

## The NEW YORKER feature on Largo

Check out the New Yorker magazine article from May 19, 2008

### LARGO NIGHTS

Dana Goodyear

A few days before the Super Bowl this past February, Benmont Tench, who has been playing keyboards with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers for more than thirty years, took a break from rehearsing, in Tempe, Arizona, for the game's halftime performance to send a text message to a chum in Los Angeles. "This is not Largo, my friend," he wrote, as practice fireworks went off around him. "It's fun, but I wish Sara was standing next to me hitting me with her bow. And Ellen."

The chum was Mark Flanagan, or Flanny, as his friends call him, who has owned Largo, a small music-and-comedy club on Fairfax, across from Canter's deli, since 1996. Sara is Sara Watkins, the twenty-six-year-old fiddle player from Nickel Creek, who, with her brother Sean, hosts a regular evening at Largo called the Watkins Family Hour. Tench is their pianist. The photographer Ellen Tunney, a petite woman with an orb of gold curls, is Largo's bartender.

The following Thursday, Tench was back at Largo, playing with Sara, Sean, Greg Leisz (pedal steel), and Gabe Wicher (fiddle), to a crowd of about sixty-five. They played some Watkins songs, and one by Tom Brosseau, a sweet, off-kilter singer-songwriter from North Dakota, who is Flanagan's tennis partner and often plays at Largo. After a bit, Sara said, "If Jon B. wants to come up and play with us on this song, he should."

From the back of the room, a tall, loping figure in a leather jacket, with thick dark hair and lively eyes set in a pale face, made his way across the floor, carrying a guitar: it was Jon Brion, a virtuosic musician, producer, and composer, who has had an always-sold-out show at Largo for a dozen years. Then Sara invited up another John--"lot of Johns tonight," she said--and it was John Paul Jones, the bassist from Led Zeppelin. There were whispers in the surprised audience. ("There was no way I was going to announce this," Flanagan said to me.)

They played a John Hartford bluegrass song, with Jones on bass and Brion on a nineteen-fifties Gretsch. Jones, fine-featured and distinguished-looking, smiled mildly as he played. When the song was over, another musician walked onto the stage: the session drummer Jim Keltner (Dylan, Lennon, Harrison, Clapton, Floyd). He sat down at the drum kit and put on a pair of dark glasses. Jones picked up his mandolin, and the group played an instrumental version of the Zeppelin song "Going to California." Keltner leaned back and cast his arm tenderly, like a fisherman. Jones held his mandolin snug to his chest, as if it were a wiggly baby and he had to concentrate to button up its coat. He was blushing with pleasure by the end.

"Nice boyfriends," Flanagan said to Sara when the show was over and the audience was reluctantly drifting out.

"That was the most ridiculous band," Brion said. "You couldn't hire that band, you couldn't afford that band, you couldn't get them together. By all accounts it shouldn't have happened."

Keltner went home; so did Jones. The others sat around till well past midnight, taking turns on Jones's mandolin, which he had left behind.

Flanagan is six feet two and husky, with wiry cinnamon-colored hair and a snub nose. He is a buoyant soul and a dead-

on mimic. (He calls his friends and does them, to them, on their answering machines.) His car is a marshmallow-colored Escalade, and he has three Triumph motorbikes. Under his protection, Largo has become a hothouse for musicians and comedians, and has encouraged hybridization of the two usually divergent strains. The comedian Zach Galifianakis first played the piano, now an integral part of his act, because there was one on the Largo stage. He invited the singer-songwriter Fiona Apple, whom he met at Largo, to sing his punch lines. She asked him to lip-synch to one of her songs in a music video. Then Kanye West, who has performed with Brion at Largo, saw Galifianakis's set, and wanted him to make his video, too. (Galifianakis shot it at his farm in North Carolina; West does not appear in it.) After Aimee Mann and her husband, Michael Penn, asked the Largo comic Patton Oswalt (the voice of Remy in "Ratatouille," among other things) to do their patter for them, they toured together. She recently made a music video featuring a young Largo comedian named Morgan Murphy. "Almost all of my friendships are a direct result of going to Largo, meeting these people, and trying to mix comedy and music," Mann told me. "Largo's the hub of my social life, really."

Tenacious D, Jack Black's band, bloomed at Largo; Flight of the Conchords played one of their first shows in America there. The director Michel Gondry has been known to come in and play drums. Paul Thomas Anderson, a friend of Flanagan's through Brion, Mann, and Penn--all of whom have written music for his films--has drawn many times from the Largo talent pool, casting performers like Oswalt, Paul F. Tompkins, and Mary Lynn Rajs kub. After Anderson wrote Philip Seymour Hoffman's part in "Boogie Nights"--a sad-sack, thwarted hanger-on in the porn scene--Hoffman went to Largo and met a creepy regular, who used to approach the artists, stroke their arms, and murmur, "Hiiiiii." "You'd feel this soft, gentle touch on the back of your shoulder and you knew you were done for," Anderson said. "Once Phil really sized him up, he got a handful of things from him." Even Flanagan has turned up in Anderson's movies, appearing in the opening moments of "Magnolia" as a British thug, and, fleetingly, in the angry-crowd scene near the start of "There Will Be Blood." Anderson is executive producer of "Largo," a film about the club and its performers, which Flanagan codirected with Andrew van Baal and which will premiere at the L.A. Film Festival, in June.

"I've never been to Flanny's actual place of residence, but in my head when I go to Largo I feel that I'm going to a dinner party at his house," Fiona Apple said. "All my friends are there. The audience is there, too, but they're almost like pigeons on the windowsill, looking in. I don't even think of it as Largo. I think of it as Flanny's place."

Early in the night, butterscotch Tiffany chandeliers glow dimly over the tables at Largo, but they go off when an artist takes the stage, leaving just the greasy, muted light cast by white votive candles in glass Mason jars. The waiters pour water from pitchers with no ice. Cell phones are forbidden, and there is no talking during the show.

The burgundy walls are lined with photographs of Flanagan's favorite singers, from Presley to Costello, and his favorite jazz musicians. There is a closeup of Miles Davis that Flanagan shot at a performance in Germany when he was sixteen. Near the bar is a trio of comedians: Buster Keaton, Marty Feldman, and Peter Sellers. Laretta Feldman, Marty's widow, and Anne Levy, Sellers's first wife, are two of Flanagan's good friends. (Laretta--a throaty-voiced bohemian with a museumlike house near Mulholland, where Sarah Vaughan once played piano--is rumored to be the intended audience for the shout-out in the Beatles' "Get Back.") Tunney, the bartender, who has worked at Largo for nearly a decade, told me that she was most startled not by Prince, or Madonna, or Paul McCartney, but when she looked up from pouring a glass of champagne for a guest of Laretta's and saw that it was Tim Curry. "Oh, darling, should I have told you?" Laretta said.

In a diffuse city, Largo has a nucleating effect. Tunney likes to introduce fans of a particular artist to one another. Flanagan told me he's been invited to some twenty weddings of couples who met there. It is a modest space--less than a hundred seats--and held together, Flanagan says, with duct tape and spray paint. Brion says, "Flanagan managed to create a world you can walk into and be immersed. Paris is like that--they let one designer build it. When you walk into Largo you're in somebody's vision." Anderson calls Flanagan a "benevolent dictator," albeit a stealthy one. "For the longest time, I didn't know Flanagan's birthday," he said. "He likes to operate like a ghost, like he's not there." Flanagan changes his shirt several times a night, and doesn't like to be photographed.

The Largo stage, a low platform covered with overlapping Oriental rugs and crowded with instruments and wires, occupies most of the wall that faces Fairfax; noises from the street drift in. The bar holds worn books with gold embossing, and a six of spades tossed from the stage by Ricky Jay. Flanagan has been looking for a bigger space for

years, and recently signed a lease on the historic Coronet Theatre, about a mile away, which has two hundred and eighty seats and a proper stage, as well as a smaller space that he plans to fashion as "Little Largo," burgundy walls and all. The first show at the new place will be in early June.

One winter night, Aimee Mann had a gig at Largo. She walked toward the stage with Flanagan behind her, like a watchful body man. (He guards some artists with special vigor; Mann is one, Apple is another. Of Brion, he says, "I have to hide him before the show. He'll be standing there by the kitchen, and there will be people waiting for him with film scripts.") Flanagan appeared onstage first. "Good evening, girls and boys. Welcome to Aimee Mann's clubhouse," he said quickly, and disappeared. Mann came out with a pianist and a bass player, and played a bunch of new songs from an album that will be coming out next month.

Glen Hansard, a Dublin musician who starred in "Once" and is an old friend of Flanagan's, slipped in and took a seat at the end of the bar. He was in town for awards season--the music from "Once" was nominated for two Grammys and won an Academy Award. After Mann's show, Flanagan took me through the kitchen and up a steep, rickety flight of stairs that leads to his office and the greenroom. The greenroom couch is leather, and, along with a pair of deep armchairs, came from the set of "Boogie Nights" (they belonged to the Burt Reynolds character). The walls are dark, and plastered with rock and jazz posters; the ceiling slopes, and is festooned with silver tinsel and little pink lights. It is layered, filthy, and historical--a fortress, a fantasy dorm room.

Mann sat in one of the chairs, a Guinness in her hand. Hansard--blue-eyed, with reddish hair and the naive but tired aspect of a child older than his years--perched on the arm of the chair opposite her. They were meeting for the first time, and Mann was giving Hansard advice about performing at the Oscars.

Hansard glanced furtively at Flanagan and said, "Hey, I was wondering if I couldn't go in for a bit of a lash while I'm here?"

"You want to play?" Flanagan asked. "Oh, yeah."

That's how most Largo shows get booked.

The loves of Flanagan's life are his girlfriend, Renee, whom he met at a coffee shop, and their one-year-old daughter, Mahalia. When she says "Da-da," she almost sounds English, which he finds disquieting. Flanagan was born Catholic in Belfast in 1964. He is the second child of four in a birth pattern that goes girl-boy-boy-girl--the first three at eighteen-month intervals. His father was a government bureaucrat and his mother was a nurse. When his friends used to call the house and ask for Flanagan, she would say, "There's a house full of 'em," and hang up. She was very pretty and outgoing; her people were publicans. At twelve, to earn money for a guitar, Flanagan worked as a busboy at his grandfather's bar, Lavery's Gin Palace, which is still in the family. Working there, Flanagan decided he wasn't interested in drinking, and he rarely does.

Lavery's, equally close to the Shankill Road (Protestant) and the Falls Road (Catholic), is unusual for having stood through the Troubles. To save the bar from a bombing attempt, Flanagan's great-uncle carried the explosive outside and was killed when it went off. When the church next door to the Flanagans' house was bombed, and its large metal cross caught fire and crashed through their roof, landing on the kitchen floor, the family decided to move to Sligo, a childhood home of William Butler Yeats. The view from their house was of Ben Bulbin; it was painted with the words "BRITS OUT." At eighteen, Flanagan entered a four-year degree program in medicine and psychology; he worked with autistic children, teaching them to sing along to his guitar.

In his early twenties, Flanagan says, he moved to Boston, with funding from the May Institute, to continue his work on autism. After three years, he decided that Boston was too cold, and he drove to L.A. He was taking some time off from his studies when a friend from Ireland told him that his brother was opening a bar and wanted help. Flanagan invested, and started booking the musicians. After a few weeks, he met Jon Brion. That night, Brion remembers, "we started talking about music. He was frightfully knowledgeable, but more than that he was clearly a music lover. Even some musicians I know are not music lovers. To this day, we can be watching a show, listening to a record, or seeing a movie together, and just at the moment I find I could really get lost in someone I look at him and he's grunting his approval."

"I like things that are thoughtprovoking, emotional, and have a sense of humor," Flanagan told me. "There's a streak of crazy in the best ones. When you work with very talented artists, it's a very fine line. I worked with autistic children for eight years. You see these similarities. They can tap into the muse so easily." He takes pleasure in the artists' quirks. "She's a complicated shadow, that one," he said, of one neurotic songwriter. Flanagan took over Largo in 1996, and decided that comedians would make a good contrast to the broody, brainy music. "When all the songs are about 'She's leaving, she's gone, she might come back for a while, but she's really leaving,' you need something to counteract it," he said. He asked Lisa Leingang, then a network development executive in Los Angeles and a Largo regular, to book comics for Monday nights. Leingang, who is now the vice-president of programming and development for CBS in New York, recently dug up a notebook that recorded all the Monday-night lineups from 1998; the list included Margaret Cho, Jeff Garlin, Janeane Garofalo, and Dana Gould, a onetime writer for "The Simpsons." Many of them--Sarah Silverman, Greg Proops, Nick Swardson--still perform there, along with a younger batch. Last year, Silverman hired Harris Wittels, a twenty-four-year-old comedian she saw at Largo, to be a writer on her television show.

Unlike most L.A. comedy clubs, which emphasize tight, perfected monologues and camera-readiness, Largo is known as a place for experimentation. "It's a safer, looser, pure performance space," Scott Landsman, an executive at Comedy Central, says. "But it can be hit-or-miss. You occasionally want to say, 'Come on, dude, could you not have worked it out a little bit in your bathroom mirror?'"

"Preparation was not necessarily the byword," Stephen Colbert, who appeared at Largo a few times in the late nineties, told me. "I don't know if the audience was especially welcoming, but it surely was forgiving." Sometimes, Zach Galifianakis says, "I'll say a joke that doesn't work, and Flanagan will be dying laughing in the back of the room, because no one else is laughing."

Careers are launched, or re-launched, there. In 1999, Jeff Garlin asked Leingang to give Larry David a spot on a Monday night. He hadn't done standup in years, and was working out material for an HBO special. They taped the Largo set and used it as part of the special, from which "Curb Your Enthusiasm" was born. Fred Armisen, a player on "Saturday Night Live," told me that when he moved to L.A., in 2000, he started going to Largo alone. "I met Flanagan and described to him what I do, characters and stuff. I was not on a TV show, I was nothing. And he put me on." At Largo, Armisen said, he first tried his deaf-comedian character, and perfected Fericito, the Venezuelan timbales player. When people ask him if he did a lot of standup starting out, he answers, "Pretty much only at Largo."

Largo inverts the hierarchy of Hollywood: flashing a business card from Comedy Central or Atlantic Records means you won't get in. Entourages are frowned upon, and there is no separate set of rules for celebrities. "He's horrible," I heard Flanagan say of a pompous movie director. "He comes with a group of people that have to get in because they're 'his' people--ugh." During a performance by an Australian rock singer, Flanagan says he had to silence Russell Crowe and a bunch of rowdy Australians, who were doing shots and talking through the set. They left in a huff, and one of them pushed over a candle on his way out. (Crowe denies the whole thing.) If you want a table, you must make a reservation, arrive at eight, and eat dinner. Colin Hay, the former lead singer of Men at Work, says, "You can have the chicken, or the chicken, or you can have that chicken twice baked." Otherwise, you can take your chances in the long line that stretches down the block from the club's front door and hope to get a spot in the back near the bar.

There is no "list," a policy that dates to Largo's early days, when Brion began to attract huge crowds and music-industry people kept calling and asking, trying to be put on it. Brion told me, "I said to Flanagan, 'What list? What's a list?' He said, 'That's how it's done in Hollywood--regular people pay ten dollars, and if you're on the industry list you pay five.' It's always struck me as funny that the people with the income expect to get in for less or for free. I said, 'Why don't we say,

If anyone asks the price, it's five dollars, and if you come in and say you're in the industry it's ten.' "

Zoe Friedman, a development executive whose parents started the Improv, in New York, said, "They don't treat industry people as if they're special. They could care less that I work at Comedy Central and used to work at Letterman. There are a lot of rules, which can be sort of annoying, but once you accept the rules, you sit down, have a nice meal with some friends, and you're committed to it, which is part of what's so satisfying about a night there." She added, "On industry nights at the Improv or the Laugh Factory, I see people that make me embarrassed to be in the industry. They're on their BlackBerries, or talking to the person behind them. I don't see that at Largo."

Comedians and musicians say that Largo has the best audiences in the city. "You know that saying about how you're performing for the comics in the back of the room?" Sarah Silverman said. "At Largo, the whole crowd feels that way."

Jon Brion is an eloquent autodidact; as an adolescent he was briefly placed in special-education classes, and he left high school as soon as he was of age. His father was the director of the Yale marching band. Brion taught himself piano by fiddling with the notes, and as a teen-ager he played backup for jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Benny Carter when they came to New Haven to perform in the public schools. Brion is still an instinctive musician. When he sits down at the beginning of a show, he says, he has no idea what he's going to play. "It starts with an abstraction, then the sound reminds me of a melody, then another melody." His performances are spirited, feverish, and often hammy. He thinks of himself as a funny musician, a quality that is enhanced by the hokey, cranky sound of the turn-of-the-century upright at Largo, which he and Flanagan bought from a Sunday school in Compton. Brion has removed the piano's front panel, to give him access to its strings.

On a cool, damp Friday night in late February, Brion walked through the back door of Largo, a suitcase in his hand and stubble on his face, two hours before his show. He was coming straight from the studio, wearing yesterday's clothes. His assistant was already there, tending to the eight guitars on a rack on the stage and checking the old amplifier and the mixing board. Flanagan was upstairs in his office, talking to Bobb Bruno, a musician who plays an electric drum pad while wearing a bunny suit, and Liam Finn, a son of Neil, of Crowded House, and a musician, too.

By ten minutes to nine, there were two hundred people outside the club, restless and cold. Some had been lined up since early evening. Music came on. Michael Griffee, the manager, shouted across the empty room, "Does that mean go?"

"Yeah, go, go!" Flanagan, who had come downstairs, said, and the first guests entered. Brion was still on the stage, his hair lank and in his face, fiddling with his keyboards: a Chamberlin and two small electronic keyboards perched on the piano. "Every week, I swear that next week I'm going to do an all-ukulele show," he said, and disappeared to the greenroom to get ready, just before Aimee Mann and Michael Penn came in through the back.

An hour passed. Griffee swooped down and surprised a customer who was using a BlackBerry, his chin lit blue as if by an underworld buttercup; Griffee told him to put it away. Flanagan stood near the kitchen doors listening to the thump-tap of Brion's feet through the ceiling above his head, as Brion warmed up in the greenroom with a guitar. Then he ducked into the sound booth to put on Artie Shaw, the Gramercy Five Sessions, which he does before every Jon Brion show.

Brion appeared, freshly shaved, wearing a clean shirt, a slender vintage silk tie, and a neatly buttoned leather jacket. Flanagan patted him gently on the back and hustled him to the stage. He sat straight-backed, looking almost Victorian, at the piano, and felt his way toward a ghostly tune. He raised his right arm and strummed the exposed piano strings, making them mewl.

"Let's have a request!" he called to the crowd after a while, and for the next several hours, racing from drum kit to keyboards to guitar, playing a part and recording it and letting it repeat on a loop, he gave them They Might Be Giants and Bob Dylan and Judy Garland--"Fuck it, I'm just going to play old standards, because that's what I feel like doing!"--and Cole Porter in the style of Les Paul, and, finally, in an experiment he was laughing about even as he pulled it off, "I've Got You Under My Skin" to the tune of "Strawberry Fields Forever." The jacket came off, the eyes rolled back, the hair became unkempt again; his cheeks were polished apples, his guitar a wayward dancing partner he had to dip to take charge of. Ellen Tunney leaned on her elbows at the bar, listening contentedly. Flanagan stood, backlit, by the kitchen doors, catching every note.