**Model SP #2: Pitching "The Prisonaires"- an excerpt from Jonathan Lethem's novel *The Fortress of Solitude* (A good example of a live movie "pitch"!) Go for the same kind of delivery as Dylan (the narrator) employs here.**

“You’ve got a movie,” he said warmly.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been wanting to hear this.”

He didn’t know the first thing about it, I saw now. I could have offered him a comedy about a rookie vibraphonist for the Boston Pops, or a thriller about a spy who kills by ultrasonic whistle, any of the many things a music guy would be likely to concern himself with.

“I’m closing my eyes,” said Jared. “It means I’m listening.”

I was left to consider his tanned lids, immaculate desk, twin rubber tree plants. I was the ant who had to move them, apparently. “Your movie is about—?”

This was a just-because-my-eyes-are-closed-doesn’t-mean-there’s-no-hurry situation. “A true story,” I said.

“Okay.” “In Tennessee.”

—Tennessee?” Jared opened his eyes.

“Yes.”

“What happened in Tennessee?”

I started again. “In the fifties, in Tennessee, there was this singing group called the Prisonaires. Because they were in prison. But they had a career anyway. They recorded at Sun Records, where Elvis Presley was discovered. That’s the name of the movie—The Prisonaires.”

“Did you know that both my parents came here from Tennessee?” He made it sound like Crimea, or Mars. “Or is that just some kind of coincidence?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Okay. Okay. Wild. What’s it called?” “The Prisonaires.”

“Okay, tell me again.”

“Let me set it up,” I’d been advised to “talk in scenes.” “I’d want to start the movie inside the prison. The lead Prisonaire is a guy named Johnny Bragg. He’s the songwriter, the lead singer. He’s been in jail for years, since he was sixteen. On trumped-up charges. So he and another convict are out in the yard, walking, in the rain, literally, and one says to the other. ‘Here we are, walking in the rain, I wonder what the little girls are doing?’ And Johnny Bragg starts singing the line, a mournful little song, ‘Just Walkin’ in the Rain.’ Which became their first hit. Maybe it could be playing over the opening credits.”

“That reminds me of something else.”

“You’re probably thinking of ‘Singing in the Rain.’ ”

“Oh yeah, sure. He wrote that?”

“Different song.”

“Okay, let me get this: he’s wrongfully imprisoned. What’s the charge?”

“Well, actually it was six convictions for rape. Six ninety-nine-year sentences, with no possibility of parole.”

“Ouch.”

“The cops set him up. He was an arrogant, good-looking kid, and they had it in for him. They pinned a bunch of unsolved rapes on him.”

“Brad Pitt, Matthew McConaughey.”

“I forgot to say black.”

“These are black people?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Jared waved his hands, reluctantly brushing Pitt from the room. “Start again with black people. How does he get out of jail?”

“Well, he doesn’t. I mean, he does later, but not right away. He starts a singing group in jail, prison, the Prisonaires. That’s the gimmick—they’re still in prison. They’re let out for recording sessions and live performances.”

“I don’t get it. In or out?”

“That’s the movie. The Prisonaires were so famous in Tennessee that the governor was under pressure from both sides—to free them, to keep them locked up as an example. A few got pardons, but Bragg was still locked inside. It’s a great story, full of dramatic highs and lows.”

“You’re freaking me out.”

“I am?”

“Because we don’t make movies with dramatic highs and lows.”

“Sorry?”

“Just kidding, man.”

It was becoming possible I’d pitch myself across the gap between our love seats and throttle Jared.

“Look, if I could just describe it without any interruptions I think I could make you see.”

“Dylan, that’s not nice.”

“It’s just—I’m dying to tell you this story.”

“I like you, mister.”

I waited until it was clear he had nothing to add, then said, “Thank you.”

“Five minutes.”

He spread his fingers to show me five, then stretched back and closed his eyes again.

“The Prisonaires are one of the great unknown stories in pop-culture history,” I said. The language was dead on my tongue, but I blundered on. “Five black guys in prison in the 1950s, some serving hundred-year sentences, some on briefer stretches, all victims of prejudice and economic injustice in the Jim Crow South. Five jailbirds who form a singing group just for the love of the music. But they’re so good they sing themselves into an audition. The warden issues special passes just so they can visit Sun Studios—this is in 1953, the same point when a weird little kid named Elvis Presley is hanging around Sun, trying to get a session. But the star of the movie is Johnny Bragg, the lead singer, the lead Prisonaire. When Bragg was sixteen he got railroaded—a woman with a grudge, maybe jealous because he was playing the field, called the cops on him. She screamed rape. And the white cops pinned six convictions on him, just to clear their books. Six unsolved cases, wham. Johnny Bragg gets six hundred years in prison.”

Nearly everything I had was cribbed out of Colin Escott’s liner notes from the Prisonaires CD, or fantasized out of my own musings on a handful of newspaper clippings I’d unearthed myself. But it was enough. I was beginning to inspire myself, to remember what I’d had in mind in the first place, the screenplay I ought to have been researching and writing for the past year.

“On the early-morning bus ride to Sun Studios Bragg looks out his window and sees an empty drive-in movie theater, and he says ‘Wow, look at that crazy cemetery.’ He’s twenty-six—been in prison for ten years.”

“Bad deal,” mused Jared.

“So they record. Cut a single, two sides. Elvis Presley is there. In the studio, hanging around. Just a kid they tolerate around the place. He and Bragg make friends, this is all true, by the way. Great chance for a cameo, like when Val Kilmer plays Elvis in Mystery Train.”

“Never saw it.”

“It’s okay, not great. Anyway, Bragg and the Prisonaires cut a record, two sides, and go back to the joint. End of story, right? Except the song, ‘Just Walkin’ in the Rain,’ is a hit. A big hit, people calling in requests to radio stations. Meanwhile, the Prisonaires are back inside. They don’t have radios, they don’t know, but then they start getting letters in the prison, letters from strangers. They’re becoming stars. And the prison officials start getting involved. You’ve got the warden on the phone to the governor, everybody trying to figure out how to handle this thing, whether to encourage it, how to spin the story.” Jared nodded and rocked slightly, seeming to approve, perhaps envisioning white actors in supporting roles, Gene Hackman, Martin Landau, Geoffrey Rush. “The authorities decide to go the liberal route, and claim the Prisonaires as a sterling example of rehabilitation. They start letting them out to make radio appearances, do live shows, cut more sides at Sun. There’s a lot of sentiment building up, people calling for pardons. Not least the Prisonaires themselves—they cut a song extolling the governor, called “Frank Clement, He’s a Mighty Man.” Basically just a raw bid for mercy. Not everybody’s happy though. The same heavy dudes that set Bragg up in the first place haven’t forgotten him. They’re biding their time, waiting for the Prisonaires to stumble. When the governor’s up for reelection things start getting interesting. These guys are becoming a political football. You can just picture the racial politics involved.”

“I’m thinking KKK, that’s what I’m thinking.”

“Uh, yeah. Just about. The thing about Tennessee in the fifties, Jared, is that the Klan didn’t always necessarily wear a hood.”

I was winging it here. But that was okay. The facts would surely have to be bent to make a movie. This was what I’d come here to do: bend these facts into Hollywood’s ear. “So the governor’s under pressure on both sides, he’s been encouraging these boys, raising their hopes. He begins making plans to release the Prisonaires, talking about them on the radio, milking it for publicity. And his Republican opponent is working the other angle, turning it into a scare story. ‘The good citizens of Tennessee better hope that not all of its convicted killers can sing’—shit like that.”

“Wow. This is good stuff.”

“Let me describe one scene for you. I see this as a real centerpiece. There are photographs of a Prisonaires show from just before the first pardons—remember, these guys have families, they’ve left women behind, and the only time they get out is onstage. They can’t mingle. There’s probably armed guards at the edge of the stage, that sort of thing. These pictures, I should have brought them along, they’ll blow your mind, Jared.” By force of will I was leveraging the Prisonaires’ reality, their sweat and pain and love, into this pallid room, into Jared’s pallid mind. I’d make it stick, here where nothing stuck. I understood now that I was born for pitching. I had only to be let into the room. “It’s like the Beatles at Shea Stadium, Jared. Or Elvis. Women weeping, breaking down. But these aren’t just a bunch of teenage girls. They’re the Prisonaires’ mothers, grandmothers, aunts, girlfriends holding babies.. I see this as a real centerpiece. There are photographs of a Prisonaires show from just before the first pardons—remember, these guys have families, they’ve left women behind, and the only time they get out is onstage. They can’t mingle. There’s probably armed guards at the edge of the stage, that sort of thing. These pictures, I should have brought them along, they’ll blow your mind, Jared. They’re falling apart, tearing up handkerchiefs, crawling on the floor while these guys sing. The music is so beautiful, it’s just tearing people’s hearts out. Maybe you’d even have the girl who set Johnny Bragg up, probably she’d be there too. She’s sorry for what she did, she’s still in love. And she’s in this crowd of women, just falling to pieces.”

“Holy shit.”

“That’s just half of it. When this crying wave hits the audience, the Prisonaires lose it too. They try to go on singing but they can’t. They’re separated from these women, from their mothers, everyone, by the distance of the stage. And they start bawling too. They’re clinging to each other, clinging to microphones and chairs. Trying to reach out, but the guards push them back. It’s like, I don’t know, like Guernica, Jared. It’s a scene you don’t forget.”

“I can really see this.” Jared sounded astonished at his own powers of visualization.

“Of course you can. Okay, so, back up: the governor. He’s getting reports on this stuff. He’s riding a tiger and he’s afraid it’s going to eat him alive. So he springs a couple of the guys. His opponents are roasting him alive, but he springs them anyway. And that’s when a plan emerges. The governor’s got a crafty little aide, a Kissinger type, who suggests they leave Johnny Bragg inside. Bragg’s the one carrying the heavy sentence, and he’s the songwriter, the lead voice—the genius. Split the band away from him and maybe the story can be allowed to die out.”

“No.”

“It’s horrible, but yes. That’s how they play it. They pardon all four of the other Prisonaires, one by one. Everybody’s waiting for Bragg to come out and join them. Looks like a happy ending, but it’s too good to be true. The governor’s enemies on the right have him in a box. So he makes a show of being tough on crime by leaving Bragg inside. The warden cuts off his privileges. The hope is that without the music, this thing is destined to blow over.”

“Jeesus.”

Jesus, yes. Where was I unearthing this crap? I was pitching the Oliver Stone version.

“But Bragg doesn’t quit making music. With all his Prisonaires on the outside, he forms a new prison group, the Marigolds. Years are going by here, you understand. They’re squeezing the life out of this man. In ’56 Johnnie Ray records a cover of ‘Just Walkin’ in the Rain,’ and Bragg gets a check in prison for fourteen hundred dollars—he tells them just to put it in the commissary, he thinks it’s for fourteen dollars. He’s never seen so much money in his life. But he’s got no way to spend it. The Marigolds record a few numbers for Excello Records, but nothing really hits.”

“What’s with Marigolds?”

“There was a craze for flower groups, the Clovers, the Posies, stuff like that. Just like everybody had to be bugs a few years later—the Crickets, the Beatles.”

“Ah.”

“Bragg doesn’t get parole until ’59, six years after the Prisonaires’ first hit. And then he only lasts a year before they set him up for another fall. He’s charged with robbery and attempted murder—for stealing two dollars and fifty cents. Pathetic. White women come forward again, claiming he tried to attack them. He’s a magnet for these kinds of accusations. It’s classic race panic, and Bragg’s this symbol that pushes everyone’s buttons. The man must have had some kind of presence, some pride when he walked down the street, that these white authorities couldn’t abide. They just had to put him back inside, it was their way of coping.”

“I don’t know if you’ll like this but I’m totally picturing Denzel Washington.”

“Listen: that year Elvis Presley, fresh out of the army, detours his trip home to visit the state prison to hang out with Bragg. Picture it, the same weird little kid who was hanging around the studio admiring the Prisonaires harmonies is now the biggest entertainer on the planet. And he remembers Bragg, it matters to Elvis. The thirty-year-old black con and the King. The visit gets publicity, but only for Elvis. No one remembers Bragg’s case anymore, and the Prisonaires are a distant memory. Elvis offers to pay for a lawyer, but Bragg says it’s okay, he’s cut a deal. There’s nothing on paper, no proof, but Bragg’s promised the warden not to push the case to the Supreme Court in return for a promise he’d be out in nine months.” I paused, then, to set it up.

“Yeah?”

“They kept him another seven years.”

“You’re killing me, Dylan.”

“It goes on and on. In the sixties he re-forms the Prisonaires again, this time with a white guy in the group—it’s the era of integration now. But the other prisoners don’t like it, he gets attacked in the yard. Later he gets out again and marries a white woman, and the cops arrest him for walking down the street with her—”

“Stop, okay? Stop. Don’t tell me any more.”

Jared had been growing steadily more agitated for some time, and now he sprang from his seat, bugged his eyes, and paced to the desk.

“Is something the matter?”

“Everything’s great, Dylan. It’s just—who else knows about this?”

“You’re the first.”

I assumed this was the answer Jared had to hear. Needless to say, the Prisonaires story had only been sitting around for thirty-odd years, waiting to be plucked up. It didn’t belong to me. For all I knew another writer was turning in a polished third draft of his version in the office next door. I dared ask,

“You like it?”

“Are you kidding? It’s pure dynamite. I’m just thinking, okay? I’ve got to think. This is Friday, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay, practically speaking, that means I’m not going to find anybody until Monday.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Where are you going from here?”

I suspected ForbiddenCon wasn’t a reply Jared would easily make sense of. It wasn’t that easy for me to make sense of myself.

“Back to my hotel.”

“Don’t shit me.”

“I’m not.”

“Because a part of me, wow, a part of me doesn’t want to let you out of my office until I know what we’re doing with this, until I get something from you that I can take into a meeting and a promise you’ll give me a couple of days from the weekend. Forty-eight hours at least. Do you want a tissue, mister?”

“Sure.”

I’d tear-streaked my face, evoking Johnny Bragg’s dilemma. I wonder how many of Jared’s pitches wept in this office. Maybe all of us, by the end. Jared plopped his tissue box on my love seat, then leaned over his desk, onto the intercom.

“Mike?”

“Yes?”

“Mike, I just heard something great. This is what I’m always telling you—you never know how it’s going to happen. Some boat-guy’s friend just walks into my office and it’s this writer Dylan and Dylan has something really great, really really great.”