could always get work. Kids like us could put in for a grant and somebody would find the money to put up a stage and lighting for a concert at two o’clock in the morning at some square in the old Barrio Gótico.”

A year later he came back, renewed, to Cambridge and Harvard, where he concentrated in social studies and played with the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra, the Bach Society, the Mozart Society, and a handful of campus ensembles and pop-up jazz clubs.

“My days were just totally lit up, after the academics, with jazz and classical music.” That was also true after college, when Berlin headed to law school at the University of Oregon: “Eugene has a great music scene.”

Today he plays regularly with half a dozen Boston-area bands with evocative names: the Dixie Cookbook, the Busted Jug Band, Jazz Is in the Air, the Racky Thomas Blues Band. Whenever he puts together an ensemble of his own, he calls it the Berlin Hall Repertory Orchestra, a nod to the juke joint that his grandfather, a Latvian immigrant, ran above the family’s dry-goods store in Newport News, Virginia. For some years, Berlin played and traveled with country-bluesman Howard “Louie Bluie” Armstrong, “the last of the great black string-band musicians.” When Berlin goes to other cities for work, he tries to set up gigs with musician friends, who are scattered all over. But most of his performances are local: Sinatra standards at a cocktail fundraiser with pianist Shinichi Otsu, or Chicago-style electric blues with the Tall Richard Blues Band at a club on the South Shore. Last October, on one of the last mild evenings of the year, he was in Somerville’s Davis Square, busking with the Dixie Cookbook, which plays early New Orleans jazz. An instrument case stood open for tips at their feet, as the quartet filled the plaza with jaunty syncopation: “My Blue Heaven,” “We’re in the Money,” “Tiger Rag,” “Sweet Sue.” Students and after-work commuters lingered, while children gamboled over from a nearby restaurant’s outdoor tables, dragging their fathers by the hand.

“One thing I’ve learned,” Berlin says, “the more you play a tune—whether an improvisation or rehearsed set pieces—the more dimensions open up, the more space for interpretation.” In improvised music, “The opportunity for open landscapes is quite extraordinary, but even if you’re playing the same tunes over and over, it’s like you find these little internal structures. It’s like discovering a cathedral inside something very small.”

Legal journalist Adam Cohen ’84, J.D. ’87—last seen in these pages with an excerpt from his book on eugenics, focusing on University leaders’ support for that species of social engineering (“Harvard’s Eugenics Era,” March-April 2016, page 48)—has now cast his eye at the past half-century of Supreme Court jurisprudence. What he has found is summed up in the title of his new book, Supreme Inequality: The Supreme Court’s Fifty-Year Battle for a More Unjust America (Penguin Press, $30). The introduction begins with several examples, including an African-American catering assistant at a university who was racially harassed at her workplace, followed by this one:

Jack Gross, an Iowa insurance executive, had a similar difficulty with the Court a few years earlier. He was one of a group of high-performing workers over the age of 50 who were demoted by his company on the same day. Gross was forced to hand his responsibilities over to a younger worker he supervised. A jury ruled that he had been a victim of age discrimination and awarded him damages.

The Court overturned the jury’s verdict, again by a 5-4 vote. Gross met the standard of proof required in race and sex discrimination cases. The Court decided, however, that victims of age discrimination had a higher burden of proof, even though the federal laws against race, sex, and age discrimination used identical language. The dissenting liberal justices accused the majority of “unabashed judicial lawmaking.”

...As shattering as decisions like these have been for individuals, in the aggregate they add up to something much larger: a systematic rewriting of society’s rules to favor those at the top and disadvantage those in the middle and at the bottom. The Supreme Court has played a critical role in building today’s America, in which income inequality is the largest it has been in nearly a century. The Court’s decisions have lifted up those who are already high and brought down those who are low, creating hundreds of millions of winners and losers.

“The more you play a tune, the more dimensions open up.... It’s like discovering a cathedral inside something very small.”