ANITA BROWN JAZZ ORCHESTRA

This is a family story that is both difficult to share and difficult to truncate. If you are so inclined to learn about the inspiration for this piece that is so dear to my heart, I have provided as brief a backstory as possible:

BACKSTORY: *Hart Island Suite*

As my ailing mother lay in a hospital bed in her living room as a Hospice patient, I began asking questions about a little-discussed story; the wrenching experience of my parents' full-term, stillborn, unnamed daughter, one year my senior. In this conversation I learned that no birth or death record had ever been provided to my parents by the City of New York and that the hospital staff had facilitated her public burial in the NYC *potters field*. It was common practice during that time for hospital personnel to whisk such a baby away from the parents as swiftly as possible. My mother's doctor advised that they go to a comedy movie to help Mom forget about the experience.

Neither of us knew where this *potters field* was located. My mother's long-carried burden was obvious as she discussed it with me, particularly because they couldn't afford a proper burial at that time. She referred to the *potters field* as "that terrible place." This lit a fire under me to obtain records and locate the resting place of my older sister.

From online searches I learned that the NYC public cemetery is a small island called *Hart Island*. It sits in the Long Island Sound, east of City Island, overlooking Sands Point and Great Neck in Nassau County, Long Island.

After learning that I had made application for her Death Certificate to the *wrong* NYC office, I happened upon the name Melinda Hunt, president of The Hart Island Project, in my continued online searches. Melinda advised me of the correct NYC agency and to resubmit my application. She explained that while Hart Island had been off limits to visitors until very recently, once a family member possesses the death certificate of a family member who rests there, the family is permitted to visit by appointment on a Saturday.

Having secured my older sister's death certificate in late 2016, I first visited Hart Island in a snowstorm in January 2017. To my great surprise, I found it to be profoundly beautiful and serene. With the quiet of the falling snow I stood on a high plateau at the north end of the island, where I now know there are markers from my sister's era, overlooking the eastern shoreline, listening to the waves lapping against the rocks and a lone buoy bell sounding synergistically. As I took one step forward towards the plateau's edge, approximately 200 Canadian geese took off simultaneously in southbound flight.

At the conclusion of this visit I spoke with my mother on the phone, describing my experience and conveying that as a family we could not have afforded a more beautiful resting place; that she is at the water's edge in one of the most beautiful spots in NYC. The relief in her voice was evident as she replied, "Thank you so much for doing this. A huge thing just lifted from my shoulders that I didn't even know was there. I feel so much better." She suggested I name her posthumously. Together we decided on ***Julie.*** In the hours that followed I sketched some musical ideas and considered the thoughts I'd documented in the small notebook I took on my snowy visit.

In June 2017 I met Melinda Hunt for another trip to Hart Island, during which I composed a melody and copied the verses from the island's lone Headstone. During that visit Melinda informed me that legislation had been proposed by the City Council to transfer the jurisdiction of Hart Island from Department of Corrections to Department of Parks. She intimated that if and when that happens, any celebratory event that may be planned should include a composition from my pen, and that through The Hart Island Project's 501(c)(3) she could submit an application to NYSCA on my behalf for a grant to write such a piece.

With permission from my mother I agreed and began composing. I knew that it would be a slow process for me. As my mother's health deteriorated I worked diligently over the summer so as to be significantly prepared should the grant come through, hoping she would be able to hear some of it. In August 2018 I was able to read through my first formidable sketches with the band and she and I listened to recordings of those reading sessions together.

In late December Melinda notified me that through The Hart Island Project's application to NYSCA, I was awarded a ***2019 NYSCA Individual Artist Composer Commission*** to compose ***Hart Island Suite.***

Mom was able to hear the bulk of Hart Island Suite after a reading session of preliminary sketches that I scheduled for her benefit. On March 3, 2019, mom passed away quietly in her home surrounded by family.

Hart Island Suite is dedicated to the sister I never met, posthumously named *Julie,* and our mother, pianist Phyllis Brown. It was completed in late December 2019 with minor edits continuing through January 2020. Its first rehearsal was scheduled for March 16, 2020. Due to the pandemic I was forced to cancel it on Friday, March 13, 2020, the day *live music* stopped.

It is my intention to provide a funerary ritual and celebration for my older sister, ***Julie,*** and to extend my heartfelt sentiment to the one million souls who rest on Hart Island, and the family members of all victims of the COVID-19 pandemic who were denied this important ritual.

Please join ***Anita Brown Jazz Orchestra*** for the premiere of ***Hart Island Suite*** on August 26th, my parents' anniversary, at Lyndhurst Mansion in Tarrytown, NY, presented by **Jazz Forum Arts.**