

The Art of the Fugue

"Lissen, son," said the old timer when he'd got his breath back, his face redder than momma's cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving, "Whadya think?"

Purcell scratched his head. "I dunno, pal, I really dunno." He looked at his notes and then looked back at the old guy sitting nervously dragging at a cigarette. "You're giving some names, yeah, you're giving some low-down - but what's the bottom line, huh?" Purcell shook his head and winked at Scarlatti. Scarlatti ducked his head. "Mebbe -" he went on, "Mebbe if we could kinda - catchem in the act, know what I mean?"

The old guy looked confused. "What else d'ya need? I'm an old man now, I can't be wearing da wire or such!" His voice rose to a whine, and he glanced from one cop to the other.

Purcell sighed. "Okay-dokey, tell you what, old timer. We'll go through this again." He made a real show of looking at his notes. "So there's all these Johns, right? What's with the Johns? John Doe, John Smith, what?"

"I told ya, it's da Joyman Johns Gang! Don't you guys know nuffin about nuffin? Check with Mr. Brady, he knows da Johns!"

"Mr. Brady?" asked Scarlatti, "J.P. Brady? Man, he's catching fish down at the Floriday Keys. We can't ask him nuthin'!"

"Phone him!" begged the old man, "Just phone him, tell him old Patches got some real good stuff for him on da Joyman Johns Gang. Tell him we cracked it this time!"

"Sorry, pal," said Purcell. "Like we say, Brady's gone fishin'. Can't help us now. So just tell us once more and then we're done here."

The old guy sighed.

"OK, so we got eight of dem no-goods in da Joyman Johns." He ticked them off on his fingers. "First off, there's da two old men, Mad Looey and JayCee. Came over from Joymany in da fifties, nuffin much doin', just a coupla stores down in da Bronx, ya know - sausages, cabbage, cakes. But dey worked hard, made der money. Mad Looey -"

"Hold on there, old timer" interrupted Purcell, flicking through his notes, "Who's this Mad Looey. You din't tell us about him till now?"

"You young guys, ya never lissen!" shouted Patches weakly. "I told ya - Johann Ludwig, dat's Mad Looey!"

"Okay, okay, Johann Ludwig," said Purcell, making a note. "Got that clear now."

"As I was telling ya, Mad Looey, he lost his wife in a shoot-out with Da Bohemian -"

"That'd be Georgie Böhm, am I right?" interrupted Purcell.

"Yeah, that's him," said the old guy, brightening up. "You're paying attention now, sonny! So Mad Looey, he ain't been right in da head after dat. You ask Mr. Brady about Mad Looey, son."

"Yeah, sure thing," said Scarlatti, "We ain't doin' that - we told ya already."

"You're making a big mistake, son. Den der's Looey's brother, JayCee. Dat's Johann Christoph, like I told ya before. Got dat? Okay, so JayCee, he's a bit weak in da head, kinda funny with da women, can't make da grade, know what I mean? So dose two, dey moved up in da Bronx back in da seventies, East 161st Street, ya know? Mixing with da Italians. Then along comes dat nephew of ders, Jay-Ess -"

Purcell held up his hand, checked his notes. "Hang on there - Jay-Ess - that'd be this Johann Sebastian guy, am I right?"

"Got it in one, Mr. Purcell. Dat Jay-Ess, he comes over from Yoorp in - let's see - 1991. Real tough guy - gold ear-rings, all dem mobile phones, all da fancy stuff. Sets up in Queens, takes on da Jamaicans. Starts out with his 'Toccata and Fugue' -"

"Hey, you watch your mouth there, old man! This ain't no speak-easy joint where you can mouth off like that!" Purcell was white-faced.

"No, sir, Toccata and *Fugue*. Dat's what Jay-Ess called it when he did a hit and run. Hit and run - Toccata and Fugue! Real piece of work."

Scarlatti nudged Purcell. "Ya know, Purse, I think I heard Brady talk about this guy once - this Jay-Ess. Maybe there's something in this?"

"Course there's sumfin' in dis!" shouted Patches. "Dis ain't just yackety-yack, ya know! Gimme another cigarette. Thanks, buddy. So Jay-Ess comes in, and he brings his family with him. Real bunch of low-lifes, I tell ya. Shoot you in da knee, then ask for payment, ya know? Dere's Seepy, he's da worst. Dat's Carl Philipp Emmanuel, in case you're wondering. Den, Jo-Jo, a real hard-case -"

"And that'd be - uh...Johann Christian?"

"Yeah, dat's him. Real nuts, dat guy. Always on your case, never leave ya alone. Jay-Ess give him a weapon, ya know: the *Ill-Tempered Cleaver*, he calls it. Man, you don't mess with dat guy, he's a psycho! Den dere's two more brothers - Freddy and Willi. Soft in da head, both dose guys, do anyfin' Jo-Jo tells dem. So anyway, dis past year, dey been moving in on my patch. Money for dis, money for dat. Dey gotta bag-man, Telly."

"Telly?" asked Scarlatti. "Like Savalas, that kinda Telly?"

"Yeah, pal, and a real dumb-ass. Sucks lollipops, da lot. Georgie Telemann's his real name. Came down from Chicago last year. Boy, what a jerk-off! Torched my hot-dog stand last month when I din't pay up."

"So what they up to, old timer?" asked Purcell. He wasn't exactly warming to the old guy, but something was sounding like a real lead here. Purcell saw his name on an office-door outa this. A big desk, a secretary mebbe...

"I told ya, Mr. Purcell. They're after da burger business in Queens! All of it - burger-joints, hot-dog stands, French fries, drive-thrus, da lot. Old timers like me, we can't do it no more. Look at me - came over from Cuba in fifty-two, with nuffin on my back, worked my nuts off - and for what? All for dat Joyman Johns to take it all offa me! It ain't right, Mr. Purcell, it just ain't right!"

"Okay, okay, old man, take it easy." Purcell patted Patches' arm. "Say, Scarlatti, why don't you get Patches here a cup of that nice coffee? Looks like he could do with summin' strong."

Grinning and winking, Scarlatti went off to the coffee-machine. Purcell gave the old man another cigarette and checked his notes.

"Okay, now it's not just you that them Johns guys are after, ain't that right?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Purcell. All da old guys like me - we all been chased offa da streets, you know? What about Diddy the Dane? - that's old Mr. Buxtehude, over at Stuyvesant - he's afraid to step outa his front-door now, says he won't share da sidewalk with scum like Jo-Jo and Jay-Ess. Last time he sees dem, he ends up on da floor, black, blue and orange all over. Just like da New York Mets, but worser. Jeez! - and what about Wally Walther? - last time I saw him, he was drinking hooch outa paper-bags in a alley between Jackson and Roosevelt." Scarlatti came back in with three coffees. Purcell liked his black and sweet. "Thanks, pal," said Patches. "Hey, but don't talk to me about Two-Hands Handel!" The old man put his hands to his temples and groaned. "Ya know about Two-Hands, don't ya?"

"Hey," said Scarlatti, waving his coffee at Purcell, "That's the guy who tried to mug the DA, ain't it?"

"Sure, that's the guy. Real fruit-cake, that one!" Purcell shook his head, like he was sorrowful.

"Fruit-cake? Nothing!" said Patches, thumping his coffee down on the table. "Two-Hands was wanna da good guys. Seepy pushed him too far, threatened his wife and kids, ya know? We old guys, we ain't got no time for dat! Dat's sleazeball stuff!"

"Well, he's doin' time now, is Handel, fifteen to twenty."

“Yeah, dat’s right! And while he’s in da stir, Jay-Ess and Seepy and Jo-Jo and Telly are cruising da streets like dey own da place! Ya know, Two-Hands had a real fine burger joint down Astoria Boulevard. Real fine, I tell ya! Nice waitresses, quiet customers, best coffee dis side of Havana. Now what? - you go down der tonite and whadd’ya see? ‘Brandenburgers’ - bright lights, high prices, no class, no class at all! ‘Brandenburgers’, I ask ya! What’s wrong with hamburgers? Is dat right, Mr. Purcell? I ask you, is dat right?”

“No, I reckon it ain’t right, Patches,” agreed Purcell. He scratched his chin. “But I gotta have something to go on, something that the DA can use, ya know?”

Patches looked at him a minute. “I got summin,” he said slowly, looking round like there’s guys with heat in the corners, waiting to take him down. “But I want witness protection, I gotta vamoose!”

Purcell drew his breath in sharply. He whistled, cocked an eyebrow at Scarlatti. “Witness Protection, huh? - that’ll come hard. I need to talk to the Feds about that one. Can’t make no promises.”

“Well, I trust you, Mr. Purcell. And I’m gonna tell you about a place they got goin’ down below Queensboro Bridge. You gotta get da Vice down der - Jay-Ess set it up, some kinda club with women from Russia, Prussia - I dunno. Drink, drugs, strippers, counterpoint, the lot. It’s called ‘*The Art of the Fugue*’...”

Purcell raised his eyebrows, whistled long and loud, snapped shut his note-book. “Okay, that’s it! I’m not standing for that kinda low-life in my precinct. Scarlatti! Call up Gene Rameau in Vice, let’s get down to Queens and close that place down.” He turned back to Patches. “Mr. Elbel, you stay right here. You and me, we’ll cut some kinda deal for this, sure as my name’s Henry Purcell!”