1. *The Stradivarius*

My first find for the museum: a Stradivarius violin. Or that’s what I thought. I pulled the instrument out of an antique shop in New York. There were two small food dishes just inside the door, blue ceramic and flower shaped, cat-sized, and a heavy blanket of dust, like kudzu, covering the remaining merchandise. The store appeared to have been deserted for at least a decade, judging from the accumulated dust. The violin was in a back corner, on a shelf behind an iron grate that was locked with a padlock. My torch made short work of the lock. I pulled the instrument off the shelf and wiped a clear patch off the front. Dust fell away like dryer lint. I blew into the instrument’s f-holes and, when the resulting dust cleared, I was thrilled by what I saw: “—varius.” A few more puffs of breath into the violin revealed the full name, Stradivarius. I learned about the fabled Stradivarius violin from a book about classical music, containing a chapter on famous performers and their instruments. Due to this book’s explication of the instrument’s rarity, I was determined to find one. I figured the artifact I had found was a German-made reproduction, produced in the 1950’s and worth only the materials used in its construction, until I returned to my workshop at the museum and examined the instrument against an old dealer’s guide. My find was a crude knock off, a novelty item at best. Being as the violin was one hundred and fifty years old, however, and seeing as I was—and still am—the head of the newly formed Department of Acquisitions and Authenticity at the Peoples’ Musical Heritage Museum, I decided to present the artifact as our first acquisition. As visitors and other employees of the museum were unlikely to know even what a Stradivarius is, I rationalized that my secret would be safe. My first acquisition—a fraud.
Only my wife, Lori, knows.
“You can always out the forgery later, Max,” she says when I’m feeling paranoid. “If you’re so worried, you can say you discovered the violin was a forgery after additional examination.”

I’ve been working at the museum for three years, now. While I have been no stranger to controversy during my tenure, this first indiscretion is still undiscovered. The authenticity of museum relics isn’t worthy of the Mainframe’s time.

2. The Mbira

Though I am paranoid and I do dwell on the controversies that have occasionally developed around my finds, only a small percentage of my acquisitions have been controversial. The Mbira, or thumb piano, is one of the more curious items in the museum’s collection, and, as far as I can tell, is entirely authentic. I discovered the piece in a boarded up art museum in Toledo, Ohio, part of what seemed to be a traveling exhibition of musical instruments from around the world. We acquired over two-dozen of our own museum’s pieces at this one site—a didgeridoo, several hand drums, a balalaika, and a set of bag pipes, among others—but it is the Mbira that stands out the most. The trip to Toledo was my first major expedition, as a collector for the museum, after my wife and I were forced to give up being artists and move to New York. Lori had been a sculptor; I had been a painter. We were forced to find new careers after the creation of visual art by humans was ruled obsolete by the National Network of Recreation and Productivity. The findings of recent studies indicated that artistic creation resulted in more, not less, dissatisfaction among human citizens. Of course, those studies didn’t explain why I was more dissatisfied in my new job than I had ever been as an artist. As such, I was excited that my first major task in my new assignment—after only a few months on the job—took me into an art museum. I spent
hours gazing at the massive oil paintings, rich and textured like nothing I’d ever seen. Those paintings, most paintings, had been boarded up in museums for most of my adult life. Though we had been allowed to create art until a few years back, the Mainframe determined that the viewing and enjoyment of old art was counterproductive to our society’s evolution. When the decision was made that humans would no longer be allowed to create art, the Mainframe’s computer-made art was already the predominant form—now it is all that exists. Eventually, one of my team members discovered the exhibit of instruments we’d believed the museum was housing and pulled me away from my appreciation of the massive paintings that lined the museum’s walls.

Of the museum’s many instruments, I was, and am, most drawn to the Mbira—the keys’ elegant curve, the smooth finish of the body. My admiration is not entirely rooted in the instrument itself. In fact, while the Mbira’s unique design certainly caught my eye, it was neither lovelier, nor more unique than any of the other instruments held in the glass cases scattered about the museum’s East Wing. The Mbira became my favorite because, as I removed the artifact from its glass casing, carefully guiding it the through the jagged edges of broken glass made by my hammer, the instrument slipped from my grasp and fell to the floor, not with a simple wooden clatter, but with music. The performance was brief and messy, a random array of notes that filled the art museum’s exhibition room, echoed off the cold marble floor and wood walls, off the oil paintings and the sculptures. The sound was foreign, but rich and warm—it was utterly unprocessed and raw, notes like bolts of electricity, bathing the room in real tones, the likes of which I’d never heard before. This sound was unmediated, non-synthesized—was music. It was a beautiful sound, and, while I didn’t intend to play the instrument—I’d never have considered such an act of defiance, not that early in my new career—I was thrilled at having caused those sounds. I savored the clatter’s echo—in those sounds, I heard paint.
3. Bob Dylan’s Stratocaster

At the beginning of my second year working at the museum, I discovered, in a long-abandoned music-themed restaurant in Minneapolis, Bob Dylan’s 1962 Fender Stratocaster. The item appeared to have been donated to the restaurant sometime in the middle of the twenty-first century, after Dylan’s passing. Judging from the faded wood framing the display case—this fading presumably caused by spotlights that would have only been switched on while the restaurant was in operation—the guitar had been displayed for at least two decades before the Network of Nutrition Analysis and Sustenance Distribution began reconfiguring human eating habits and closing down such unhealthy eateries. When I first found the guitar, I didn’t recognize the full scale of the artifact’s significance. This guitar, in particular, was the very one that Bob Dylan played, controversially, at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965.

At first, I was enthusiastic about the discovery—I’d read all about Dylan’s performance of electrified rock and roll music to bemused crowds, and was excited to have an artifact with such an immense aura and historical significance in our collection. On the train back to New York, however, I began to recall the precise context and nature of Dylan’s performance. According to my various history books, Dylan’s fans were angry that he had introduced the electric guitar into his folk music. While such fans might have been thought to be outrageous at the time—my books all certainly treat them as such—I recognized a familiar kernel of fear in their attitudes. I, too, have watched as human arts have been replaced with new technologies. In my lifetime, no human, anywhere, has made music—not legally, anyway. The Mainframe has been responsible for composing and performing all music for the last seventy years. Those who tried to make music on their own were eventually caught out by a Mainframe Liaison, or turned in by their neighbors and subject to imprisonment or forced labor. As such, Dylan’s guitar came to symbolize, for me, something sinister, a key step in music’s reliance on, and eventual domination by technology. I was repulsed by the artifact. I neither
wanted to see it again, nor hang it to be displayed for the gathering masses in
the museum. Why should we celebrate that which we’d lost? So, with Lori’s
help, I smuggled the guitar back to our living quarters and hid it under our
bed. The guitar remained hidden for two weeks until our regional Mainframe
Liaison, a man who we only knew as Liaison Schneider, visited our house,
having been informed of an inventory discrepancy after an audit by the
Network of Museum Travel and Acquisition. I’d been sloppy in covering my
tracks, left the guitar on my list of items obtained during my trip, and failed
to present the item at the museum.

Now, Dylan’s guitar hangs proudly in the 20th Century, Popular Music
Exhibit in our museum’s East Wing. While visitors gawk at the guitar—played
by an actual human being—and marvel at the description of its significance,
I try to avoid that section of the museum, try to avoid that instrument’s
menacing presence.

4. Dr. Walter Kuznetsov’s Computer

After the incident with the guitar, I became more selective in the items I
acquired for the museum. In the months following my discovery of Dylan’s
instrument, I came across a number of artifacts that I simply ignored: an
early analog synthesizer called an Ondioline, which was found in a Brooklyn
recording studio; Bruce Haack’s “Farad” vocoder, discovered in a private
collection; an early Moog, uncovered in a recording studio in Boston; and
a talk box, purported to be the very unit used by Peter Frampton on his
groundbreaking song “Do You Feel Like We Do,” found in another themed
restaurant in Toronto. Already unsettled by Dylan’s guitar, I overlooked
each of these items, instead collecting glockenspiels, harmonicas, boxes of
discarded analog tapes—which can, according to our laws, be displayed, but
not listened to—aesthetic stringed instruments, and when we were lucky, an
occasional full drum set.
At the end of my second year at the museum, I was approached by Mainframe Liaison, Schneider with a find of his own. As it were, the Central Mainframe, while running a diagnostic of its primary systems, identified an out-of-date computer presence. The old computer slowed the Mainframe’s systems so, in the name of efficiency, the system disconnected the computer and discovered, while running a series of diagnostics, that it was the very computer on which Dr. Walter Kuznetsov programmed the first ever artificially intelligent composer of original music. The computer’s music was hardly original—the compositions were generated by a series of algorithms that allowed the machine to emulate the compositional styles of famous composers. At first, audiences scoffed at the inhumanity of the Doctor’s ambitions. Audience distrust of Kuznetsov’s invention lasted only until he arranged a concert in which his program’s compositions were performed alongside human-composed material. The unwitting audience responded more favorably to the artificially generated music than the human originals, and thus the slow process of human cultural decay became real.

When Liaison Schneider showed me the computer, I immediately rejected his request for the machine’s inclusion in our collection. When he pressed, I argued that the machine was not representative of human musicianship, that the museum was intended for our musical heritage, not that of the Governmental Body Mainframe.

“Maxwell,” Schneider said, “The computer is a part of our musical heritage.” He argued that the machine was one of the last innovations of human music; that, though it lead to our current circumstances in which music—and now art—may only be produced by computers, that we should preserve the piece as an innovation by man.

“If the machine is not included in your collection, you will be relocated,” he said, adding, “Your usefulness only extends as far as we have suitable positions for your talents.”

Dr. Kuznetsov’s computer now sits in the new Electronic Music Exhibit in the museum. Unlike Dylan’s guitar, no one approaches the machine. On
the rare occasion that a patron approaches Kuznetsov’s computer, he only stays long enough to stare it down, to feel its evil presence, to test himself the way that some children hold their breath underwater to see how long they can, and then feel the relief of gasping for breath when he quickly turns and shuffles away to the museum’s more welcoming exhibits. We all hate the Mainframe. I know it in my guts, see it in museum patrons’ eyes.

5. A Toy Harmonica

My most recent acquisition was a toy harmonica. I was walking through an abandoned neighborhood in Hoboken when I passed a boarded up toy store. Judging by the neighborhood’s age and upkeep, it was abandoned shortly after the Mainframe came to power. Like us, the citizens were probably herded towards one of the larger metropolitan areas and assigned jobs to help them pass the time. Normally, I wouldn’t bother with a toy store, but in the lower part of the front window, beneath the wood board’s reach, I saw a small plastic drum. I broke the window with a large chunk of concrete from the street and crawled through the gap between the board and the window’s frame.

Once inside, I tried the electricity access panel. I was surprised to find that the store was still wired. When lights came on, they were joined by the overhead speakers, which began playing a recent pop tune generated by the Mainframe’s Division of Culture and Entertainment. The song was catchy enough, and featured a smooth emulation of a woman’s voice singing about a relationship. She repeated the words “baby” and “love” every line or two, though much of the song was incomprehensible. Even the lyrics were written by algorithm and the voice, though impressively human, was certainly computer-generated. When I was a child, the song wouldn’t have been possible. Most of the computer-generated music then was instrumental, or
featured vocals that were heavily distorted to mask the inhuman qualities of the voices. In the last twenty years, the Mainframe’s progress in reproducing the human voice has been remarkable.

I hummed the song to myself as I perused the shop. All of the toys were antiques, mostly from the twentieth century—dolls and their houses, models of antique cars, old games and sporting equipment that I recognized from the Peoples’ Museum of Games and Sports. I found a pile of cheap, toy harmonicas in a wicker basket on the floor. I picked one up, turned it over in my hand. The toy was light. Its reeds were plastic, unlike models I’d previously obtained from music stores and themed restaurants, and the outer casing was made of cheap tin. I decided to take the harmonica and started looking around the store for other children’s instruments. Perhaps the museum’s patrons might enjoy an exhibit of toy instruments.

The song coming through the overhead speakers was at its chorus. The female voice facsimile was singing “Ooh, baby your love’s a treat,” over gentle, emulated guitar and piano. I thought of the museum full of useless artifacts back in Manhattan, the aura of Dylan’s guitar, the Mbira, the colorful drums, and pianos. Those artifacts were the sole proof of my labor over the previous three years. The thought of so many instruments stuck behind glass saddened me. The music piped in through the toy store’s speakers somehow sounded empty, tired. I don’t know if I can say I know what music should sound like, but at that moment, the music I was hearing wasn’t right. I remembered the Mbira’s keys crashing on the museum’s floor in Toledo, its rich tones bouncing around the room, resonating in my body. I remembered the feel of brush strokes on canvas. Without realizing what I was doing, I lifted the toy harmonica to my mouth, blew through it, and delighted at the thin, plastic tones I had produced. I placed my tongue over some of the holes and blew again, listened as my breath passed through the children’s toy and mingled with the music playing overhead. I blew again, trying to match the song’s pitch. And again, and again, synching up with the emulated guitar’s rhythms. The sounds I made were thrilling; they were small
and trivial in terms of musicality, but unlike anything I’d ever heard or felt for a long time—I was creating. When I left, in addition to toy record players, xylophones, and guitars, I took two harmonicas—one listed on my inventory, a second stashed in my pocket. Lori and I are teaching ourselves how to play. We make sure the windows and doors are fastened, turn up the Mainframe’s music and try to play along. Sometimes we try to write new songs.