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A Pianist and Her 232-Pound Upright, Going Gig to Gig in New York

By ANDY NEWMAN OCT. 14, 2015

In the basement laundry room of an apartment building in Red Hook, Brooklyn, late on a Friday afternoon, a woman in a crisp blue dress squeezed past a neighbor stuffing clothes into the dryer.

“We’re just going to be moving the piano,” she explained.

With that, Erin Durant and her boyfriend and her friend with a van hauled out an upright piano and began maneuvering it up seven uneven concrete steps to the street.

After much heaving-ho and delicate shoving, the piano lay on its back in the rear of a cargo van. Ms. Durant’s boyfriend paused to rub his wrist. And Ms. Durant, a singer-songwriter who has spent much of the past year lugging a 232-pound piano around New York, was off to another gig.

There are easier ways to pursue a musical calling in the city, as the hordes with guitars slung across their shoulders and saxophone cases in their hands can attest. And there are electronic keyboards, more and more sophisticated, asymptotically approaching the sound of an acoustic piano.

But Ms. Durant, a New Orleans transplant who moved to New York a decade ago, craves the sonic solidity and three-dimensionality of the real thing.

“It kind of responds back to you,” she said the other evening before a show. “The kind of music that I play” — spare, gospel-tinged, redolent of old parlors — “is more suited to a real piano.”

Ms. Durant is not the only musician who can be seen pushing a piano around the streets of New York. Colin Huggins, who has been rolling his 600-pound baby grand into Washington Square Park on weekends for years, said that at least half a dozen others had been following in his wake, though he said he had never heard of or seen a woman piloting a piano.

Ms. Durant said she drew inspiration from another musician — a harpist named Shelley Burgon, who said she had learned some useful tricks hauling an 85-pound concert grand harp across the city’s clubscape.

“One thing I always check on is to find out if there’s handicapped accessibility,” Ms. Burgon said. “That makes loading a harp a lot easier: ramps, elevators. Harps and the handicapped, we’re friends.”

Ms. Durant used to carry around a Nord electronic keyboard, no feather itself at 50 pounds or so. Then she performed a few times at a place in Williamsburg that had a piano, the Brooklyn Rod and Gun Club. It spoiled her.

“I played a show with my electric keyboard after having played a bunch of shows where they had a piano,” Ms. Durant said, “and as a performer it felt sort of lonely. I didn’t have that piano to kind of kick back at me.”

She looked around and discovered a type of piano known as a Tom Thumb, popular, in the analog era, on cruise ships.

Ms. Durant’s model, built by the Kawai company around 1970, has 64 keys rather than the standard 88. The top of it is only about belly high. But it still weighs about as much as 10 marching-band tubas, or a half-dozen double basses.

And because Ms. Durant is not an Olympic weight lifter, transporting the piano, she said, “takes some finessing.”

And friends.

“Moving it is a dance of gumption, peace and determination,” one of them, Adriana Atema, said.

Another, Jay Pluck, recalled, “There was a tricky moment getting it off the stage at the Mercury Lounge.”

That particular Friday, the van lurched along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway toward the evening’s destination, an old storefront in Greenpoint that was once a restaurant.

There was no stage or anything like it. The musicians set up in the aisle leading to the bathroom. The piano was wedged against an ancient oven.

Before the show, Ms. Durant, in her blue prairie-diner-waitress dress, served Korean-style rice bowls with tofu and pickled burdock root to the guests.

Then she took her seat at the piano. Wood-warmed notes flowed out over the room. She sang, a high clear voice with curls in it. “I wanna roll down the river, I wanna take you by surprise.” That was back in June.

Ms. Durant’s piano has already had several homes: a friend’s studio, a dungeonlike basement space in Williamsburg, Ms. Durant’s slightly more accessible basement in Red Hook. Over the summer, she found a ground-floor rehearsal space in Williamsburg — no more stairs. She also got her own van, and her father, a naval architect, built a wooden brace for the inside so that the piano can travel standing up.

Moving it is still an adventure.

On a Friday evening in mid-September, Ms. Durant and two other women were struggling to get the piano up onto a dolly on Manhattan Avenue in Greenpoint when a tall stranger approached.

“Do you guys need help, or do you do this all the time?” he asked.

“O.K., come on,” Ms. Durant’s friend Brie Ruais said. “Come on. You want to help?”

“I kind of enjoy moving pianos for some reason,” the man said.

A few minutes later, the piano was up over the curb, up over the doorstep of Troost, a cozy narrow bar with prosecco on tap.

The tall helper shook Ms. Durant’s hand. “My name is Tim,” he said.

After short sets by a few friends, Ms. Durant strapped on her harmonica and sat down at the little piano bench. She stroked a few autumnal chords, barely audible over the din.

“I know a place where you can go,” she sang. The bar quieted down and the piano seemed to grow larger as the sound filled the front of the room.

Ms. Durant glanced up and out the window at the street and the moonless night and paused for a moment. Then she set her gaze at the keys and continued to play.

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