

## **That Taxi Gig** - Jim Crozier

It was one of those days that I woke around noon and checked my pockets, "Nope, not enough money for dinner today, gotta go to work."

That meant a walk from Bleecker and Laguardia to 4th Street to take the "A train". If I had a dollar more than a subway token, I would stop and get a falafel sandwich and a cup of coffee on the way. From the Columbus Circle station it was two long blocks and a bit more to West 61st between 10th and 11th Avenue. There I would turn in my "picture" (what we called the hack license), hang out with my buddies, and wait for the dispatcher to give me a car. The cars would start coming in off the day shift starting around 3:30, so if my bookings had been OK lately I could usually get out around 4pm. One never knew who would be at the shape-up from one day to the next. There was Larry the photographer, Eric the songwriter and personal assistant to a somewhat successful playwright, and Mac the composer. And, I would occasionally do some work with the some of the other various musicians and actors that might be there.

One of these was Gary, my home town rock & roll buddy who had come to New York with the same show I had. After my first stint with Ann Service Company, a Checker fleet, he had suggested that I come over to work with him at Dalk Service Company. That garage had a much hipper shape-up. The business was owned by a bunch of Irish guys that ran a fleet of stock Dodge Coronets. While the Checkers had clear advantages - some folks would hold out for a Checker because of the roomy passenger compartment, they were a tad narrower than most cars (an advantage in tight traffic), they were higher up giving you a good view, and the gearing was such that they were really hot off the line - but the front end was way too flimsy for the beating they got on the New York City Streets; so it didn't have to be in service very long before driving it on the expressway, or even Central Park Drive was way too thrilling - like, "Let's see you keep it on the road through this turn". The stock Dodge had none of those advantages, but that slant six was nearly indestructible, and they still handled OK long after the shocks and front-end alignment had become distant memories.

From the satellite photo, it looks like the building is still there - a low, concrete, block-through building. We entered from West 61st Street, through the garage door - there was no other door in this wall, and this door was never closed, probably didn't have a door to close. About 20 feet in and around to the left was the dispatcher's window, the window ledge was just about eye level for me - they dug on the intimidation thing. Here I would hand in my picture and watch him put it in the stack - He was always shuffling them around. It is really quite amazing how he would nearly always have something to say about your last night out, and he would always get in some comment including the phrase "get those bookings up." Once I was bawled out for poking a hole in the dashboard for my pen. Every other car in the fleet had such a hole but the day guy complained that I had destroyed his new car.

Stepping back from the window was the open shape-up area, which went on about 60 feet back. There was a wooden bench or two, and a high desk where you could figure up your book before you turned in the money. Right beside this area, was a row of gas pumps and some overhead oil and coolant dispensers, four stations in all. The cars would come in off 61st at a full 15 miles per hour and pull down to the last available pump. The driver grabs his bag and gets out while the pump jockeys get to work. Meanwhile, someone from the herd is called to the window, handed his picture with a trip sheet, and heads for the car. A minute later, that car was exiting the door on 60th Street and was back in business. Of course, you might think that this would be a non-smoking area, and you might be wrong.

There probably were a couple black drivers, but I am sure that they had gone to college, so were more like us guys, there was a girl or two, as well, "tough chicks!" But, the garage staff was all black. They were mostly OK, but they didn't take "No Shit!". I got one of the mechanics mad at me once, which was a very stupid thing to do, his buddies had to drag him back while he was opening his knife yelling; "I'm going to cut you - motherfucker!"

In those days, early to mid 70's, the drop was 60 cents, and it was 60 cents per mile and 10 cents per minute of standing time. The drop is what they call the that number that comes up when you start the meter, and the mile is divided into increments of a dime. We were all AFL/CIO members and worked on commission plus tips, 49% after 6 months. Generally you would get out with a car at a decent hour if your trip sheet averaged \$60 per night - a few nights in the forties, and you would find that your shape-up got longer, and it might just come to pass that they didn't have a car for you - very few guys

ever actually got fired. While I was in the city doing the taxi gig, the fare went up a dime, the city went bankrupt, and the shape-up went from 1 hour to 3 hours because all the laid off cops and firemen were a whole lot hungrier than most of us artist types.

So, your commission after taxes and union dues ended up yielding about \$20 per day paid bi-weekly, and \$20 was an OK night in tips, as well. That came down to about four dollars per hour, at a time when minimum wage was two. I knew some guys that made good money on the gig - and there were lots of scams you could run. By the time a fleet was a few months old, wires to the roof light on most of the cars would have been cut, so you could turn it off even if the meter wasn't running - the only time I ever tried to run "off the meter" I got busted by the Taxi and Limousine Commission, so I found it not worth the trouble - but some guys were really good at it. The TLC would hire these sleaze ball goons to drive around in beat up cars, or even gypsy cabs, looking to bust the Taxi drivers of an infraction of the various rules - running off the meter was the biggie, and refusing a fare was another. The fare on an out of town trip was double the meter - which offered endless opportunities for mischief, for both driver and owner. And, I even knew one guy who sold guns out of his cab.

This was pure hacking and only the medallion-ed, yellow taxi cab driver is allowed to do it. Some of the owner-drivers would sign up with a radio dispatch service, but the fleet cabs had no radio. The business is strictly a matter of putting your car where someone wants a cab. In general, the game is to get as many short trips as possible in as little of time as possible. When things were hopping, it was really bad luck to stop - the trick was to stay in the area where it was busy, and not get dragged up town or out to the boroughs. Since it was against the rules to refuse a fare, the only way to avoid picking up someone you didn't want was to "not see him".

I got really good at sweeping the avenues, but that game was not available until after rush hour. On a Monday night in August, there would be 17 cabs racing down 7th Avenue, trying to be the first one to get to the one person between 42nd and the Village that might need a cab at this moment. In general, the lights were timed at 35 mph, but some of them changed a little late. I got good at claiming a lot of space in front of me, and knowing which lights changed late - the trick is to be moving at 20 mph while the rest of them were standing still on the line - that would give me both sides of the avenue for at least a few blocks before I would have to pick a side to defend. One of the other principle tactics when you had to take a side, was to hold the guy in the outside lane so that he had to stop behind a bus or a double-parked service vehicle. That's how the race was run.

My typical routine was to bust ass for 3 or 4 hours, working the daily rush and whatever that brought, stop for some kind of dinner, and then try to get into the groove working the party traffic between the Village and the upper East Side. I would usually bring the car in shortly after 2am, but the bars were open until 4, so some nights...

It was like:

*He's racing down the Avenue, trying to find a fare,  
He's heading for the Village, he thinks there's one down there,  
He knows every red light, when it's green,  
He's the fastest thing on four wheels,  
He's a night time New York taxi driving man.*

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