

# ON AND OFF THE CLIFF

Volume 39, Number 3

May-June 2017

## Voices Awaken!

Recent weeks have brought an outpouring of contributions for this issue of *On and Off the Cliff*. Whether our members' muse awakened voices with the "Greenly Spirit of Spring" or the Guilty Spirit of Spring Cleaning—inspiration has been uncovered.

Ranging from nostalgic to reflective to a bit bawdy—enjoy.

You will discover:

- Two pieces tied to the poetry of Carl Sandburg
- An interview with Artist in Residence Jennifer Cronin, a talented young painter.
- A review of AIR member Andrew McManus's chamber music performance.
- A glimpse into the artistic spirit that filled the life of Cliff Dweller Robert Amft.
- The story of *Zivio*, the word, the song, the CD tradition.
- A portrayal of a jazz-filled night on the Cliff.
- A brief but colorful report from the House Committee.
- The state of CD affairs reported by Club President David Chernoff.
- A "Super" reminiscence offered to the Literary Club in 2011 by Past President Bill Cuncannan CD'75.

## An Evening of Carl Sandburg

By Joan Pantsios CD'14

The evening of April 12 saw a gathering of members and guests enjoying a program about Carl Sandburg, an honorary member of The Cliff Dwellers and from 1962-67 Illinois' Poet Laureate. He was famously present at the Cliff on the evening that Harriet Monroe introduced William Butler Yeats to the Club.

M. Sylvia Castle from the Abraham Lincoln Bookstore had brought a variety of Sandburg books and other memorabilia for us to browse, and our portrait of Sandburg was on display throughout the event. After we enjoyed another of Chef Victor's excellent buffet dinners, she kicked things off by giving us an overview of Sandburg's life and work.

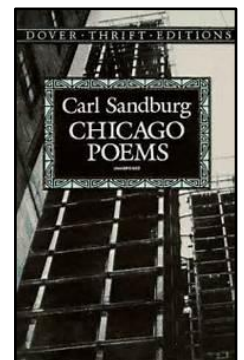
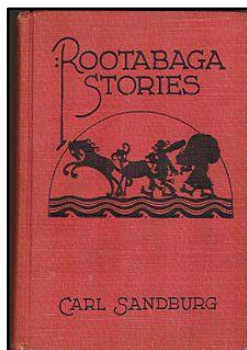
Members regaled us with readings, beginning with Andrew Elders, a fellow Galesburgian, who read *Skyscraper*, followed by Virginia Harding's rendition of three poems: *Jack*, *War*, and *Fog*.

We then learned from Sylvia about a part of Sandburg's career with which many of us were not familiar--his movie reviews.

Joan Pantsios read two of Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories*, "The Wooden Indian and the Shaghorn Buffalo" and "Never Kick a Slipper at the Moon." Leslie Recht gave us Sandburg's iconic poem *Chicago*.

The evening ended in fine form with the crowd joining singer-guitarist Harrison Fried in a rousing rendition of *Animal Fair*.

We had Sandburg the poet, Sandburg the film critic, Sandburg the short story writer, and Sandburg the songwriter all in one evening! Thanks to all who read and all who came to enjoy.



## The President Reports-May-/June 2017

It was very cold and rainy at the Cub's Opening Night, and we lost. However, things are proceeding nicely at The Cliff Dwellers.

- The Building has scheduled replacement of the HVAC system serving the Club for Saturday, May 13th, weather permitting (the new roof-top unit is being delivered by helicopter).
- We continue to add new members and trial members.
- Building ownership continues to assure us they will commence construction of the new exercise facility during the 3rd Quarter of 2017
- We enjoyed an evening Reception for Union League Club Officers, Directors, and Committee Chairs
- We continue to reach out to Building tenants and also have invited residents of the 310 South Michigan Building to a membership event
- We enjoyed many wonderful Club events and art exhibitions
- Soon the patio will open for drinks and dining

Thanks to our Program Committee, we have several events planned for May, including another one of Chef Victor's wonderful theme dinners (May 10th); a Chicago Architecture Program (May 23rd); and dinner and a staged reading of *Naked Lunch: The Musical* (May 29th). In an effort to generate more revenue, Club-sponsored events have been limited during May and June – typically our best months for member-sponsored events.

Once again, I encourage you to continue to recruit new members--the lifeblood of the Club--and to use the Club facilities more often, including parties and events. More members and more meals served (especially in the evening) will not only make the Club even more enjoyable for all, but it will also allow us to operate in the black. Each of you can help.



If you have any suggestions about new members, events, or how to improve the Club, please let me know.

*Zivio!*

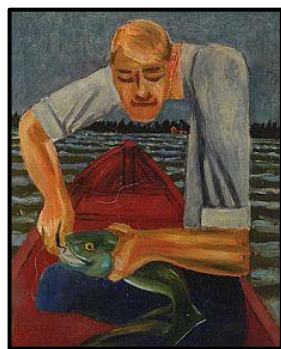
**David S. Chernoff, President**

## An Introduction to Robert Amft at the Cliff Dwellers

By Loren Chernoff



A young Robert Amft



*& the World of Art he loved and lived.*

I have the distinct pleasure of introducing tonight's artist, the late Robert Amft. I'll start with just a bit of his background, the fact that he was a Cliff Dweller beginning in 1954. He served on the Board of Directors from 1962 through '64, and was Vice-President during that last year. He was born in Chicago in December of 1916, and, for those of you who are counting, that makes last December the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. After working in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho as part of the Civilian Conservation Corps, he earned a BFA from Chicago's Art Institute in 1939, where he met his wife, Marian, with whom he had four children. Above the desk near the door, you can see Bob's charcoal drawing of Marian. He also studied at the Saugatuck Summer School of Painting with Francis Chapin.

You might ask why I'm introducing Bob tonight--It turns out that his wife and my mother were best friends from the age of nine so I know him as a family member, the one who sometimes let his daughter, Sally, and me use his "Good Gold Paint." Bob was truly multi-faceted, both as a person and as an artist.

He was a man who saw the entire world through the eyes of an artist, using many kinds of media to express himself. Like Picasso, he couldn't walk down the street without finding something that he would turn into a whimsical sculpture. He filled his ten-room apartment with massive oil paintings, sculptures, water colors, photography, and mixed media. But he was also well grounded in art history. Once, during the late '90's, he was using the Evanston Public Library and noticed a painting that he recognized as the work of William Adolph Bouguereau, a nineteenth-century French artist. He brought it to the attention of the Board of Directors, who then contacted Sotheby's, who sold it for \$900,000, to be used by the Evanston Public Library.

I always thought of Bob when I learned of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's work on the flow state, an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what he is doing. When Bob died at the age of 95, he was still achieving that state of flow, and he never stopped creating.

Now, I will be quiet and let you all look around and enjoy just a small sample of the varied works of Robert Amft, Cliff Dweller.

To learn more about Bob, his career, and family click on this link: <https://twisteddill.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/secret-family-recipe/>.

## A Transcendent Sax Trio Fills the Club with Jazz

By Lindsey Huge CD' Photos by Steve Graue

April is Jazz Appreciation Month, and the guests who made it to the Club on April 7 heard much jazz to appreciate. We hosted for the first time a powerful trio led by Brent Griffin, Jr. on alto sax, with Junius Paul on bass, and Isaiah Spencer on drums. Brent's talents have recently been recognized and supported with a 2016 Lumin Arts Jazz Fellow. This was the fourth time he's performed live with Isaiah and Junius. And, their cohesion and communication was evident.

Brent has broad musical interests and skills, and began rehearsing after our show for upcoming performances with J-Livi and the Party, a local hip-hop brass band outfit. Brent began playing in grade school band in the Gurnee school district. He played in jazz band at Viking Middle School in sixth grade, and started jazz sax study in sophomore year of high school.

He first met Isaiah on the local music circuit five years ago, and caught up with Junius through a mutual teacher, Vincent Davis of the famed Chicago Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Mr. Davis has performed with Roscoe Mitchell in conjunction with the AACM.

In addition to the trio, we were honored to host a dozen former jazz music students of Brent's from the Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School of Harvey. They came with Dr. Roosevelt Griffin III, their teacher and music director of the school district. Dr. Griffin has directed music at Harvey for over 14 years and will receive this year's Jazz Educator Award from the Jazz Institute of Chicago.

Brent conceived and arranged two distinct sets of music for our show. The first set featured his and Isaiah and Junius's updated takes on standards. "We wanted to perform some jazz classics in fresh ways, with new interpretations, including shifts in melodies and different times. For instance, we played Todd Dameron's "Hot House" twice as fast

as customary." From their first fresh take, all heard that Isaiah and Junius' intricate rhythms could take Brent anywhere, and that Brent was capable of going wherever they drove as well as steering new paths. The interplay among these three young artists was exceptional. Their "Peace" by Horace Silver approached convention, though Isaiah expertly rounded the beat with mallets.

They rehearsed once for this performance, though not all numbers. I requested Sonny Rollins' "Doxy" after they'd rehearsed, and their take on this bop standard was straight-ahead but cohesive and passionate. "I was happy to play it," Brent reported, "especially when I discovered that two of the students in the audience were studying it." Brent's alto changes are rapid without blurring his lyrical play. The



trio seemed to find full expression where they wanted, and the joy in their individual and group command was apparent at every turn. Again freshly revising an oft-played piece, they gave us Billy Strayhorn's late sixties "Ishfahan" with two different time signatures.

Brent, Junius, and Isaiah stretched expectations further in the second set. Here was a searing 65-plus minute improvisation inspired by Thelonius Monk's "Ask Me Now." Sprawling and ebullient while always accessible, Brent named the piece "Ask Me Not, Tell Me How," and noted in his introduction how it intended to express the need for honorable communication among all people in trying times, lamenting the unfortunate tensions in our current political climate. Brent explained, "I conceived and wrote the framework for it only several days before our performance, intentionally allowing great space for improvised expression, even leaving out any guiding melody." It was an amazing performance, expansive yet nuanced and intense. This piece demanded our best ear and

thematically asked for our best selves. Brent, Isaiah and Junius lifted dozens of brilliant musical comments to us and gave our audience some of the finest jazz we've heard.



Middle school music students don't get to hear live jazz in clubs. They may get to concert halls or festivals. "I wanted them to hear and see small group jazz in an intimate setting," Brent observed. "And your space provided a great opportunity for young jazz students." The students, seated directly in front of the group, were clearly excited to see and hear their former teacher play at the club. Dr. Griffin was also appreciative of the opportunity for his students. "An occasion like this can change the course of a young music student's life," he explained. "They talked of little else but the show on the ride home. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade tenor sax student, JuJuan, sat in the front row, rapt throughout. His mother later told me that he

wouldn't go to sleep or stop playing his horn the rest of the night, he was so inspired." Dr. Griffin also applauded the phenomenal musicianship of the trio.

Brent plans to play more with and compose for this group of Junius and Isaiah. We should all be happy for those plans. He expects to remain in Chicago and develop his musical future here. To him, the Chicago jazz horizon beckons opportunity. "There's so much that can be done here, so many great musicians to play with," he observed. This poised and talented young man is only 23 and told me he's excited to learn more about the history of



jazz and apply it to his compositions and playing.

Young and older alike were moved and inspired by The Brent Griffin trio on April 7, as we once again brought America's Art to the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor on Michigan Avenue.

## Here's from the House Committee

By Paul Hamer CD'05 House Committee Chair

The good news is that there are not any pressing issues involving cash outlays for problems in the House. We are coming up on our Spring deck planting time, so any and all members who want to volunteer for deck planting will be welcomed. This activity usually occurs on a late-May Saturday, and the crew enjoys brunch when their task is completed. Details will be available in upcoming Blasts.

I understand that some of the other Clubs around town have been looking down their noses at us and sneeringly referring to us as those "Bow Tie Kids." As if we are not even adults!!!

In an effort to combat this behind our backs smear campaign, we have come up with a "Call Out Response" disguised as a Club Fund Raiser. If we can get 40 Club Members to commit, we can each have our own CD Bow Tie!

Note our design. If you want to support our Club and proudly wear an official symbol of the Club, please contact me at [paul@fwchicago.com](mailto:paul@fwchicago.com). Cliff Dweller Bow Ties will be \$100.00.



## Inspiration: The Art of Music Composition and Performance.

By AIR Committee Chair Eve Moran CD'10

Interesting is the mind, ear, and soul of the music composer whose technical skill and nurtured talents blend to create flawless musical performances. Such was the case of Andrew McManus and his work *the has-been to beachey*--the highlight of a uniquely-themed musical event April 28, 2017 at The Cliff Dwellers

This particular McManus work is a setting of the words of two poems by Carl Sandburg: *the Has-Been* and *To Beachy* (1912). It is short in length, intimately connected to its text and filled with moods that range from lyrical to surreal. Commissioned by Chicago-based Access Contemporary Music, it premiered as part of a new set of Sandburg-themed works composed for the 2016 Ear Taxi Festival.

The mind loves connections. As such, it did reflect on the idea that, long ago, poet Carl Sandburg was an honorary member of The Cliff Dwellers. While today, in 2017, McManus is an Artist-in-Residence at our same club. The merging of two arts, poetry and music, that we in attendance were experiencing was made even more remarkable by this happenstance relationship between the two artists.

There was ample satisfaction in the performance which featured Julia Bentley (mezzo-soprano), Julie Rosenfeld (violin) and Eli Lara (cello). This highly-acclaimed group of musical artists (each of whom is on faculty at the University of Missouri) gave stirring and richly intense life to McManus' work. The mystery in Sandburg's words, so beautifully evoked by Bentley, found lyrical expression in the strings that vividly supported the poem's varied moods.

But, there was more to enjoy in this celebration of music and poetry. Bentley (accompanied by the responsive Lara) gave beautiful voice to *Walcott Songs*, a work by Bernard Rands (b. 1934) that sets to music three texts--*Endings /Midsummer, Tobago/The Fist*--by Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright Derrick Walcott. There was added poignancy in the moment as Walcott had passed away in mid-March at his home in St Lucia.

Bentley (accompanied by the ever-resourceful Rosenfeld) then turned her talents to parts of *Suite for Voice and Violin* by Heitor Villa Lobos (1887-1959). The first and third parts of this suite use poetry by Mario de Andrade (1893-1945) while the second section is a vocalise, or wordless aria. A tropical flavor was very evident and well-expressed by the two performers.

In his informative and entertaining opening commentary McManus observed that new contemporary works need repetition to build familiarity. This concept was illustrated when his *the has-been to beachey* was



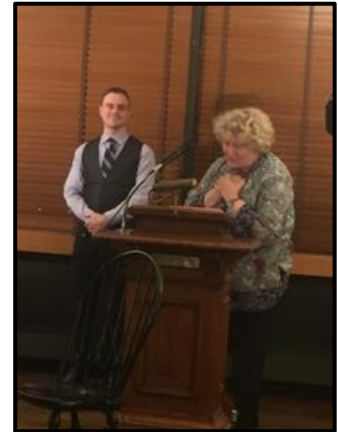
Andrew McManus sits in the wings as Julie Rosenfeld (violin), Julia Bentley (vocals) and Eli Lara (cello) perform his work, *the has-been to beachey*.

performed again at the close of the program. Indeed, the ear was re-awakened, thus proving the validity of his proposition.

A program booklet produced by Richard Eastline CD'73 was a useful adjunct to the event. It included the words for all the poetry used in the compositions as well as notes on the music and biographical information about the performers.

George Gabauer CD'94, one of the earliest proponents of the Club's Artist in Residence (AIR) program smiled throughout the evening. Sadly, the driving force that was Mel Skvarla, who directed the first several seasons of the AIR program, is no longer with us.

We were rewarded by an extraordinary presentation created by Andrew McManus and performed by a first-class ensemble.



## An Artist in Residence Replies: Lunch with Jennifer Cronin

By Eve Moran CD'10

Realistic but dreamlike, the honored and exhibited paintings of Jennifer Cronin do fascinate and haunt the observer. A key to the works of this 2017 Artist in Residence is reflected in her *Artist Statement*:

Wandering. Looking for something to follow. Hoping to find a hint of something that is genuine and true. In my earliest work, it was a playful tale of imagination weaving itself throughout my daily life. Through the language of figurative realism, I sought to investigate personal fantasy and escape amidst the backdrop of mundane, everyday life. Through this work, I developed an interest in conveying the quiet complexity of my subjects, which I have carried with me throughout my years as an artist. As time has passed, I have turned my search outward, looking for meaning in the lives of others and the surrounding world. With the same approach of compelling realism and quiet reflection, I have sought to document the world around me through a lens of honesty and unmistakable humanity.



Jennifer's art seems to be ever-evolving and yet constant in showing a world that we might not easily see or absorb. For example, in her recent series, *What Was Once a Home*, Jennifer documents architectural decay in empty but still-standing homes in the Chicago area (many of which are situated on Chicago's far South Side). Of these highly detailed drawings, Jennifer notes, in part, that:

These houses were once cherished beauties, filled with life and warmth. Each shingle, each pane of glass, each baluster, each knob and handle was thoughtfully placed to form a home that was just right. A beacon of the American Dream. And now, these drawings show the houses

as they are, as shadows of their former selves. Still standing, as symbols of what they once were, and the people they once held.

***When and where were you born?*** August 5, 1986 in Oak Lawn, Illinois.

***What is your favorite childhood memory?*** Once, when I was in the second grade, my parents had to run errands in downtown Chicago. They left me in the care of my older siblings Tommy and Michelle. At the start, we went to the Rock 'n Roll McDonald's. There I became fascinated with the sugar packets and filled my pockets. Later, we walked to the beach and entered the water in our street clothes. There was abundant laughter as the sugar packets moved out of my pockets, rose up from the water and surrounded us.

***What were some of your early interests?*** While I had an early interest in art, I was equally fascinated by the sciences and mathematics.

***What studies did you pursue - and where?*** I studied at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign). In 2008, I received my BFA in Painting. I further received a BFA in Art Education in 2009. And in my last semester, I studied abroad at Camberwell College of Art in London, England.

***Who was a hero or an inspiration in your life?*** My parents, Shirley and Tom, were a strong influence on my life. Another inspirational figure was my grandmother Grace. For many years, she was an Art teacher at St. John Fisher school in Chicago. She had a strong artistic spirit and encouraged play with art materials that were spread out across her kitchen table.

***What was a highlight in your career thus far?*** In 2016, I was awarded a grant from the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation. This was truly liberating. It allowed me to reduce my work hours at the Skydeck and devote more time to my painting. In addition, I was able to enroll in screen printing classes.

***Please tell something of your current artistic work.*** Currently, I am working on a series of paintings called "Seen and Unseen" to be shown in 2018. It was inspired by a trip I took to the small village of Newtok, Alaska. This place is experiencing severe erosion problems and losing coastline which threatens the homes, livelihood, and culture of the Native Alaskan resident community. My artwork aims to document the drastic changes taking place and raise awareness of the real-world effects of climate change.

***What is your favorite song or piece of music?*** *Zombie* by The Cranberries.

***Do you have a favorite artist or a favorite painting?*** Zaria Foreman is my favorite artist.

***What is your favorite color?*** Purple

***What is your favorite book?*** The *Harry Potter* series of novels by J.K. Rowling. But, right now I'm reading *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* by Sherry Turkle.

***Do you have a favorite film?*** *A Beautiful Mind* directed by Ron Howard.

***What type of activities do you most enjoy?*** Going to the beach and anywhere else I can experience nature.

***What person (living or dead) would you most like to invite to lunch at the Club?*** My grandmother, Grace. I would love to bring her up to the Club and fill her in on all of the things in my life.



**ZIVIO! ZIVIO! ZIVIO!—WHENCE COME YOU, ZIVIO?***By Richard L. Eastline, CD '73 Emeritus*

Just what is this *Zivio* thing? Members of The Cliff Dwellers stand and lift their voices as if it were a national anthem, often mouthing or mumbling peculiar words and perhaps looking a bit embarrassed. What does the text mean and how did it find its way to this literary-minded club?

Origins can be difficult to track down and, once identified, subject to convoluted interpretation. Even what seem to be simple or obvious relationships often turn out to be fraudulent, tempting the seeker to embrace a questionable lexicon or desperate speculation.

But for the loyal Cliff Dweller, academic context is immaterial. The objective in singing *Zivio* is to make a joyful noise while honoring the lyrics as the time-proven paen to a glorious history. Yet, there is that kernel of curiosity buried beneath the veneer of acceptance. With that in mind, let the story begin, based on some modern-day basic sleuthing.

The word “zivio” is an alternate spelling of “zhivio,” traced to Old Slavic and in use throughout the Balkan countries as a hearty shout in behalf of an appreciated performance or the appearance of a public figure (especially royalty). From that initial usage, the word was adopted as a toast with the intended meaning of “may you live (a long life)” and that then was extended to a broader expression equivalent to today’s “Cheers!” Its historic use was documented by the British author of popular travel books dealing with the Balkans, M.(Mary) E. (Edith) Durham, who wrote in her 1900 account of “Twenty Years of Balkan Tangle”—*Then, Prince Danilo passed, and the crowd cried “Zhivio!” I met the Times correspondent and said, “Well, that was a display. You have something to write about now.*

So, how did Z(h)ivio! get to Chicago? An educated guess might be based on the travel-minded members who may have visited the Balkans after the first World War, heard the *Zivio* shout at restaurants or special events, or may have encountered its mention in one of the travel journals they brought with them. But a much better explanation—and one based on an archived Club document—involves the recurring foreign-flavor dinners offered to members and guests, still a popular feature among today’s program offerings. In a hand-written note to the editor of the Club’s newsletter in 1967, member Jack Cowan states that Bohemian suppers brought together the Slavic members who “officiated as teachers” in rendering their imported *Zivio* refrain (shown here in the form in which it appears in various Club hand-outs):

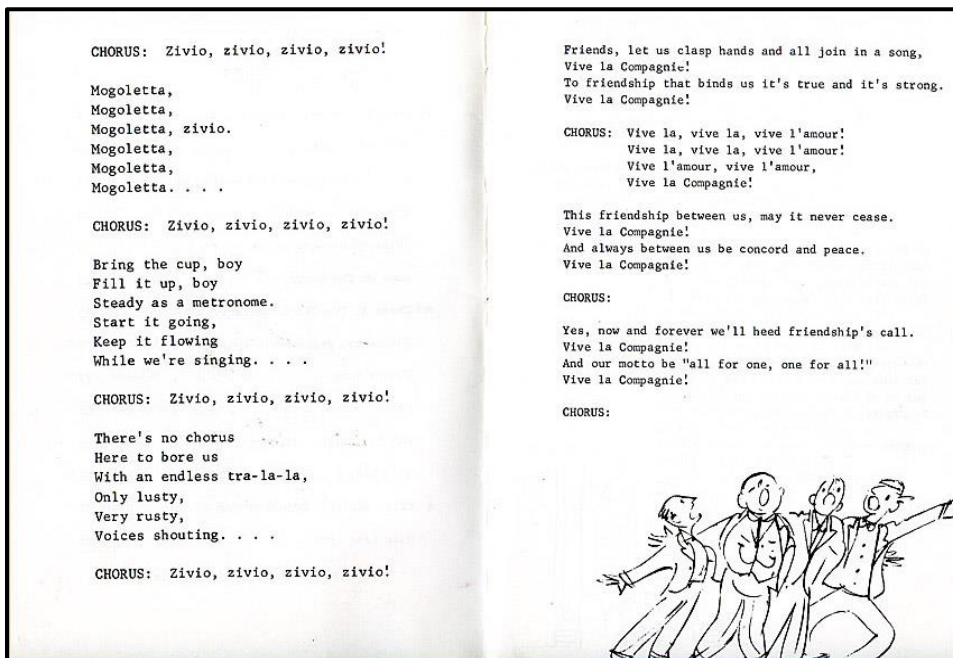
*Zivio, zivio, zivio, zivio!**Mogoletta**Mogoletta,**Mogoletta, zivio.**Mogoletta,**Mogoletta,**Mogoletta,**Zivio, zivio, zivio, zivio!*

Note that Zivio, as we now refer to the complete musical expression, really has very minimal content. The eight-line stanza is made up of just three words that are repeated in a pattern that amounts to a total of 21 words. If you take the time to examine the printed lyrics, you will get a lesser number. But that's because at sometime in the past, two words became connected and resulted in the bewildering "mogoletta" (there are some who suggested that it is a muddled form of Mogadishu even though that city lacks proximity to the Balkans). No, "mogaletta" is likely the unintended corruption of "maoga" plus "leto" which follow "zhivio" in Old Slavic to create "may you live / many / a summer" or, loosely, "may you live a long life." At The Cliff Dwellers we've adopted Zivio alone as meaning the same thing, similar to its use in the Balkan shout.

When did this observance of the Zivio moment begin? Good question—but no answer at this time. Based on the available information presented in this article, the date precedes the mid-1960s. But, by how much? Possibly a mention of prior performance might be found in an early issue of the Club's newsletter or a copy of an invitation to a Bohemian-theme dinner during the fifty years after 1909. Until the archives of The Cliff Dwellers memorabilia are more fully organized, it's likely that any such date will remain unknown.

Over the years there apparently were attempts to convert the lyrics to a more conventional literary rhyme. Whether via a competition within the membership or else by unsolicited contributions by those with a poetic urge, several fully-developed stanzas have made their appearance—and subsequently disappeared. During the early 1960s, the Club published (for its members) a songbook for use at festive gatherings. Along with a good many party favorites, it included the original *Zivio* verse plus alternates---authors uncredited, alas. For the record, the pages devoted to this achievement have been copied for this article.

And why, you might ask, do we continue with the original? Perhaps the exotic quality of the *Zivio* we all know has given it a special status, if only in impressing some with its obtuseness. Or simply because we're so used to it that we've conveniently adopted it as another of The Cliff Dwellers honored tradition.



### Scheduled Programs & More

As the weather warms and Summer awaits, make your way to the Club to enjoy the season, good friendship, and the delight of food and fun with other Cliff Dwellers.

Art Openings	Saturday at the Movies	Art Foundation's 3 <sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays	CD Book Club
First Wednesday Art Exhibitions remain on display for two months. Artists and Sculptors attend openings. A cash bar and dinner buffet are available.	Films are shown Saturday in the Sullivan Room at 10:30; discussions continue over lunch. Alternate dates are noted.	Evening presentations in the Kiva by CDAF grant recipients are free and open to the public. A cash bar and dinner service are available. Reservations are encouraged.	Discussions facilitated by Richard Reeder CD'13 take place on the noted Saturday beginning at 11:00 and continue over lunch.
May  Artist <b>Peter Hurley</b> and Sculptor <b>Brian Monaghan</b>  Continue	Below are the dates for the remaining movies that will be shown this year on Saturdays at the Club: 9/9 <b>28 Up</b> 10/7 <b>56 Up</b> 11/4 <b>Diva</b> 12/2 <b>House of Games</b>	The Art Foundation will be on Summer Recess.	5/27 <b>Empire of Deception</b> by Dean Jobb
June  Artist <b>Peter Hurley</b> and Sculptor <b>Brian Monaghan</b>	No Show.	The Art Foundation will be on Summer Recess.	6/24 <b>The Reason for Time</b> By Mary Burns
July 12  <b>Bob Guinan's</b> Final Seven Paintings	Sorry. The theater is closed.	The Art Foundation will be on Summer Recess.	7/29 <b>Love and Shame</b> By Peter Orner

**WE NEED YOUR INPUT!**

MEMBERS WISHING TO CONTRIBUTE TO **ON AND OFF THE CLIFF** CAN SUBMIT STORIES, REFLECTIONS, ARTICLES, POEMS, PHOTOS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THE ARTS TO NEWSLETTER EDITOR MIKE DEINES by e--mail [mjdeines@yahoo.com](mailto:mjdeines@yahoo.com)

Share Current, Past, and Future Stories about The Cliff Dwellers.

Editor's note: The following essay was written by Bill Cuncannan CD'75 and delivered at the Literary Club in 2011. Bill wanted to share the tale of his "2<sup>nd</sup> Career" as a supernumerary at the Lyric Opera. Leslie Recht observed, "Bill often referred to being a 'Super,' since he and his wife Polly were both great supporters of the Opera. I think that this ties the two organizations together and would be a nice piece for the newsletter."

**Memoirs of a Lyric Opera Supernumerary**  
or,  
**Putting three children through**  
**school, college, and university**  
**on \$2 an appearance.**

*By Past-President William Cuncannan CD'75 Emeritus*

Xmas 1953 found me in the wardroom of a US Navy battleship anchored in Hong Kong harbor. Thanks to that summer's cease-fire agreement, we were no longer lobbing shells from our big guns at North Korean targets, and were fixin' to return home. The date approximately coincides with the founding of the Lyric Opera of Chicago by a group headed by the then 28 year old Carol Fox. The company burst on the world operatic scene with the American debut of Maria Callas in the title role of Norma. The opera critic world was blown away, and the rest is history. Under Fox's leadership it joined the Met and San Francisco as the top three opera companies in the US.

Twenty years were to elapse before my debut as a supernumerary on the Lyric Opera stage. A friend who knew of my love for opera suggested I respond to a "cattle call for supers" broadcast on WFMT. An inquiry regarding qualifications was met with the response: "You gotta fit the boots – costumes are easily altered – but you gotta fit the boots." With that, my debut was arranged - I was a super.

Supers are the lowest people on the Opera House totem pole. They appear on stage costumed but mute. They carry spears, are guards, slaves, waiters or whatever the directors want.

Chorus Masters usually want the choristers to be blocked facing downstage, i.e. singing toward the audience. If for instance, the chorus of singers in a crowd scene is costumed as townspeople, often the director will have supers similarly costumed and blocked looking upstage i.e. facing away from the audience. This gives the effect of a much larger crowd of singers without affecting the overall budget much. (Chorus is union and big \$\$\$'s.)

Regular Supers agree to attend all casting calls, and if cast, to attend all rehearsals and performances. They are given the "plum" roles, e.g. dragging a dead tenor off stage. In the average season there will be twenty Regular Supers divided between men and women. When large numbers of supers are needed for a specific production, other "cattle calls" are issued.

Supers show up from almost every role in life, but when they enter the house through the Stage Door, they turn into members of the company and become grist for the casting mill. Schoolteachers become prostitutes; prosecuting attorneys, highwaymen. Every commutation and permutation imaginable.

It is vital that singers have a view of the conductor at all times. Just below the prompters box there is a camera focused on the area around the conductor. This image is projected on TV screens mounted all over the backstage areas, in the flies and wings. This insures that wherever a singer is placed the conductor will be visible. (unofficially of course sometimes during a long boring rehearsal or some such, some of the TV screens will provide a selection of World Series and Bear games.)

Then, of course, there is something very special about the crowd which comes in white tie and tails only on the very first opening of the season. Most not opera lovers – appear to have had several drinks – dragged in by the ear a la Jiggs and Maggie cartoon strip of old – and seated in the first two rows right behind the conductor. Little do they know

that the camera focused on the conductor also transmits images of them all over backstage. Stagehands have a betting pool very much like the one in Alaska as to the precise minute and second when the ice goes out in the spring. When will the first bald guy doze off? When will the first one visibly be drooling? Reports of these wagering activities somehow never seem to reach the front office.

Carol Fox's reign gave a sort of bluenose reputation to the company. A number of years ago Lyric commissioned a new production of Mozart's *Idomeneo* jointly with the Cologne and San Francisco opera companies. In one scene a virgin is sacrificed to the God Neptune. When the show played in Cologne she was nude, in San Francisco topless, and Chicago clad in a full body stocking. House Rules demanded no hanky panky was to be seen. So no one really saw the married lady chorister who often came to work early and spent the afternoon in the private dressing room of the tenor (or an occasional baritone as well).

In 1973 Carol N. was performing Massenet's *Thais* for the New Orleans Opera. Just before the show began she entered the dimly lighted stage from her dressing room wearing only slippers and a floor length robe. Her dresser helped her out of the robe and into a large bathtub nearly filled with milk. While seated in the tub only her head and shoulders were exposed. The stage lights went on and the curtain rose. The orchestra played and she sang. As the scene concluded the curtain came in, the stage lights dimmed and she was helped into her robe and slippers and off to her dressing room. This routine was followed for every performance save one.

Closing night, however, was another matter indeed. She said person or persons unknown (read stage hands and her publicity maven) had hidden a solid row of concrete building blocks under the milk in the tub. This raised up the seating position about eight inches. She came to the stage as before and was seated in the tub. The stage lights went on and the curtain rose. The orchestra played and she displayed to the audience her magnificent voice and considerably more than the tops of her shoulders. The *Times-Picayune* called her performance "Titillating."

The story quickly made the rounds of the world's opera houses. Carol Fox had signed her to sing the title role of Tosca in the 1976 season. Company members speculated what would happen. Apparently cooler heads prevailed and in the fall of 1976 she began those rehearsals as planned.

This production promised to be a sentinel event in opera history, as Tito Gobbi's realization of the role of the evil Baron Scarpia had been the "Gold Standard" the world over. When he was onstage as Scarpia, the audience knew in their hearts this was an evil person. Malevolence oozed from his every pore. Audiences were known to cheer audibly when Tosca stabs him to death. When he retired from the role, the disappointment was greatly tempered when he agreed with Carol Fox to direct this production.

At that time a fairly new addition to the Lyric roster of performers was the tenor Luciano Pavarotti. He had made his house debut in 1973 as Rudolfo in *La Boheme*. He was cast in the starring tenor role of Mario Caravadosi. At this time he was on a well-published diet in an attempt to pare down his weight which was a bit in excess of 300 pounds.

At the casting call six supers were cast as "spiri" (spies in the employ of Scarpia and the Catholic Church). We would be set about various nefarious acts from time to time.

On a Sunday afternoon in late fall that year, we were on the main stage rehearsing the second act. Cavaradosi is off stage being tortured by some of Scarpia's men in an attempt to wring from him the location where Andriotti (an enemy of Scarpia) is hiding. He is brought onstage and handed off to two of us spiri to restrain. While we each have hold of an arm, a minor character walks over and fakes hitting him in the chin. All three hundred pounds of Pavarotti goes limp and he falls from our grasp and hits the stage deck with a very audible THUMP. We have just dropped the world's most visible opera singer. My vision of a stage career vanishes.

Tito Gobbi is across the bridge over the orchestra pit in a flash shouting "more spiri – more spiri." Two additional spiri join us and the action is played again. When he gets the fake hit on the chin this time, the four of us are just barely able to let his body hit the stage deck with about half the former force. Finally, all six spiri are assigned to the task. We soon discover that there is no way that six people can get a grip on a three hundred pound

limp body. The location of the fake assault is moved to the back of the stage so that the six of us can just drag him about ten feet offstage where all of us are then out of the sight lines.

That's the final blocking that takes the show to opening night, and everything works. We do all of the performances, and on closing night in mid-December, after we drag him off one last time, he straightens up, gives each of us a bear hug, shakes hands all round saying "Buon Natale, Merry Christmas, Buon Natale and next time I be not so heavy" What a trouper.

The tales of tantrums and giant egos are the stuff of opera legends. A modest example comes to mind.

Modern day opera productions rely a good bit on computers for managing complicated lighting setups. A typical scene may have a hundred or more subtle and not so subtle light changes. These are prearranged, entered in the score, and are executed manually on cue from the assistant director (the "AD"), who does the second by second management of the show.

In 1976 Lyric was doing the version of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* in which the tenor is stabbed to death (as opposed to the version in which he is shot). A handsome tenor Jose C. was scheduled to make his Lyric Opera debut as Riccardo, while the soprano Katia R. was singing Amelia. Every serious student of opera backstage intrigue knew that they had been appearing together at opera venues world-wide for some time. She sang where he sang, and vice versa. Lovers yes, married yes, but not to each other. In the last act, he gets stabbed, falls back into his large elaborate chair, sings, gets up clutching his chest, sings some more, falls back into the chair, sings some more, well you get the idea. As expected this is a focal point of the entire show. All the computerized lighting from every direction is focused on him in the chair. Most of the rest of the stage is more dimly lit.

The position of movable props on an opera stage is precisely positioned by the director during rehearsals. When the director is satisfied, the stage hands mark the positions on the deck with bits of colored tape. All the props which will play when the curtain goes up are placed "on the marks" by the stage crew. Other props, such as the chair into which our tenor is about to fall back, are carried onstage and placed on the marks by a costumed super.

Sounds like a pretty easy job, get in costume, standby in the wings with the chair and when cued by the AD carry the chair onstage, put it down on the marks and step back in the shadows. Done it dozens of times – a piece of cake. Haah! Opening night when cued, I carried the chair onstage and tried put it on the marks just as I had been blocked to do. But when I got onstage, the soprano was standing on the marks, forcing the chair to be put down upstage of the marks. This left her basking in the light and the tenor to die in the shadow. Somehow I felt sure there would be hell to pay but the AD was on to what she had done and I was absolved.

Further ruminations on my part led me to conclude that all was not well with their affair.

The arcane world of opera singers, agents, and contracts is mostly beyond my ken, but suffice it to say that leading stars and leading roles are often booked many years in advance.

In 1979 Lyric had scheduled Puccini's *La Boheme* starring the very same Jose C. and Katia R. as Rudolpho & Mimi respectively.

Supers and chorus go into staging rehearsals well before the principals so we were pretty far into the schedule before we noticed the absence of our Rudolpho and Mimi. The other Bohemians, Marcello, Musetta and Schaunard were there rehearsing with us. Something was greatly amiss. As the story finally came out, their affair really had gone on the rocks big time, and it was one of those "I won't go there if he/she is there" which gave comfort to none but the lawyers.

Near panic – where in the world at this late date could top notch Mimi’s and Rudolpho’s be found who were free for these scheduled nine performances? At all? At any price? Mr X could sing one in October and one in December. Ms X was free for two in November, and so forth. The rehearsals had to proceed.

The second act opens with a large scene of New Years Eve in the Café Momus in the Latin Quarter of Paris. The five waiter supers each had specific blocking which was all the way down center stage working off of the five principals. Stand-ins were doing the blocking for the missing Mimi and Rudolpho. Last minute substitutes finally were found. The show opened on schedule and the scene went well. A special blocking rehearsal would be called for the five waiters each time there were new principals. Not a real problem until about half way through the run.

I was in the midst of a trial in the Federal Court in Chicago. There were many parties and lawyers almost filling the courtroom. I had a junior partner and a senior associate sitting with me at our counsel table. The trial was droning on one morning when the US Marshal in charge of the courtroom motioned that a message had come in for me. I stepped into the anteroom and saw the phone number calling was the rehearsal department of the Lyric. A special blocking rehearsal for the waiters had been called that afternoon at two, and it was important as both the Mimi and Rudolpho were newly arrived and in a car from the airport to rehearse for that evening’s performance.

Well old Judge X was a curmudgeon, but I had no choice. At an appropriate break I asked for a brief side bar meeting with his Honor. I approached him with my most serious face and muttered about “important matter just came up” and “needed my personal attention immediately” and “two other lawyers from firm there” etc. I bit my tongue before I would accidentally blurt out “nothing important likely to happen in your court judge.” He granted my request without further ado. The rehearsal proceeded with the two new bohemians and the show went on that night without incident.

Or so it seemed.

Next morning, just before the opening of court, I was told that Judge X wanted a minute with me in his chambers. Turns out that Judge and Mrs. X were entertained the evening before at a performance of *La Boheme* at the Lyric Opera. They had wonderful seats on the main floor in the fourth row. He paused for effect before he remarked on the amazing resemblance that I bore to one of the waiters in the Café Momus. He wore a sly smile as he indicated to the Marshall to lead me back into the courtroom. Fortunately the matter never again arose.

The *ne plus ultra* of my career was the 1981 production of Verdi’s *Macbeth*. It lives in my memory as the high point of Superdom.

At the casting call I was selected from the ranks of the supers to appear in the role which Verdi named Duncano. That translates as King Duncan in the English that Shakespeare used when he wrote the play Verdi set to music. Those familiar with the play will remember that King Duncan is killed by Macbeth in one of the Bard’s most grisly plots.

It is a super’s dream role. First, supers almost never get named in the libretto and the program. Verdi names the role in the libretto. Second, Duncano at the head of his retinue (of unnamed supers of course) crosses to center stage, acknowledges the obeisance of Lady Macbeth and her husband, exits stage right, is killed offstage, gets the \$2 and gets to go home early.

But wait, there’s more.

The *Chicago Sun-Times*, Friday, October 30, 1981 issue carried a headline:

***Macbeth* Grand-Music Drama with Powerful Performances  
Opera/ Robert C. Marsh**

“\* \* \* Macbeth and his lady are surrounded by a large cast in which strong performances can be achieved with a few bold strokes of characterization..\* \* \* Frank Little’s Macduff and William Cuncannan’s Duncano had just the right stance for the victorious forces of Justice. \* \* \*”

How can this have happened. Supers don’t ever get reviews. Perhaps Marsh had gotten too deeply into the sarsaparilla or something.

*Chicago Sun-Times*, Friday, November 6, 1981

Department of amplification:

\* \* \*Among those confused, at 1:00 a.m. last week, was this critic who should have named Macduff (Frank Little) and Malcolm (Gregory Kunde) as the victorious forces of justice. But I do applaud the players who had essentially mime parts and had to create a character primarily by gesture. These were William Cuncannan as Duncan and Nicolai Pliska as Fleance.”

My reviews and “amplifications” were bronzed, and hang in my study to this day.



A "Super" infused production of *Macbeth* by the Chicago Lyric Opera.





## Cliff Notes—

- Since our last publication 5 individuals interested in the arts have become new members of The Cliff Dwellers.

**Nonnie Lyketsos, Janette Tepas, Julie Carpenter,  
Paula D'Angelo, and Diane Chandler-Marshall**

we welcome them all and look forward to their active participation in Club activities and events.

- **ZIVIO!** To the Cliff Dwellers who have recently sponsored resident and trial members, **and ZIVIO** as well to the many members of this year's Artist in Residence class and the young members group who have turned out for "Meet and Greet" open houses like the recent event on Wednesday, May 3, with our neighbors who are residents of 310 S. Michigan along with some staff members of the School of the Art Institute.
- Program Chair Virginia Harding CD'08 is relinquishing her committee position. For years Virginia has filled the CD calendar with a spectacular variety of opportunities for members to enjoy and celebrate the Arts--both on and off the Cliff. Recently, she pointed out that "programming events is dependent on working with members who contribute interesting ideas for future programs and are willing to help put events together." Our monthly Club calendars and weekly Blasts speak to Virginia's wide-ranging imagination, her skills in coordinating entertaining and enlightening events for our membership, and her dedicated efforts in making The Cliff Dwellers an enjoyable place to spend our time and share our friendship.  
*Zivio, Virginia!* You have set the bar high.
- **Joan Pantsios CD'14 has accepted the position of Program Committee Chair.** She is looking forward to her new opportunity and encourages all members to continue contributing fresh ideas for programs and Club events.
- **The Book Club WILL meet at The Cliff Dwellers Saturday, May 27 to discuss *Empire of Deception*.**
- The Chicago Tribune reported on Sunday, Mar. 19 that Chester "Chet" Davis had died in Florida. He lived for years in Winnetka and followed me as Cliff Dwellers President, 1993 -1994. He received the Symphony eviction letter from Henry Fogel. 
- On March 28, 2017 Melvyn Skvarla died. Walker Johnson stated, "Melvyn provided yeoman service to the Cliff Dwellers as the director of the move from Orchestra Hall to the Borg Warner Space, 200 S. Michigan in 1994-95. He directed the move of such Cliff artifacts as the Shaw fire place and surrounds, paintings and documents, historic light fixtures, Gaur, and figured how to swing the Sullivan Mural through a window in Don's office to its present location opposite the elevators. Recently he has been the Univ. of Illinois Historic Preservation Architect in Urbana-Champaign for some 15 years."   
For more information Ctrl Click this link [Melvyn Skvarla](#).