

May 31st

Aboard the ICE, Gent to Köln

So, a blog?

I've always had problems with blogs, but this trip itself is so interesting that it seems a pity not to start catching impressions as they occur, even though I'm starting pretty dang late in the game. Yet, not really that late, only a bit more than halfway through the entire 2.2 month trip. I started on April 22, 2008, truckin' a roundabout route across the U.S. of A., and today is only May 31st, and I'm barely in Europe. The flight home (to Bangkok) isn't until June 27th. So the earlier impressions are still fairly fresh, and maybe I can catch a bit more of the freshness by calling them as they come from here on out.

First, let me say I've had problems with the concept of a blog ever since the things came into being. My biggest difficulty with the form is that, unless you, the reader, start from the beginning and read it as a serial, á la *The Pickwick Papers*, or for that matter, *Tom Sawyer*, you will usually find yourself joining me in the middle of the story, missing all the preparation I'll be expecting of you. This means that as a writer I have to make some otherwise unnecessary choices: do I

1. Write with this in mind, clarifying references to earlier events with brief synopses or—how weird would this be?—reference notes,
2. Fergeddabouddit, leave you to figure it out by yourself,
3. put some kind of disclaimer at the top of every new page, maybe a link to the first page, or
4. write each installment as an independent, stand-alone piece?

The real problem is that I have to write frontwards to backwards, but the series is run starting with today, and goes back to the beginning, right? Backwards!!! Confusing!!!

OK, anyhow I'm gonna try to do it. This is the first installment, and since the trip to Gent is freshest in my mind (I'm now traveling from Gent/Ghent/Gand, anyhow Belgium/Belgique) to Cologne/Köln in

Germany/Deutschland, I'm going to start here, no matter how in the middle of things it seems, and backtrack.

By the time I get to the end of this first posting I'll have gone from here all the way back to the beginning of the story, and then all the way back, through this part again, then on to the end of the trip. So, begin!



Gent - Castle of the Counts

Just spent a couple of wonderful days and nights with friends Nik and Nancy Phelps, who moved to Gent from San Francisco two years ago. Where to start with that? Just describing Nik and Nancy, to those who don't know them, is really hard. Long-haired and lanky Nik, with whom I've played gigs ranging from Easter services to big band jobs, is the rare sort of player who can handle just about any wind instrument, from oboe to french horn, and makes his living writing scores for animated movies. But that's only the bare beginning. Nik & Nancy, as a couple, were a San Francisco institution for, I dare say, decades. Everyone was invited to their Christmas and Thanksgiving parties, which gave extended meaning to the terms "extended family" and

"holiday celebration."

Everyone asked them (much as I was asked before I left!) how they could possibly leave the Bay Area. Well, if you see them, it's pretty obvious how. They've got this great little 2-story flat hidden behind an archway and smack dab in the center of this ancient city, just steps from great coffee and chocolates, hundreds of little stores and restaurants, even from a castle, on narrow, winding alleys that pour into a wide cobblestone plaza fronted

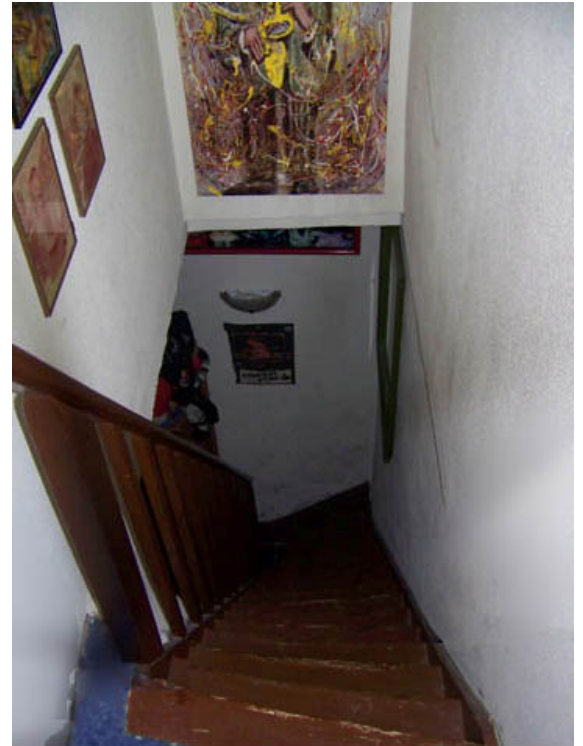


Anybody would know whose house . . .

kept drifting in. Louise sat down, poured a glass of Chateau Neuf du Pape, and asked Nik & me to play, so we took out horns and wailed. And . . . the inevitable, my curse, I suppose . . . I had to sing . . . who woulda guessed . . . and a capella, too . . . “Wonderful World.” It follows me everywhere, but you already

by cafés and restaurants. They’ve melded into a matching eccentricity with the locals, and walking around town with them I felt at home, too. Although we’re in Belgium, the language here is fiercely Flemish, no French, s’il vous plait, even German is more welcome. But just about everyone we hung out with spoke near-perfect English.

There was Louise, the upper-crust, multilingual black lady from Curacao who now runs a jazz-oriented restaurant on a square near the castle . . . we (four of us including Erica Zweig, another friend visiting from SF) descended in and had some incredible food (Louise’s jambalaya is to die for) & vibrant conversation, during which more friends



Nik ‘n’ Nancy’s vertigo stairs

knew that. Afterwards we bopped off to a local trad jazz club that was, I kid you not, standing-room-only packed for these pretty decent New Orleans-style players. We sat outside, in the cool, jabbering, mercifully shielded from the banjo rack-a-rack, and there was unselfconscious hash smokin goin on to complement the Delerium Tremens beer that is all the rage here. Following that, till late at night, we went to Nico’s bar, just a few doors up from my hosts’ place. There we jammed on Django tunes with Nico on guitar till 2AM+. Nancy kept saying, “this is just a normal night for us around here.” Well, hmmm. It was great, but if they do that every night, they have some energy. Man! But fun!

After another day of sightseeing, mostly hanging out with Erica, and another night on the couch in the front room, I got on the train to visit Neil, my lead trumpet playing/acupuncturist buddy from Marin and S.F. days. All about that later in the blog series.



The plaza around the corner

See, this is expected blog problem: without meaning to, I've got us in a bind here. Just finished this thing about Gent that I started DAYS ago, and I'm already leaving Oslo for Amsterdam after 3 days here and one in Köln. When do I tell that story? Now? Or do I now go back to the beginning, April 21st, departing Berkeley with a wild mix of books, supplies, and furnishings for my East Coast son and daughter piled into the back of the Toyota pickup, headed for what amounted to 6000 miles of adventure across that still-great land of ours, seeking out the best friends I never get to see, doing up the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and hangin with my amazing cousin in the Ozarks and . . . ? You get the picture. Well, just doing my best, at least I've dribbled out these few beads of consciousness, hopefully worth sharing, and I hope someday soon this will find itself in its proper place in a blog. My first attempt, installment, whatever, we'll just have to see. Let me find a place for this on the net, then I'll put each piece in a pdf file, like this, and send it to yas, at the same time posting it in typically confusing blog-order out in cyberspace. Okay, thassall for now, write if you get work, hang by your thumbs, you know the drill. Miss you all!



A world of bikes: why can't the U.S. do this?

Till soon, I hope,
-Peter M.