

“Felonious Jazz” by Bryan Gilmer
Excerpt for Bull City Rising

The office trailer blocked the rays from the construction site’s single, anemic security light, so Leonard had to feel around in the dark to find the heads of the screws. The Phillips bit slipped satisfyingly into place. The tool screamed and then stopped, screamed and stopped – a variation on the siren sequence of notes from the last track, he realized – until he’d undone two rows of screws. At 2:30 a.m., no one was around to hear the serious racket he was making, and there had only been three sets of headlights on Rocky Falls Boulevard since he’d parked here five minutes ago.

He had again limited himself to one mouthful of sanitizer, but thankfully the pure taste lingered in his mouth.

Leonard put on leather gloves and peeled back the trailer’s skin, pulled out glass-fiber insulation and threw it onto the ground. Then he kicked at the sawdust paneling that made up the interior wall until he had a hole between studs big enough to crawl through. Not his most glamorous burglary, but this was just the first step.

He found himself underneath a countertop on a vinyl floor littered with chunks of dirt. He pushed a rolling chair out of the way, then stood and brushed the grit from his hands. He pulled out a small metal flashlight and shone the beam, finding a sign on the far wall with the name of the contracting company that was building this new shopping center.

Tonight was the perfect moment for this track. A dozen flatbed trailers loaded with structural steel beams stood parked in rows on the muddy, graded shopping center site. The Freightliner road tractor bearing the erecting contractor’s name was still hitched to one load. But the crane hadn’t yet arrived at the jobsite. Leonard found a row of brass cup hooks near the door to outside, and a pleasant sparkle greeted his light: keys. He looked them over until he found one that said Freightliner. He pulled it from its hook and kissed it.

He unlocked the door with the little diamond-shaped window and walked down three wooden steps. He froze at the bottom when a car’s headlights appeared out on the highway.

When it had passed, he strode toward the truck, grabbing and dragging along a couple of the orange caution barrels with those flashing lights he'd always thought of as "blinkies." He wedged them onto the trailer with the steel beams.

The truck cab wasn't even locked. He climbed into the springy seat and bounced up and down. He clutched and turned the key to fire up the diesel engine. He figured out how to release the air brakes and wrench the shifter into low gear with the help of handy diagram stickers. This truck was fancier than the ones he'd driven in the Army.

He let out the clutch, and the engine coughed as the truck began to move almost imperceptibly, changing the patterns of light inside the cab. He chuckled at the orange blinking through the rear window. He upshifted as the back of the trailer cleared the front edges of its mates. He pulled hand over hand to steer the heavy load of steel onto Rocky Falls Boulevard.

After half a mile, at the I-540 overpass, Leonard stopped on the shoulder to let a following car zoom past. When it was out of sight again, he backed and pulled the truck – almost jackknifing it once – until he had it where he wanted it: perpendicular across the southbound lanes. He shut off the engine, turned on the truck's emergency flashers and climbed down from the cab, locking the doors behind him.

He placed the blinky barrels on the dividing lines between the southbound lanes so no one would crash into the friggin' thing and get decapitated. That wasn't in the spirit of this composition at all.

Leonard checked again for cars, saw none, and pulled the .380 from his coat pocket. He'd kept the blue-steel semi-automatic from the load of stolen guns. It reminded him of one he'd admired in a pawnshop case as a teenager. He got a nervous little thrill from the cold steel and turned on his heel to face the truck.

He fired. Fluid drained onto the ground, looking dark as blood in this light.

The diesel fuel wouldn't catch fire, since it only exploded under the pressure inside an engine, but they'd probably bring out a HAZMAT crew to clean up the spill, and that would

take a while. Excellent.

And they'd have a harder time moving the truck without fuel. And with 18 flat tires. His ears rang from the shot, and he cursed himself. A musician had to be smart about his hearing. He stuffed in yellow foam earplugs, almost burning his cheek on the gun barrel in the process.

He fired slugs into the tires in succession with a drummer's perfect rhythm, seeing his written score for the piece in his mind, counting out the measures to time the leaps of the pistol. He worked around the truck methodically until he'd created a 40-ton roadblock.

The traffic engineers around here were clearly no military strategists. Making all the traffic in an area rely on one big-ass road made it plenty easy to bring traffic to a stop, either by accident or on purpose. Why, thank you folks; thank you very much. This next tune is one I call "Choke Point." It's off "Stolen Inspiration," and there are autographed copies on sale out in the lobby...

He bet they wouldn't have this road cleared until lunchtime or after. They might need a crane to unload the beams onto another trailer, and then they'd have to change all those tires, then tow the road-tractor. He could hear the horns honking, the bass line of the heavy engines that would be idling ...

He walked the half-mile back to the construction site smiling as a single car approached the roadblock and its brake lights lit up the pavement in red. He surveyed the empty lanes that would soon stack up with these useless automobiles, thinking how hard it would be for most of them to turn around across the landscaped median, hearing how the notes screeched to a halt at the end of this piece.

Leonard started up his station wagon and drove one mile to the hauling company headquarters where there was always a dump-truck load of gravel ready to go out the next morning. He stole the key from that office, then loaded his 10-speed bike from the wagon into the passenger side of the truck cab.

He cranked the truck and drove to Creek Crossing Way at its intersection with Rocky Falls

Boulevard. No cars. He used the hydraulic levers to dump a mound of gravel across three lanes with the sound of a massive snare-drum roll, blocking the only logical workaround for the roadblock he'd made at the interstate. He backed the truck into a utility pole, pulling down wires onto the intersection.

He left the truck next to the gravel pile, shot holes in its fuel tank and tires and got his bike down. For once, a bike would be the way to travel in Rocky Falls. His breathing quickened as he worked the pedals, and as he began to coast down a slight grade, he tossed both sets of truck keys into a storm grate. He was back at the hauling company to pick up his station wagon within a couple of minutes.

Leonard was home and in bed by 5:30. He set his clock radio to wake him at 7:37 for "traffic on the sevens" and drifted to sleep with his music looping through his head in an endless encore.