

That Ship has Sailed

by [Alan Swyer](#) (August 2024)



Sheridan Theatre (Edward Hopper, 1937)

As he'd done every day for the last couple of weeks, Steve Roth woke up before dawn on a Tuesday morning, then promptly focused on a mental checklist of all that still needed to be done to ready his new documentary for festivals with rapidly approaching deadlines.

Editing, which honed sixty hours of interview footage into two hours of coherent storytelling, was now completed, pending approval from two key people: his Fair Use attorney and the woman handling music clearances. Color correction was underway, marking the exciting moment when the work-in-progress suddenly rose from murky lo-res to the glistening

high-resolution version the public would see. That explained why, after wolfing down some yogurt and showering, Steve would soon be fighting traffic from Santa Monica to Burbank for the new day's session. Once that week-long process was completed, it would be time to address the sound—a sweetening and equalizing undertaking that was crucial since the interviews were filmed in a wide array of locations, often under less-than-ideal conditions. Finally, once the archival video clips and photos Steve included were cleared by the Fair Use lawyer—or if need be replaced—then the songs he hoped to use were licensed—or substituted for—it would be time to cut a two-minute trailer.

Though proud of the subject matter of his recent documentaries—Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, and boxing, plus an award-winning look at the breakthroughs in the treatment of diabetes—Steve's newest film swiftly became the one nearest to his heart. Having long joked that his life had been saved by Black music, which he first heard from the jukebox at the soul food restaurant in Newark that provided a refuge from his unhappy childhood home, it was a joy to explore the great but under-appreciated sounds that emerged from the Third and Fifth wards of Houston. Despite the recent Elvis film, Steve was stunned at how few people knew that it was Big Mama Thornton who did the original "Hound Dog," as well as a record covered by Janis Joplin called "Ball & Chain." Even fewer were aware that Duke and Peacock were great Black-owned record labels well before Motown. Or that Houston's thriving club scene, which spawned giants such as Big Mama, Lightnin' Hopkins, Clifton Chenier, Gatemouth Brown, and Albert Collins—and attracted the likes of Ray Charles and James Brown—was largely destroyed by integration. Little wonder that while interviewing old-timers from that scene—among them Jewel Brown, who sang with Louis Armstrong, plus Grady Gaines and Milton Hopkins, who backed up Little Richard, then Little Willie John, and finally Sam Cooke—the project quickly became a labor of love.

Once his early morning checklist was completed, Steve peeked at his texts, making sure there were no red flags or crises. Then, scrolling the mass of overnight emails, professional and otherwise, he was stunned to find one from an unlikely source: an ex-neighbor named Jerry Resnick.

Steve was in the habit of receiving calls and emails from voices from the past: people he'd known at different stages of his life who were planning a trip to California, or had seen his name on a film. But this was different. For a long moment, he considered reading the email, then decided that business superseded curiosity.

Thanks to Bluetooth, Steve fielded several calls while driving, only to discover upon arriving that the color correction system had crashed. Instead of relocating to a coffee house, he promptly set up camp in the reception area so as to respond to work-related texts and emails. Upon learning a half-hour later that the system was still down, he at last glanced at Resnick's email, misspellings and all: *If you ever want to speak with me again I miss our talks and dont hold many grudges.*

Before Steve could contemplate whether or not to respond, he was informed that the system was once again functioning.

When Randy, the chief colorist, announced that he needed to run an errand at lunchtime, Steve was relieved to have some time to himself. Bypassing the trendy restaurants nearby, he grabbed a table at a taco joint. There, while nibbling on chips, salsa, and a chicken burrito, he re-read the email from Resnick, then allowed his mind to drift.

It was proximity that initially drew the two of them together when Steve's family moved just a few houses away from the

Resnicks. Though at school their paths rarely overlapped—Steve hung with the ballplayers, most of whom were Black; Resnick with a group never mistaken for the in-crowd—it was the need for spending money that initially forged a bond between them. Together they created a weather-based revenue source that lasted all the way through high school. In the spring, summer, and fall, they mowed lawns, trimmed hedges, and washed cars throughout the neighborhood. In the winter, their money came from shoveling snow and doing odd jobs.

Those ties ended when, as Steve headed off to college, his family bought a house in a suburb a half-hour away. With Resnick commuting to a local school, and Steve, two years later, flying to France to spend his junior year there, only a once-in-a-blue-moon phone call kept the ex-neighbors from falling completely out of touch.

Once again it was geography that brought them together. Determined to find a path into the film industry, Steve, with gumption galore but little in the way of contacts or funds, relocated to Los Angeles. Subletting a tiny apartment in a part of town known for police sirens and nightly gunshots, he was struggling to make ends meet as a substitute teacher and teaching conversational French one evening a week at a junior college, when Resnick started showing up with ever-increasing frequency.

After talking his way into a sales job at a company making oil filters, Resnick convinced his bosses to expand their horizons beyond the East Coast. That meant persuading them that he should be the one to fight for the lucrative Southern California market.

Thanks to Resnick's frequent trips, plus his expense account, the two ex-Jerseyites ate extremely well while also reestablishing the bond between them.

As weeks turned to months, then months to years, Steve was

continually stunned by the advances in Resnick's career. Thanks to jive, jargon, and bluster, he rose quickly from salesman to marketing whiz, shedding not merely his Jersey accent, but also his high school flame, Maggie, who in record time went from Mrs. Resnick to the former Mrs. Resnick.

Though his get-togethers with Resnick were entertaining, Steve was dismayed by the emergence of a chameleon-like trait. When Resnick wed an interior decorator named Rachel, then leased an apartment on Manhattan's Upper Eastside, suddenly he became Mr. New York City, self-styled arbiter of everything trendy.

More alarming for Steve was that after the second Mrs. Resnick gave birth to a daughter, Julie, then to another, Joy, Resnick managed to infiltrate a crowd of coke-fueled scene-makers who valued gossip column attention over all else.

By then, Steve had fallen for and married a woman named Molly, who illustrated children's books. Soon they started a family—first came a son named Greg, then a second, Gary. As a result, it was hard for him not to be chagrined when Resnick left Rachel and their girls to run off with an equestrian named Francesca. Their wedding, for which Steve chose not to fly east, seemed to define the new Resnick, taking place on horseback.

The next time Resnick hit the Coast, gone were the affectations of a Manhattan scene-maker, replaced by the mannerisms and speech of the landed gentry.

Now a marketing consultant with a new suite of offices in Midtown Manhattan, plus a manor, complete with stable, on Long Island, Resnick had attained heights that no one from his past would have dreamed possible.

Though not on the same order of magnitude, Steve by then had achieved a measure of success as a screenwriter. First, thanks to an agent named Marvin Sachs, whom he met through a weekly Saturday morning basketball game, came the sale of a semi-

autobiographical tale about growing up white in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Newark. That led to an assignment on a biopic about one of the early white rock & rollers. Yet another commission followed, enabling Steve and his family to buy a small house in the Hollywood Hills.

When Resnick's third marriage fell apart, it was to the man he dubbed his "homie" that he immediately turned. First came an extended trip to LA, during which he repeatedly—and often drunkenly—stated that Steve was the only one who always had his back. That led to what Steve dubbed the "hot line"—phone calls that began on a daily basis, then rose to two, three, or four times a day.

Sometimes Resnick was in need of emotional support. Other times, guidance. Then there were calls where Steve lightened Resnick's mood with jokes, dirty or otherwise.

Late one Sunday night, more desperate than ever, Resnick urged Steve to answer a simple question: "What," he begged Steve, "is my problem?"

"Maybe you just like wedding cake," joked Steve.

"Funny," acknowledged Resnick. "But I feel like there's something I just don't know."

"Really want me to fill you in?" teased Steve.

"Please!"

"The world today isn't the world of our grandparents."

"Meaning?"

"You don't have to get married to get laid."

After several seconds of silence, Resnick laughed. "You're the only one," he stated, "who makes me feel better."

"But it might help," Steve added, "to figure out who you are,

instead of who you keep trying to be.”

“Ouch!” moaned Resnick playfully.

In the aftermath of that conversation, instead of alternating between hand-holding and therapy sessions, the calls became opportunities, as Steve began to see it, for Resnick to star in his own movie.

Though occasionally amused by Resnick’s tales of adventures and misadventures, more and more Steve found the incessant calls burdensome. That they were time-wasters became even more of a problem when, due to the vicissitudes of the movie business, Steve found himself in a pickle. Though aware that there were inevitable ups and downs in every screenwriter’s career, it was still painful that suddenly no calls were coming in, except from Resnick. Not from Marvin Sachs or other people at the agency that represented him, nor from producers, studios, networks, or streaming services like Netflix.

Compounding Steve’s distress was his grim awareness about the status—or better yet, plight—of screenwriters. Even when working, which was never a given, their scripts often wound up disappearing into what was known as “development hell.” Worse, they were constantly reminded of being “only the writer,” “merely the writer,” and “nothing but the writer” until the awful moment when suddenly they were no longer the writer.

The possibility of making a qualitative career leap came when Steve had lunch on a Monday with a producer name Pete Orens. Lamenting the absence of cause and effect in his life, Orens suggested that instead of waiting for permission from some production entity, the two of them should come up with a film they could make on a modest budget.

“How about a documentary?” suggested Steve.

“On?”

"The Latinization of baseball both on the field and in the stands."

"I love it!" screamed Orens. "Let's do it!"

That led to a series of meetings in which Steve proposed a series of trips. The first would encompass Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela, Panama, and the Dominican. Next, Spring Training in Arizona and/or Florida. Then, hopefully, Cooperstown at the time of the next Hall of Fame inductions.

"Won't that cost a fortune?" worried Orens over coffee on a Thursday afternoon.

"Not if it's just me, a camera guy, and a sound man flying coach," responded Steve. "Or if need be, just me and a cameraman."

"Know what?" gushed Orens. "I'm gonna make it happen. We're gonna fucking do it!"

Despite his fear of being let down, Steve walked on air for the next few days. Then, to his dismay, Orens vanished. That meant radio silence except for robocalls about extending his car's warranty, plus more and more untimely intrusions from Resnick.

While getting ready for bed one Saturday night, Molly, sensing her husband's exasperation, finally asked why he put up with the calls, many of which resulted in marathons. Steve responded with a shrug. "Shared history?" he offered. "A goofy sense of loyalty? Curiosity?"

Steve's frustration diminished only when Resnick mentioned a new business predicament. "I'm being burned!" Resnick announced to Steve early one Thursday morning. "Me and the guys I'm repping are getting fucked."

Resnick went on to explain that during the days, weeks, and months that he'd been chattering endlessly about his personal

problems, he and a professor from Cal Tech had been hawking technology that made computers not merely run faster, but also with significantly less noise. Convinced that as a salesman he was the slickest of the slick, Resnick failed to consider that someone, somewhere, might be slicker. That, he unhappily acknowledged to Steve, proved to be the case. A computer giant maker entered into negotiations to acquire the technology—or so Resnick thought. It wasn't until the due diligence dragged on forever and a day that he and his partner began to suspect they were being played. Still, only when all communications ended abruptly did it dawn on them that their technology had likely been reverse-engineered.

Worse, no other company manifested any interest whatsoever. That, Resnick sadly deduced, meant that there was likely a consortium, with the companies sharing the purloined technology.

“Is there a movie in this?” Resnick asked Steve in desperation.

“Probably,” Steve replied. “But first there should be a book.”

“What kind?”

“Muckraking.”

“Like?”

“Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. *The Insider*, which exposed the tobacco industry. *Unsafe At Any Speed*.”

“Can you do it?”

Steve nodded. “With the proper research, access, and support.”

“What kind of support?” asked Resnick.

“Bucks.”

Resnick pondered for a moment. “You really think it could

spawn a movie?"

"Absolutely."

"That could make some money?"

"Yup."

Resnick reflected. "Think it might help in a court of law?"

Steve nodded. "As well as in the court of public opinion."

Resnick smiled. "This just might be the answer we need."

"We?"

"Me, my partner, and our investors," answered Resnick. "And by the way, that's where we'd get your money—from the investors I've brought in."

The post-lunch color correction session was the perfect antidote to the time Steve spent ruminating about Resnick. Since he and Randy had chosen to create a template for each of the people interviewed, they started the afternoon with C.J. Chenier, son of the King of Zydeco, Clifton Chenier. Next came another larger-than-life character, Billy Gibbons from ZZ Top. After a short break, the day's efforts concluded with a wonderful but largely unknown singer named Diunna Greenleaf.

Not until he was fighting bumper to bumper traffic on his trip home did Steve's thoughts drift once more toward his on-again-off-again relationship with Resnick. That led to the memory of a conversation with Molly one night after their kids were in bed.

"Know how I've been worrying about money?" Steve said to her. "It looks like something's coming through."

"TV?" offered Molly. "Film? Cable?"

"Resnick."

"That," said Molly, "requires an explanation."

"He's involved in something that begs for a book—and probably a movie afterward."

"To be written by you?"

Steve nodded.

"Forgive me for asking," said Molly, "but who's paying?"

"He's got investors."

"For real?"

"He's even reached out to Rich Waldman."

"Your lawyer?"

Steve nodded.

"I guess that's something," said Molly.

"But you're dubious."

"It doesn't matter what I think."

"To me it does," asserted Steve. "But for the record, Resnick's not as bad as you think."

Molly grimaced. "So it was okay to walk out on his wife and kids?"

"Still—"

"And get married a dozen times?"

"It's not a dozen."

“Yet,” said Molly.

As the negotiation progressed, Steve immersed himself deeper and deeper into Resnick’s world, learning about the technology, the interactions with the computer giant, as well as getting acquainted with a Who’s-Who of the characters—the good and the not-so-good. At times that meant interrogating Resnick or his Cal Tech partner, Chad Melnick. Then there were the inquiries that Steve, posing as an investigative reporter, made to people in different facets of the computer world.

Depending on the day, the process ranged from exhilarating to informative, from frustrating to surprising. But the discovery of just how much theft and espionage perpetrated by the corporate giants and their legal teams went unpunished due to wars of attrition was above all deeply disturbing.

That realization, however, was not all that troubled Steve. Though long aware of Resnick’s chameleon-like tendencies, what he hadn’t expected was his complete embrace of the ideology shared by right-wing plutocrats. It was distressing when Resnick tried to lecture him about the benefits of trickle-down economics. It was worse when that led to a rant about the need to privatize public schools, which drew a reminder from Steve that they managed to do well as products of the system he was disparaging. But when Resnick starting bragging about contributions to the NRA, Steve finally had enough.

“Who in hell do you think the NRA represents?” Steve asked brusquely.

“Proud gun owners like me,” Resnick stated proudly.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Steve responded.

“Who do you think they represent?” demanded Resnick.

“The manufacturers!”

“What’s next?” hissed Resnick after a moment of silence. “That

you're okay with BLM?"

"You bet your ass. But what's next from you? That global warming's a hoax? That it's their own fault that some people are poor? That all of us shouldn't be in it together?"

"Jesus!" hissed Resnick. "Next you'll probably tell me that you liked that Occupy horseshit years ago."

"As a matter of fact, I did," replied Steve, emphasizing his point by hanging up.

Steve was still fuming a couple of minutes later when a call came in from Rich Waldman, who wondered whether Steve had any news from or about Resnick.

"That's just what I was hoping to ask you," Steve responded.

"Not a single word," the lawyer stated. "No calls, texts, emails, or smoke signals in close to two weeks."

"And where did it stand then?"

"Much too amorphous for my taste."

"So what's your take?" asked Steve.

"More importantly," said Waldman, "what's yours?"

"Seems pretty clear it's over," acknowledged Steve with a sigh.

"My sense, too," agreed Waldman.

Once that call ended, Molly approached her husband with a worried look on her face. "You okay?" she asked.

"Poorer, maybe, but yeah."

"That's all that matters," said Molly. "It's not like we're out on the street. And something'll happen."

"Hopefully."

"But can I ask a question?"

"Sure," said Steve.

"Are you surprised?"

"About Resnick? Not really."

"And like I said, something'll happen."

Something did indeed happen just two days later: an unexpected call from Pete Orens. "I've got it!" he proudly proclaimed.

"Got what?"

"Enough for us to make the Latin baseball documentary."

"No shit?"

"No shit!"

By the time he reached home from Burbank, Steve realized how lucky he was. Had Resnick come through, he might still be going through periods of being only the writer, merely the writer, and perhaps no longer the writer. Instead, thanks to his Latin baseball film and the doors it opened, he had achieved something rare in the film business: cause and effect. And as one documentary led to another, continuity. Plus, instead of vying for assignments, or searching for stories that might sell to a studio or cable entity, with each and every film he was dealing with subject matter that meant something to him.

After greeting his wife and sons, Steve took the dog for a long walk. Only when he returned home did he reply to Resnick with an email that expressed his feelings: *That ship has sailed.*

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Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions. His newest production is called "When Houston Had The Blues."

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