

The Muse Ascending

melding music and murder

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

On the surface, few things could seem more different than music and murder: one is about creation, the other about destruction at its most atavistic level. Yet at the hand of a skilled writer, even these apparent opposites can flow seamlessly together, forming an imaginative tale in which each element draws from the strength of the other.

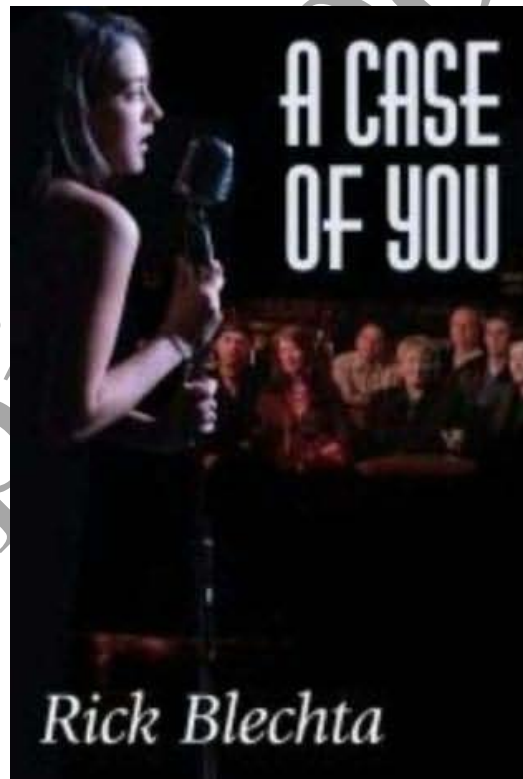
This week's pick is an example of how harmony and homicide can be woven into a captivating and original tale by one of Canada's premier crime writers.

Rick Blechta

Born in New York State, in the tony enclave of Westchester County, Rick Blechta took up music while still in his early teens. After joining a rhythm and blues band he turned his attention to a variety of instruments, including the French horn, trumpet, and keyboard. He also mastered percussion instruments, the guitar, the saxophone, and the electric bass.

After moving to Canada in 1971, Rick studied music at McGill University. Graduating from McGill with a Bachelor of Music degree, he formed a rock band called *Devotion*, which despite good reviews folded in 1975. Rick turned his attention to teaching instrumental music, first at the Etobicoke School Board, later at the Toronto District School Board, for

twenty-three years; following that he taught and conducted at the Royal



Conservatory of Music in Toronto for sixteen years. Rick is also a gifted graphic designer, and takes an active hand in the creation of the cover art for his own novels.

A Case if You is Rick's sixth crime novel. His previous crime fiction includes *Knock on Wood*, *The Lark Ascending*, *Shooting Straight in the Dark*, *Cemetery of the Nameless*, and *When Hell Freezes Over* (the latter reviewed in these pages in July 2007).

Until recently he was president of the Crime Writers of Canada.

Rick is married to prominent flutist and teacher, Vicki Blechta. They have two sons, Karel and Jan, neither of whom, Rick insists, are musicians or writers.

A Case of You
(RendezVous Crime, 2008)

Andy Curran is a drummer in a struggling trio at The Sal, a marginal Toronto jazz club struggling to stay open. To kindle public interest, the group decides to hold Open Mike nights. One evening a young street beggar named Olivia Saint appears and asks to sing. Dressed in shabby, mismatched clothing, and showing very little presence, the band members are dubious. Still, they decide to give her a chance.

By the time Olivia has finished her song she has the audience in the palm of her hand. Her voice is utterly captivating, her stylizing subtle, wistful, and haunting. The audience goes nuts.

The members of the trio recognize her talent and invite her to sing with them on a regular basis. Olivia accepts, and before long word gets around. The group and the club are doing better than they ever have. Their prospects have never looked better.

Discovering that Olivia is still sleeping on the streets, Andy invites her to move into his house. It is not long before she is sharing his bed.

Then one night two men appear at the club, and between sets speak with Olivia. They take her outside. Sensing something is wrong Andy follows and tries to help, but fails. Forced into a car, Olivia has disappeared from Andy's life as suddenly and mysteriously as she first appeared.

In desperation he hires an ex-cop and private investigator, Shannon O'Brien, to find Olivia; but before she can get very far Olivia's only friend, a streetwise hooker named Maggie, is found strangled on Andy Curran's front porch. When the police discover that she and Andy had quarreled several times over Olivia's singing at the club, they don't seem interested in looking any further for her murderer.

To make matters worse, when Maggie's death makes the six o'clock news, Andy's ex-wife tries to isolate him from their daughter Kate, arguing that a murder on his doorstep constitutes a less-than-appropriate setting for their eleven-year-old daughter.

Meanwhile, Shannon works her way through Olivia's background. What she finds only raises more questions. The family was extremely wealthy. Olivia's brother had been murdered years earlier, and Olivia was the prime suspect at the time. She had been institutionalized, making her unfit to stand trial. Her father, already in ill health, had died within a few months, and her stepmother became the family matriarch, determined to keep any further scandal out of the public eye. The woman agrees to meet with Shannon at her mansion on the Upper East Side in New York City, and although she is impeccably polite, Shannon leaves feeling that, as they say in the music business, the vibes are not good.

Shannon O'Brien persists in her inquiries, and tracks Olivia down to an exclusive private rehab clinic in the isolated mountains of Northern California. Short of personnel, Shannon assigns a brash, young new operative, Jackie Goode, to travel to California and infiltrate the facility as a patient, posing

as someone with a drug dependency. Things take an ominous turn when Shannon is unable to contact Jackie. Lacking the right to operate in the US, Shannon is reluctant to go to the authorities. That, it turns out, is the least of her problems: before events come to a climax, several lives will hang in the balance, and death will be only a gunshot away.

A compelling tale

A Case of You is Rick Blechta's strongest book to date. Olivia's disappearance is complimented by sub-plots dealing with Andy Curran's ongoing battles with his ex-wife, his attachment to his pre-teen daughter, and the tension between Shannon O'Brien and her new assistant, Jackie Goode, who is perhaps a little too willing to take risks in order to please her new boss.

Blechta succeeds in capturing Andy Curran's obsession with the enigmatic and reclusive young woman who seems to enchant everyone who hears her sing. He wraps it around a compelling tale that reaches from Toronto to New York to the secluded mountains of California, carrying the reader along effortlessly in his best novel to date.

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