

ARTHUR GILBERT*

The Fire Next ...

Pardon the unfinished title, and apologies to James Baldwin. His book, “The Fire Next Time,” is Baldwin’s profound work on race relations in America. It is a call to learn from the past to have a better, harmonious future. My wife Barbara and I are working toward that goal after the Palisades Fire destroyed our home, the place where for years the Big Band of Barristers rehearsed. This article stems from a request to write about how music is a factor in that goal.

I am what they call the band’s key man. That means I play the piano. Barbara sings at occasional concerts with the band and with a jazz quintet comprised of musicians from the band. Barbara and I have much in common. We came from musical families. Her father studied piano at Julliard. My father played the piano with a jazz combo and a band in Chicago in the twenties. My cousin, the family genealogist, told me our grandfather on my mother’s side was the principal flautist in the New York Symphony, later to become the New York Philharmonic.

The fire took from us all our possessions including our music. By music I mean not just the sheets of music, the records and CDs, the concert grand piano, but the room where for years the entire Big Band of Barristers rehearsed under Gary Greene’s direction. And now all that remains are the memories of the rehearsals.

When I was around twelve or thirteen, my father took me to Sardi’s, a jazz club in Hollywood, to hear the legendary Art Tatum. I stood next to the piano and watched and listened to the genius produce runs and chords that made the piano sound like a full orchestra. Rachmaninoff and Horowitz, two of the great classical pianists of the twentieth century, listened to Tatum, awestruck. Me too. It was at that moment, though I could not formulate the thoughts in my young brain, that I knew I should go to law school.

* Arthur Gilbert is presiding justice, Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division Six, State of California. He has been a judge for a half century. He is a concert pianist and is the lead pianist with the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic Orchestra and Big Band of Barristers.

While in high school, I wrote a jazz column for a slick magazine called the *Junior Journal* and interviewed then-famous artists such as trumpet great Shorty Rogers and drummer Chico Hamilton, who headed an ensemble of cello, flute, bass, and drums. Sometimes Shorty played the fluegelhorn, a larger brass horn that produces a more mellow tone than a trumpet. In my article I referred to it as a trumpet with a thyroid condition. I guess that was a bit of foreshadowing. Shorty cracked up.

I wanted to be a jazz musician and a writer. As a young man I called the Thelonius Monk tune, “Epistrophe,” “Apostrophe.” It was a joke and my way of saying I wanted both worlds. To avoid starving to death, I went to law school. During the decade I practiced law, I attended a party where there was a palm reader. She carefully examined the lines in my hand and announced with absolute conviction that I would have many of my works published. Little did I know at the time that most of my published work would be in Cal. App. 3d, 4th, and 5th, not to mention a few dozen articles and hundreds of columns for the *Daily Journal*. So, I became a writer. But I kept my dream of becoming a musician by playing occasional gigs and joining Gary Greene’s Big Band of Barristers as one of its founding members.

The fire took things away and things are . . . only things. The combination of some things—paintings, music, and the piano—create an ambiance that is unique to the individual. And that is impossible to recreate.

Fire is a force, both creative and destructive. Without it, we would not have a civilization. Who wants to eat raw steak?

Music survives and heals. I don’t need a concert grand to continue to play. In fact, I was a little embarrassed having such a magnificent instrument. For now, I have a state-of-the-art digital piano in the condominium where we live for the time being. The thousands of others who have suffered the impersonal and random onslaught of the fire have their ways of coping with their losses. I still play the piano and Barbara sings. We listen to music and attend concerts. We conquer the fire by keeping what it could not take away from us.



An overhead view of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic and Legal Voices 16th Anniversary Concert held at the Walt Disney Concert Center on Saturday, June 28, 2025. Please note this is after all the January 2025 LA fires had died down and left widespread devastation throughout the region. (Photo courtesy of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic.)



LA Lawyers Philharmonic Founder-Conductor Gary S. Greene's Big Band of Barristers rehearsing at the Gilbert home that was destroyed on January 7, 2025, by the Pacific Palisades fire. (Photo taken by Michael Kohan and used with his permission.)



Justice Gilbert received the June Lockhart Humanitarian Award (the "Junie") at the LA Lawyers Philharmonic's 16th Anniversary on Saturday, June 28, 2025. (Photo courtesy of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic.)



On the left is Helen B. Kim, Esq. (solo pianist with the LA Lawyers Philharmonic) and on the right is Justice Helen Bendix (Associate Principal Violist with the LA Lawyers Philharmonic). Justice Bendix hosted many rehearsals with members of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic in her home that was destroyed in the Pacific Palisades fire. (Photo courtesy of the LA Lawyers Philharmonic.)



Presiding Justice Arthur Gilbert, Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero, and LA Lawyers Philharmonic Founder-Conductor Gary S. Greene, Esq. (Photo taken by Michael Kohan and used with his permission.)



Actor/musician Hal Linden rehearsing with LA Lawyers Philharmonic Founder-Conductor Gary S. Greene's Big Band of Barristers at the Gilbert home that was destroyed on January 7, 2025, by the Pacific Palisades fire. (Photo taken by Michael Kohan and used with his permission.)

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