

Is That All There Is?

*A précis to Arthur Gilbert, “The Fire Next . . .”
and Gary Greene, “We Shall Return: Music, Loss,
and Resilience After the Fires”*

I remember when I was a very little girl
Our house caught on fire
I'll never forget the look on my father's face
As he gathered me up in his arms
And raced through the burning building onto the pavement
And I stood there shivering in my pajamas
And watched the whole world go up in flames
And when it was all over I said to myself
Is that all there is to a fire?
Is that all there is?

—*Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber*

“Is That All There Is?”¹ is pertinent to the raging fires earlier this year that engulfed the homes and businesses of so many people in the Los Angeles basin, leaving all of them wrought with confusion and uncertainty about whether they would ever be able to rebuild their homes and reconstruct their lives.

¹ The song “Is That All There Is?” was inspired by Thomas Mann’s 1896 short story, “Disillusionment.” The song was written by Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber and arranged by Randy Newman. It took a while before it was noticed in 1969 by Peggy Lee, an American jazz and popular music singer, songwriter, and actress, whose career spanned seven decades. She recorded it and [“Is That All There Is?”](#) became an immediate hit.



An aerial photograph of the destruction and desolation wrought by the Los Angeles fire in Pacific Palisades in January 2025. Even a quick look at this photograph suggests strongly that it is likely the thousands of people who lived there and lost their homes and businesses intuitively shared a common lament, “Is that all there is?” (Photo courtesy of West Coast Aerial Photography.)

The loss of the home of Presiding Justice Arthur Gilbert and his wife, Barbara, was troubling because he intended to retire this year after a half century on the bench. For the Gilberts, and thousands of others in the basin, the fires changed everything. It shouldn’t be surprising they wondered, “is that all there is,” as they pondered their vast losses and those of their friends and neighbors.

“The Gilberts lost all their possessions,” according to Gary Greene, “including Art’s cherished Fazioli . . . one of the world’s finest grand pianos. It had a powerful and rich sound with a wide dynamic range, from the softest pianissimo to the most powerful fortissimo.”²

² Fazioli pianos are remarkable and very expensive musical works of art; for more, go to [Fazioli Pianos](#); [Fazioli Piano History](#); and [Legacy of Paolo Fazioli](#).

As was Art's piano, the Gilbert home was unique. It was designed and built by Art's late boyhood friend who became an architect, Richard Appel. It was used regularly for rehearsals of Maestro Gary Greene's Big Band of Barristers and for his Jazz Quartet. Art was a talented and highly skilled pianist. He was Greene's lead pianist for his Big Band and Jazz Quartet. Barbara is a fine vocalist and regularly sings with Greene's Jazz Quartet.

According to Greene,

Our Big Band and Jazz Quartet rehearsed in the Gilbert home since I founded the band thirteen years ago. His piano was one of the finest I ever heard. It's truly sad. Several of my other musicians lost their homes, including Justice Helen Bendix, Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division One (the Pacific Palisades fire). She was only able to save her violin and viola. My bassoon player, Ted Ancona, lost his home in Altadena (the Eaton fire). He is not an attorney but played with us as a substitute; his son John Ancona is an attorney who played with us until he moved to San Francisco. My trombone player, Marc Sallus, Esq., a partner in Oldman, Sallus & Gold, LLP, lost his home in the Palisades fire along with members of my chorus and my choral piano accompanist, Linda Kaye, a paralegal. Those who lost their homes were among the first to let me know that they wanted rehearsals and concerts to continue. At post-fire rehearsals, several of my members—Justice Gilbert, Justice Bendix, Marc Sallus, and Nicholas Allis (also a lawyer)—each said how important the rehearsal was to them after losing everything. A friend loaned Marc Sallus a trombone as his was destroyed in the Palisades fire. Music helps, and I am arranging several volunteer performances for the community. We worked hard together on our first and successfully performed our sixteenth anniversary at Walt Disney Concert Hall on June 28, 2025.

Less than two months later, Justice Gilbert suffered a medical emergency. He wrote a friend, "This is remarkable. Why? I had a stroke, a real one, albeit a small one a week ago, with a brain scan to prove it. Of course it had to be on the right side. I could not write or play the piano for a week. Slowly, the right-side started working. No one would know I had this condition. I faked it well and was able to play. Right was still weak but improving. Just call me Job.



Good-bye to the court this year. Loved every minute of it. Your friend, still standing, Arthur.”

Justice Gilbert at the keyboard playing smoothly and without a hitch during a gathering at which he and his combo appeared in August 2025 following his stroke. (Photo courtesy of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic.)

What was known by the end of January 2025

Data related to judges, their courts, and staff was and remains difficult to acquire. However, some data was available early on and appears below.

State Courts

Three state appellate justices, fourteen state trial judges, and sixteen judicial staff members lost their homes. Several other state judges and staff members were evacuated but did not lose their homes, although some homes remain uninhabitable, temporarily or permanently. Chief Justice Guerrero says that California’s Judicial Council is coordinating with the Los Angeles

courts to determine how they can best help those who have been impacted, and the courts are working as expeditiously as possible to do so.

Federal Courts

So far as is known at present, five federal judges and six federal court staff members lost their homes. In total, forty-three of the federal court’s approximately 590 employees have suffered lost homes, evacuations, power failures, or other impacts. This is only one recent example of the need for planned judicial resilience in both state and federal courts after the natural disasters that often occur in California. “The judges affected include both active and senior district judges, as well as bankruptcy and magistrate judges, who have had their homes burn down or be badly damaged. Some judges ‘have literally lost their entire wardrobe’ and don’t have the means to come into work, while others have relocated and are able to continue working, Karth said.”³

The following two articles, the first by Justice Arthur Gilbert, “The Fire Next . . .” and the second by Maestro Gary Greene, “We Shall Return: Music, Loss, and Resilience After the Fires,” discuss the inspiration and resilience they and their friends and orchestral peers found in themselves in the aftermath of the Los Angeles fires in January 2025. Together, they all rose above “is that all there is.”

Addendum

The man accused of intentionally igniting the devastating Palisades fire, which killed a dozen people, has been indicted on three felony charges and faces the prospect of up to 45 years in prison, authorities said.

Jonathan Rinderknecht, 29, was arrested Oct. 7 and charged with destruction of property by means of fire for allegedly starting a blaze in Temescal Canyon on New Year’s Day that went on to become the most destructive wildfire in Los Angeles history.

On Wednesday, Rinderknecht was indicted by a federal grand jury and charged with two additional felonies—one count of arson affecting property used in interstate commerce and one count of timber set afire, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Palisades fire scorched 23,400 acres—an area roughly 1.5 times the size of Manhattan—and leveled more than 6,800 structures.

Clara Harter, “[Man Accused of Maliciously Igniting Palisades Fire Faces New Charges, up to 45 Years in Prison](#),” *Los Angeles Times* (October 15, 2025).

³ Suzanne Monyak, “Five Federal Judges Lose Homes in Southern California Wildfires,” *Bloomberg Law*, January 13, 2024.