

ities still seemed infinite, and there still seemed to be many ways to squander all these advantages. But something had changed. Instead of imagining a big, black void after graduation, I now envisioned something along the lines of what I already knew: a routine, a familiar neighborhood, a daily task, and a set of relationships. Life would continue to be as real as it had ever been. And I now knew I could create one.

In August, when the news slowed to a trickle and most people left for vacation, I spent hours sifting through the files on my computer. One day I came across a document labeled "Diary." It had been written by my predecessor, described to me as a bright-eyed girl from Texas. To paraphrase:

Day 7. Got in before everyone else AGAIN. Read the papers. Went over to the Senate building to do research for that story. Found a few things, nothing really good. What makes something newsworthy anyway? Came back to office. Read more papers.

Amazing. Her experience seemed exactly like mine, down to the procrastination.

Day 19. Steve took me to my first White House press conference. It was awesome! There I was, surrounded by some of the most powerful people in the world....Left my cell phone at the White House. Called around to try and find it, but no dice.

I had done that, too! I could have written that entry. In fact, I could have written the entire thing. I read on, watching the mood swings, the daily triumphs and disappointments that perfectly mirrored my own. When things were going well, she was full of boundless optimism: "Bob said I did a 'good job' on my story today. Score!" When things were slow, she, too, had plenty of time for soul-searching, plowing through whole paragraphs trying to piece together her place in the world.

Day 27. I am going to stop being so hard on myself. That is my new goal.

That seemed like a nice goal for the summer. But from the words themselves I could tell she was only half-serious. I knew these waves of self-doubt, how they came often and without warning, and were perhaps a way for us to fend off one of the biggest realizations of the summer: that people are under no obligation to appreciate you. I saw how, as the entries

proceeded, her fits of worry gave way to a smart, practical optimism. She sounded tougher and less panicky by the end of her sojourn. More adult.

One warm night in August, the reporters took me to a baseball game with a "source" from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. We sat high in the stands sipping beer from plastic cups, watching the speck-like players move under white lights. Soon the banter started flying, and it quickly gave way to gossip. Politics—with its rivalries, betrayals, victims, and villains—seemed even more fascinating than high school, and every bit as brutal. Everyone had a story. They'd watched people's fortunes rise and fall, and had experienced major reversals themselves. They'd all made close friends and sour enemies. I listened intently. After

a while, the attention shifted back to me. "Hey. Why's the kid so quiet?" one of them asked.

"She's drunk."

"No, I'm not," I said.

"She's just listening," said the source sympathetically, offering his cup for a toast.

"Hey kid, you gonna write a tell-all book about this when you get back?"

They laughed, and I shook my head, trying to fade into the background. The days when I thought I'd launch full speed into the world, aimed like a missile at my destiny, were over. Now I was content to listen. ♡

Elizabeth S. Widdicombe '06 is one of the magazine's Berta Greenwald Leddecky Undergraduate Fellows.

Broadway in His Blood

ASK MICHAEL MITNICK '06 what kind of singing voice he has and he replies, "A bad one." Inquire about his piano-playing skill and he remains dismissive, quickly noting, "My sister is a lot better than I am." Mitnick will admit to being "much more of a composer than a pianist," though even there he claims that his sister, Jenny, is his superior.

For the second-best composer in the family, Mitnick has done all right. He has written or co-written the score, lyrics, and book for four musical comedies that have been produced during his undergraduate years, including one Hasty Pudding Theatricals show. In the summer after his sophomore year, his musical *Snapshots* had two off-Broadway performances in New York with cast members from the Broadway show *Bombay Dreams*. He coauthored the script for the film *Winning Caroline*, a musical that was chosen as best comedy at the 2004 Ivy League Film Festival. And that "bad" baritone singing voice joins tenors and basses in the Krokodiloes, Harvard's oldest and best-known a cappella group; this summer, Mitnick and the Kroks performed in more than a dozen countries on a six-continent tour that liter-

ally went around the world in 80 days.

A witty young man, Mitnick loves musical comedy "a bushel and a peck." Even as a young shoot he knew what he wanted to do; at age eight, after listening to *Guys and Dolls*, he tried to write new lyrics to Frank Loesser's music. "I found that very difficult to do," he says, chuckling. But he didn't give up his ambitions: at Fox Chapel Area High School outside Pittsburgh, Mitnick wrote his first musical, *The Race*, about a political campaign in a small town. "Now I cringe when I hear it," he says, but when he and his classmates mounted the show, they raised \$1,500 for charity from the receipts; he recalls that first production as "one of the best memories of my life."

"There really is no place to go [for college] if you want to learn to write musicals," Mitnick says, but Harvard's track record in educating so many creators in that field appealed to him. He is well-versed in Broadway history (the Gershwins, Sondheim, and Loesser are members of his personal pantheon, and he singles out Dinah Washington's recording of "If I Were a Bell" from *Guys and Dolls* as "explosively good"). He readily reels off the names of Harvard-trained giants like Leonard Bernstein '39, D.Mus. '67 (music for *On the Town*, *Candide*, *West Side Story*), Alan Jay Lerner '40 (lyrics for *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*), established creators like John

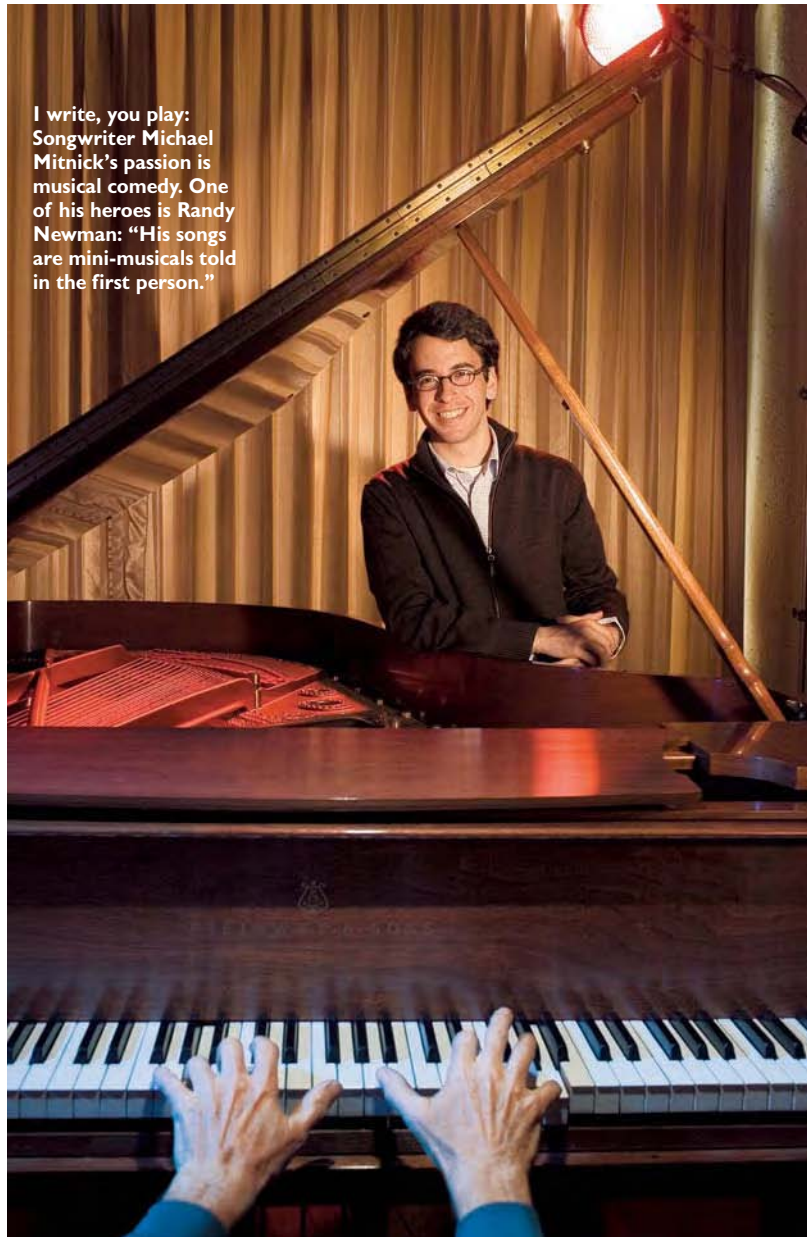
Weidman '68 (book for *Pacific Overtures, Assassins*), and lesser-known but highly successful composers such as Laurence O'Keefe '91, of the future movie *Bat Boy* and the forthcoming stage version of *Legally Blonde*.

But the big pull was Hasty Pudding Theatricals. "There's nowhere else in America," he says, "where you can write something that gets more than 30 performances, plays in New York and internationally in Bermuda, has a budget of a couple hundred thousand dollars, and involves working with professionals in set design, directing, musical direction, choreography, and so on."

Mitnick's family took him often to the theater in Pittsburgh; the group included mother Margy, a public librarian, father Barry, who teaches at the University of Pittsburgh business school, and older twin siblings Jenny and Jeff. Mitnick's father wrote a musical while an MIT undergraduate, and Jenny was president of the Original Music Group at Brown University. (Jeff has Down syndrome; Mitnick's shows, over the years, have raised thousands of dollars to benefit those with that condition.)

Having an older sister who was actively writing chamber music was a great advantage. "I think her composing ability is fantastic," Mitnick says. Jenny taught her younger brother instrumentation and orchestration and commented on his scores. But her mere presence may have been the most important thing. At one point she produced a CD of 10 modern piano pieces. "She was always saying, 'Here's a piece I wrote,'" he recalls.

I write, you play:
Songwriter Michael Mitnick's passion is musical comedy. One of his heroes is Randy Newman: "His songs are mini-musicals told in the first person."



Although a handful of geniuses like Loesser and Sondheim have written both words and music to remember, it is very rare at the professional level for one person to compose both lyrics and score (not to mention the "book," or narrative story of a show). But as someone starting out, Mitnick tackles all three, often in collaboration. "First I think of the idea for a song, what I want the song to be about," he explains. ("I Was Wrong," from *Snapshots*, for example, is the protagonist's apology to a love interest.) "Then, at the piano I work out the melodic and harmonic structure, and record it on tape. Next I'll sit at the

computer and write the lyrics, set it, and after that, it's back and forth between the keyboard and the computer. At the end, Finale [a composer's software package] prints out the score. It takes hours just to write down the notes of a song, but you get so engrossed in it, the time flies."

As freshmen, Mitnick and Derrick Wang '06 each wrote half of the score, and Mitnick most of the book, for *Get Some*, a freshman musical staged in Agassiz Theatre ("three male Harvard freshmen in search of love on a weekend night"). "So much fun," Mitnick recalls. "That was a blessed experience." Then, again working on the music with Wang, and adding book and lyrics by Kiernan Schmitt '06, Mitnick created *As the Word Turns*, the 2004 Hasty Pudding show, about Russians trying to steal vowels from English at the national spelling bee. (The original title, *Vowel Movement*, was vetoed.) That fall, Mitnick collaborated again with

Schmitt on a Currier House show, *Peanut Butter and Juliet*, adapting the Shakespearean tale to Appalachia in a story whose climax explains the origin of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Last spring, he and Schmitt joined forces with Robbie Pennoyer '05 to create *The Life and Many Deaths of Mr. Plumb*, about love in an old-folks home, staged at the Loeb Experimental Theatre.

Currently, Mitnick is working on his senior thesis, a creative writing project in the English department. It is an untitled "dark comedy—all the plot points are dark," he says. The musical concerns two upper-class New York families who are longtime friends

until two of their college-age children decide to marry. That unearths uncomfortable issues because two of the parents once had an extramarital affair, making paternal responsibility uncertain. "It's not a musical from the 1950s, where the community puts up a show in the barn that raises enough money to save the town," Mitnick says. "It has a bittersweet ending, darkly ironic."

As an English concentrator, he has been able to do his thesis "exactly as I wanted it," he says. "But if I were in the music department, it would be mostly the music that got the attention." He did take three music courses, including Music 4, which Mitnick calls an "only at Harvard" experience: "At the end of each unit, your project gets performed and recorded by professional musicians. My sophomore year they had the Ying Quartet, a world-class chamber group. It really makes you do your homework because if you don't, you're squandering a tremendous opportunity." For a chance like that, Mitnick wrote chamber music.

Even so, Mitnick, who also belongs to the Harvard Lampoon and the Signet Soci-

ety, cites the Office for the Arts (OFA) as his favorite thing at Harvard. Before college, he spent two summers at Lincoln Center Theater working for Stephen Flaherty, composer of *Ragtime* and *Seussical*, and two years ago helped arrange Flaherty's

"It really makes you do your homework because if you don't, you're squandering a tremendous opportunity."

participation in OFA's Learning from Performers program. "In my three years here, they must have had four or five musical-theater writers," says Mitnick, who took each of their master classes in songwriting.

Mitnick even got to meet one of his "absolute heroes," Randy Newman, the Oscar-winning songwriter. "His music is

impeccably written—melodious music that is also complex," Mitnick explains. "His lyrics are ironic or funny, but he writes them from the perspective of the character, so it's almost like musical theater." Newman spoke in Sanders Theatre, and Mitnick talked with him afterwards for a few minutes backstage. Newman said, "If you have any stuff, let me know"—and Mitnick just happened to have a CD in his pocket. Five months later, Newman called and gave Mitnick a half-hour-long critique of his compositions. Says Mitnick, "It was one of the big thrills of my life."

No doubt there are more thrills to come. Mitnick is applying for fellowships and to a few graduate programs in playwriting and musical-theater writing, as well as television comedy shows, whose writing staffs have historically drawn heavily from Lampoon alumni. He's also pursuing internships with some of his favorite songwriters. "Unfortunately," he says of his many interests in entertainment, "all these things are very difficult to do professionally." ~CRAIG LAMBERT

SPORTS

Loaded for Bear

Harvard v. Brown: Ivy football at its best

FOR PURE, SUSTAINED excitement in an Ivy League football contest, it would be hard to beat this season's Harvard-Brown game—or last season's. A year ago, at Brown Stadium, Harvard bounced back from a 21-point halftime deficit and escaped with a 35-34 victory when a late Brown field-goal try missed by inches. This year, in the Crimson's home opener, the feisty Bears grabbed a 16-0 first-quarter lead, only to have Harvard cut the margin to 19-14 at the half and tie the score, 32-32, with 15 seconds to play. After Brown failed to convert a field goal attempt in the game's second overtime period, sophomore kicker Matt Schindel booted a 29-yarder that

gave Harvard a stunning 38-35 win.

Harvard's defending Ivy champions, unbeaten last year, started feebly. The offensive unit was forced to punt twice and had two passes picked off on its first four possessions, while Brown scored on three of its first four series. For the second week in a row, Crimson overzealousness brought on an embarrassing 13 penalties, totaling just over 100 yards. Unhappily for Brown, that lack of discipline was more than offset by Schindel's reliable kicking, stout line play on both offense and defense, a representative day—34 carries, 189 yards rushing, three touchdowns—for star running back Clifton Dawson '07, spectacular catches by receivers Corey



Sophomore Liam O'Hagan, a newcomer at quarterback, earned high marks for his passing, running, and toughness in the Brown game.