut him down before the children woke up. The basement story was what happened to another family.