

A funny thing: Up today and down tomorrow

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

One night years ago, when there were such things as open tickets on airlines and one did not have to establish identity to get through security, my wife and I left \$900 worth of tickets on the back seat of a cab from O'Hare Airport to our home. It was two a.m., we were tired from crossing time zones, and we were careless.

We noted that the packet holding the tickets was missing just as the cab pulled out of the driveway and sped away. Even at two a.m. our Cynics Alert button must have been pressed, because we both assumed we'd never see the valuable items again. "You know how cabbies are . . ."

I like to start conversations with strangers by asking them to tell me about themselves. "I am a jazz musician," this taxi driver had responded, "a jazz musician and a bluesman."

I like jazz and know something about it, so I could pick up one end of the conversation. Soon I learned that our driver played many gigs in off-hours and had quite a following. He was too modest to say so, but he dropped the right names of venues and sidemen, so I kept prompting him. "Everyone just calls me Piano Red," he said, and that stuck in my mind after we'd said good-bye to driver and tickets.

Next morning I phoned the cab company. What was the cab and driver's number? I hadn't the faintest idea. All I remembered was that he called himself "Piano Red." I pictured the cab company rep smiling as she said: "Everyone in the company knows Piano Red. If he found something valuable, it'll be in his slot, waiting for you." Two hours later she called. "The packet is here." Piano Red was driving when I stopped for the tickets, so I could not thank him in person.

Fast forward: the front page of the Metro section of the *Chicago Tribune*, on December 17, 2006, had a color picture captioned: "Paralyzed by a carjacker's bullet, a Chicago bluesman struggles to get by." It pictures Piano Red in bed chatting

with Tricia Boezio, who has been “like family” to him since he was paralyzed. I learned that his real name is Cecil Fain, and that he is in a nursing home. He was recalled as “the strutting guy [from Alabama] in the red shirt and red pants” who kept the old groove going until last March when two low-life types shot him while he was gassing his cab and left him with a bullet in his spine. The Flat Foot Boogie Band lost its leader, an artist who had played with Fats Domino and Muddy Waters. Two of his five children have visited him. Once.

He does not sound bitter. “Funny thing about life. You can be up today, down tomorrow.”

When I hear from Boezio about Piano Red’s whereabouts, I’ll make a visit. If his fingers respond that day and he can play a bit, we’ll both be “up.” If some of the Abramoff types, the WorldCom and Enron CEOs and other high-life types had a reputation like Piano Red’s and lived up to it, we’d all be better off every day.