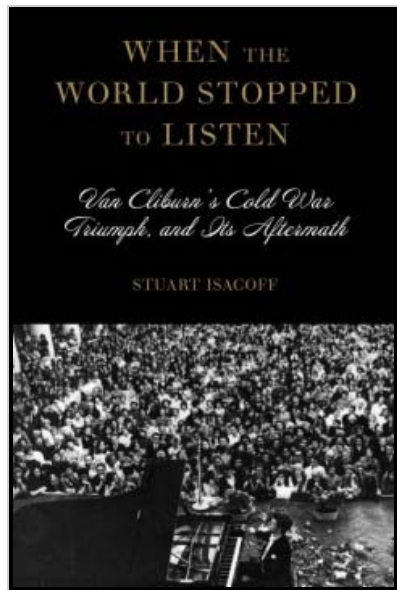


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When the World Stopped to Listen

by Stuart Isacoff

Price: **\$27.95**(Hardcover)

Published: April 18, 2017

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Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

From the Publisher: From the acclaimed author of *A Natural History of the Piano*, the captivating story of the 1958 international piano competition in Moscow, where, at the height of Cold War tensions, an American musician showed the potential of art to change the world. April of 1958--the Iron Curtain was at its heaviest, and the outcome of the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition seemed preordained. Nonetheless, as star musicians from across the globe descended on Moscow, an unlikely favorite emerged: Van Cliburn, a polite, lanky Texan whose passionate virtuosity captured the Russian spirit. This is the story of what unfolded that spring--for Cliburn and the other competitors, jurors, party officials, and citizens of the world who were touched by the outcome. It is a behind-the-scenes look at one of the most remarkable events in musical history, filled with political...

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About The Author

Stuart Isacoff

STUART ISACOFF is a pianist, writer, and the founder of *Piano Today* magazine, which he edited for nearly three decades. A winner of the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about music, he is a regular contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and many other publications....

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Release Info

List Price: \$27.95 (Hardcover)

Published: April 18, 2017

Publisher: Knopf

Pages: 304

ISBN 10: 0385352182

ISBN 13: 9780385352185

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


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What We Say

In 1958, pianist Van Cliburn electrified the world by going behind the Iron Curtain and triumphing at a piano competition. Since shady scoring still happens today at international sporting events, you can imagine how unlikely that was at the height of the Cold War. Writer Stuart Isacoff -- the founder of the magazine *Piano Today* -- tells the story, covering Van Cliburn's unlikely artistic career and the repercussions of that remarkable event. The narrative he presents is interesting and surely as thorough as we're likely to get. Isacoff is on firm ground when detailing the state of cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the West in the 1950s and beyond. He is on less firm ground when detailing Cliburn's

eccentric private life, surely in great part because the late, mostly closeted Cliburn was not terribly forthcoming, given the world he grew up in. A tighter focus on the competition itself might have been better. As it is, we're often brought up short by the presentation of material. The mania of Russian fans for Cliburn is detailed before Isakoff describes even the first round of competition and how he did -- thus giving us the effect before the cause, which is confusing, to say the least. People are going nuts and he hasn't touched a key yet, as far as we know. Later, Cliburn becomes addicted to the drugs peddled by "Dr. Feelgood" and Isakoff eventually dismisses this scandal by mentioning that the doctor would have his license revoked years later in 1975. (Which left a good decade for the effects of his prescriptions to be felt, though it's never mentioned again. The doctor's downfall also led a few years later to Van Cliburn's decade-long absence from performing, a point worth exploring. Instead, Isakoff leaps over this decade-long gap rather quickly.) Isakoff is also ginger when it comes to Cliburn being gay. It's mentioned almost as an aside that Cliburn and most of his close friends studying at Juilliard were gay or bi. And his first important relationship is mentioned in passing a decade AFTER it began. Imagine Cliburn having been married and a biographer not bringing it up chronologically until a decade after they tied the knot. It's confusing and annoying in equal parts. Again and again, major events seem to have happened long ago or long in the future. More importantly, the fact that most critics consider Cliburn to have had a pretty tragic, uninteresting career is almost too impolite for Isakoff to mention. Cliburn quite clearly never came close to fulfilling his early potential, though he remained world famous to the end. One doesn't want sensationalizing and perhaps Isakoff simply didn't have access to any diaries or materials to fully illuminate the artist's life. But for a man who was clearly a maniacal hoarder, enjoyed a weirdly intimate relationship with his mother, became addicted to speed thanks to a dreadful medical practitioner, collapsed onstage, stopped performing for a decade and made sentimental but never artistic comebacks, his life comes across here as pretty uneventful. He had a happy ending personally, finding romance in another relationship that lasted until the end of his life. Cliburn even had his partner on his arm for late career honors, which is pretty amazing given the repressive society he began in. (Both US and Russian officials seemed to worry quite a lot about Cliburn's sexual orientation creating problems for them in the 1950s and later, amusingly enough.) The material of his life is dramatic and diverse but Isakoff can't quite capture the sweep or bring alive some very tantalizing details. He has moments of insight (especially about the intersection of politics and culture) but gets swamped by the passages that demand a more clear-eyed appraisal. Cliburn may have been a sentimentalist, but his story needs someone less willing to overlook the sadder, more tragic moments where he lost nerve or squandered opportunity to turn this friendly, useful account into one that reaches for greatness. -- Michael Giltz

What Others Say

"Illuminating... This well-rounded biography will move readers... Essential reading for music lovers." —*Booklist*

"A touching portrait of Cliburn... Moving." —*Kirkus*

"*When the World Stopped to Listen* is a great book about a great American musician who, in the tensions of Cold War, helped move our world from war to peace, from direct confrontation to peaceful coexistence." —Sergei Khrushchev, author, *Khrushchev in Power*

"Stuart Isakoff's book is an exciting, thorough, and deeply moving reminder of Van Cliburn's triumph at the Tchaikovsky Competition. His penetrating comments on the elements that made Cliburn's playing so profoundly involving, and his sympathetic chronicle of the pianist's life, make this book a most satisfying experience." — Emanuel Ax, musician

"A gripping story of an iconic American pianist, set in a dark era of the Cold War. A great read, not only for musicians, marvelously researched and written. I couldn't put the book down." —Yefim Bronfman, concert pianist

"Stuart Isakoff lets us relive the career-birth of an American musical hero and a politically momentous event as profound as the collapse..."

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