

counterpoint

the state news magazine

april 4, 1975



"Put another nickel
in the jukebox..."

p. 4

The joy of man's desire

Tom McNeil is to the piano what Van Cliburn is to . . . well, the piano.

You won't find McNeil sharing the stage with Leonard Bernstein at Carnegie Hall (you might find him there but it would probably be leaning over the inside of the piano rather than sitting in front of it). His hands are no less important than Cliburn's and his contribution to music no less worthy.

Dealing with intricacies that would impress Beethoven, McNeil strips down, repairs, reassembles and refinishes grand pianos — those beautiful monsters you have seen in your grandmother's living room or just over Leonard Bernstein's left shoulder on the children's concert series.

Part garage mechanic, part welder, part carpenter, McNeil measures, cuts, shapes, cajoles, maneuvers and molds old grands into new—an appreciable art when one considers that he is dealing with 12,000-plus pieces of a complex machinery, not to mention the fact that his margin of error is limited to a tolerance of 1000th of an inch.

The range of sizes and shapes he works with vary as much as the work that needs to be done on them — from a heavy cast iron plate that has to be maneuvered into position with pulleys to a pinboard swisscheesed with tiny openings that need to be periodically remeasured to make sure they will fit exactly.

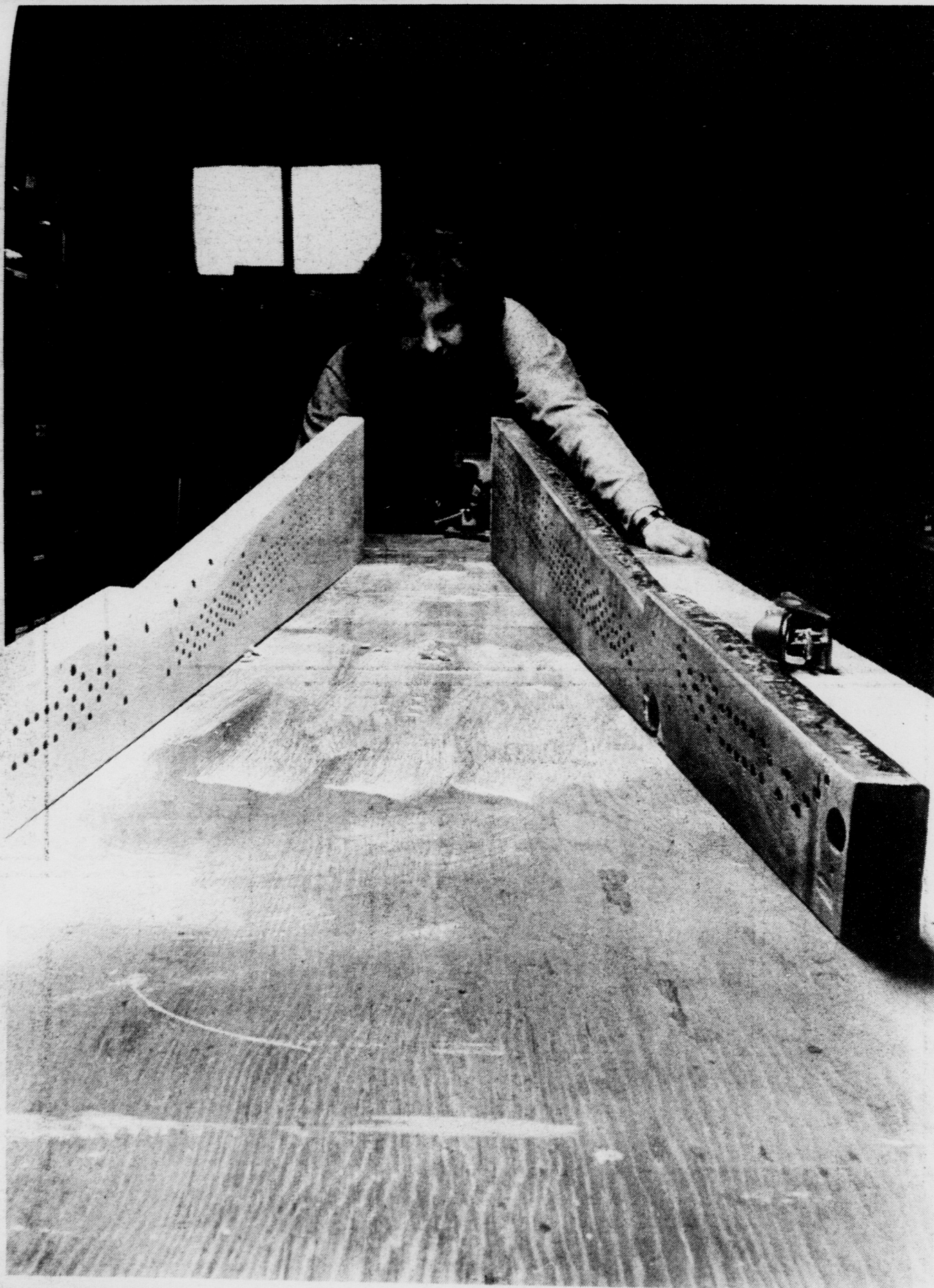
McNeil is paid well for his work and works well for what he is paid. He earns as much as \$3000 a job, putting close to 500 hours into each. And, like Cliburn, he numbers Michigan's Interlochen among his clients.

Working out of his home at 119 Allen Street in Lansing, McNeil and his assistant, Laura Quackenbush, seldom need to send away for any materials. His workshop is studded with equipment and tools, a collection that has grown since his initial interest in rebuilding pianos.

"I've played piano since I was a kid (he is an accomplished pianist in his own right) and I decided I wanted to learn about it from both sides," he says.

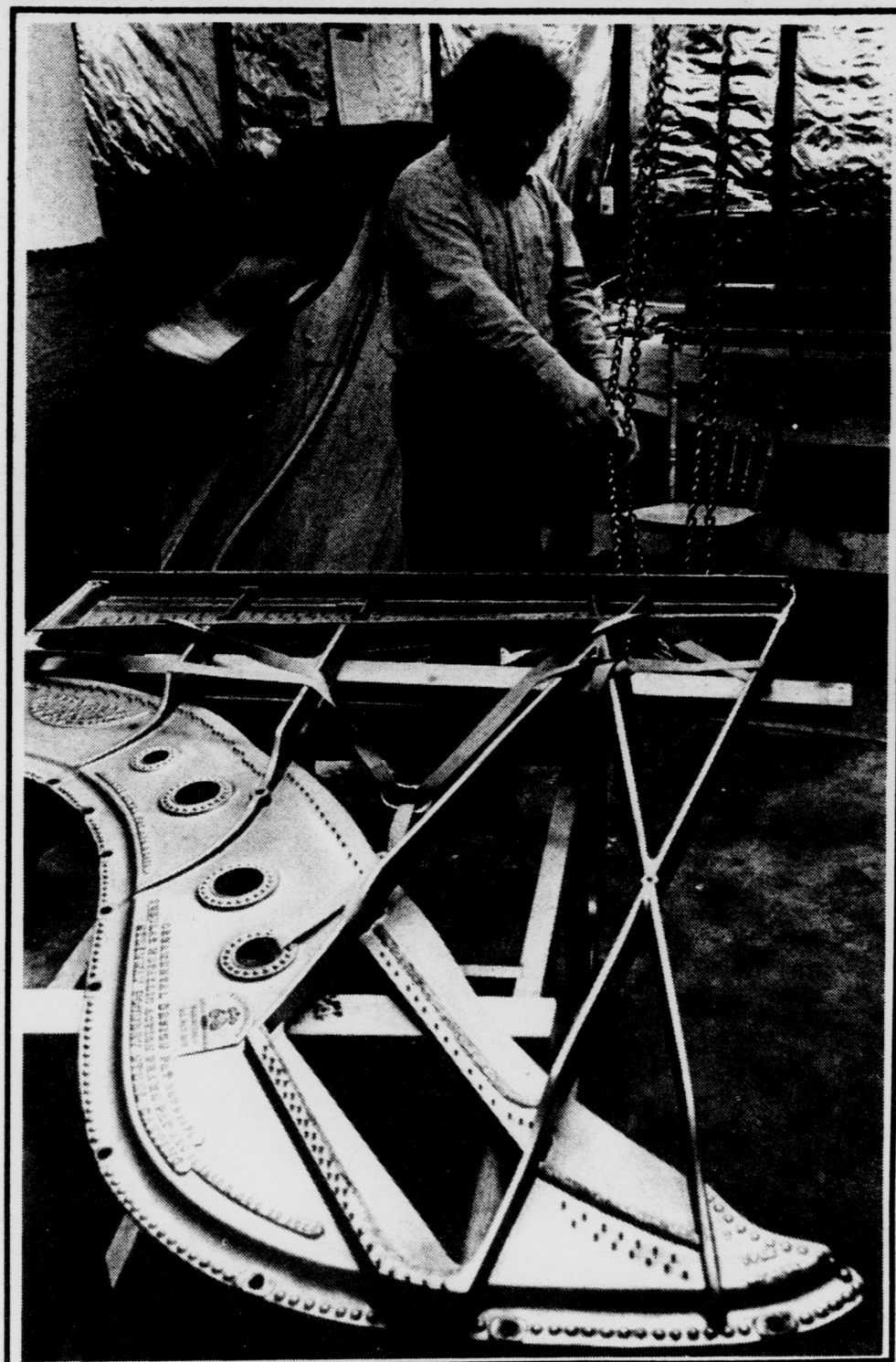
His interest got a boost while he was earning a B.A. in music at MSU (he is currently working on a masters in musicology here). He met, and apprenticed under, a craftsman whose name he refuses to reveal.

"There are a lot of people who want to get into
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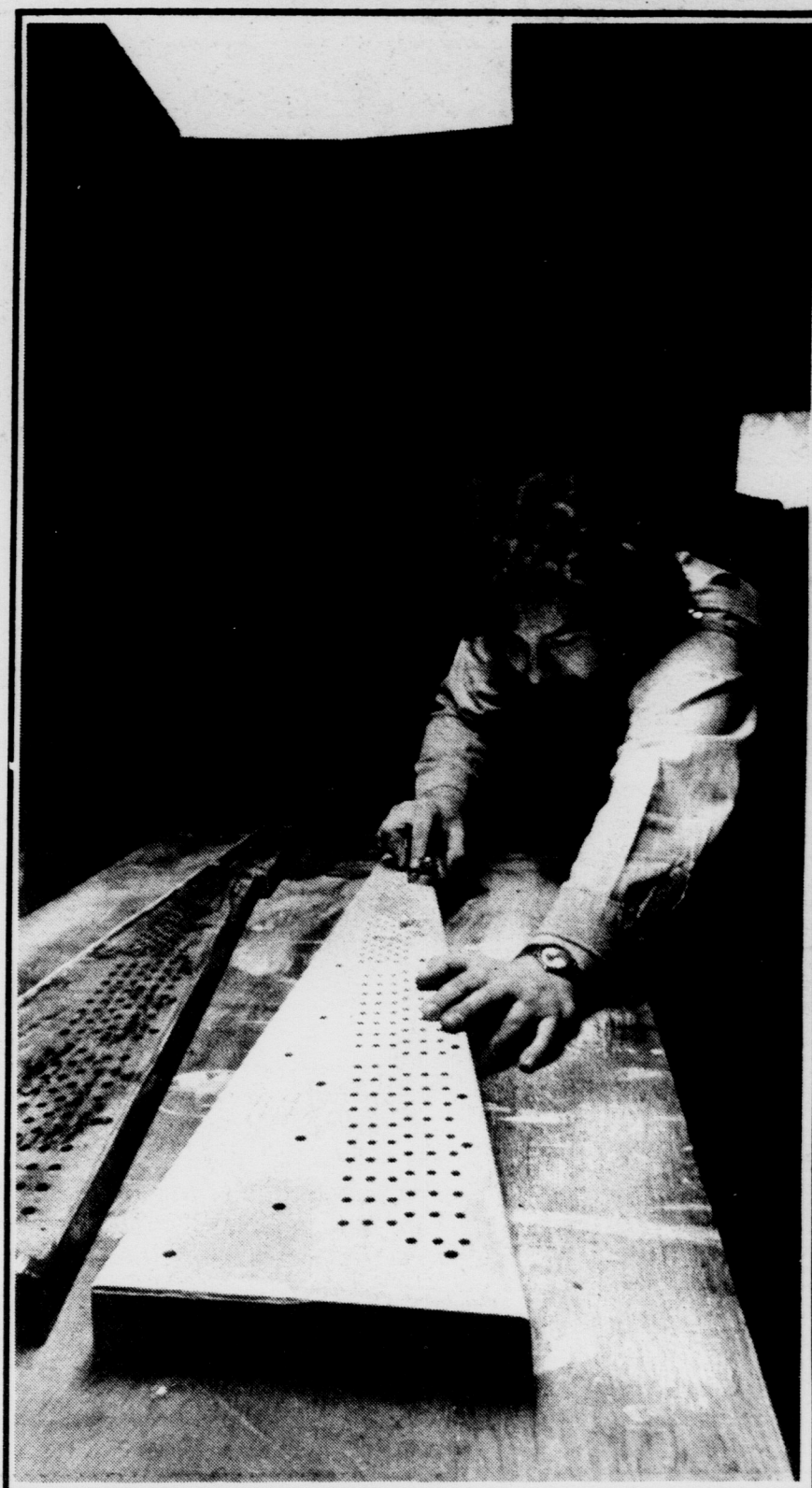


Lansing craftsman Tom McNeil spends up to five hundred hours rebuilding a single piano. The more than 200 holes in a grand's pin block (above) must be precisely measured and drilled. This piece alone was fitted over 60 times before it was completed.

Photos by
Dave Olds



Lifting the heavy iron is made easier by use of a set of pulleys. There is good reason for them as this hunk of cast iron restrains more than 20 tons of force when the piano is strung. McNeil's work on the 12,000 plus part grands also requires intense concentration as he must work within a tolerance of 1000th of an inch.





Highway 61 where are you?

By FRANK FOX

It's 3 a.m. on I-96 and the trucks are rolling.

They're driving onward, ever onward through the muddy night with truckers' teeth grinding and white knuckles strangling steering wheels—the toll exacted by too little sleep, too much stimulation and hallucinations of giant armadillos in cowboy hats singing "Happy Trails to You."

The highway flutters and teases, the enveloping night becomes a massive wall of cotton and King Edward cigars are being chewed into tarry goo.

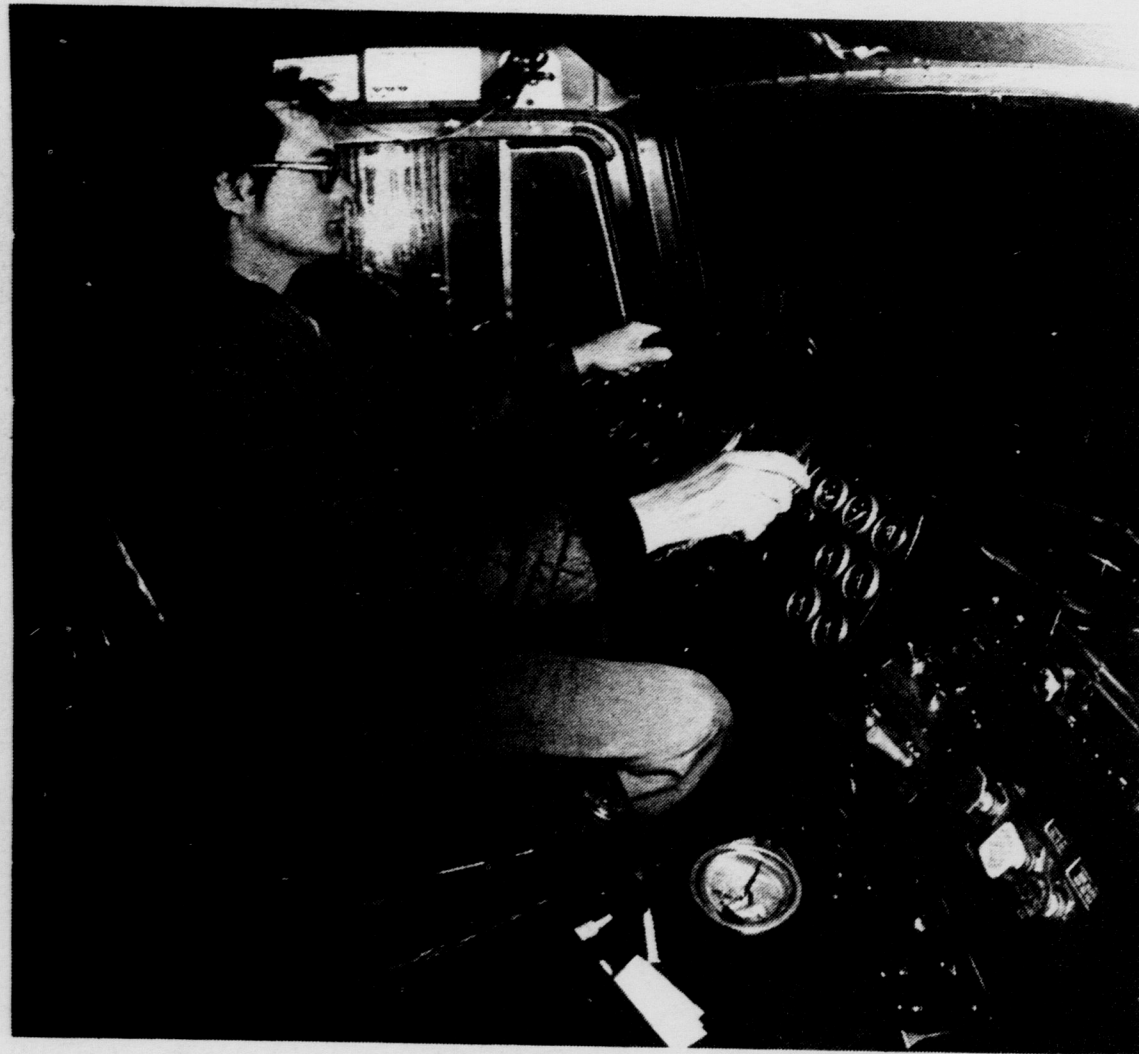
Suddenly, like a beacon sweeping across an oily sea, a huge sign comes into view above the I-96 Overpass at U.S. 27. It can be seen for miles down the road, towering improbably into the sky. Spotlights dance over the face of the orange "76" ball atop this truckers' landmark, which proclaims Don's Windmill Truck Stop at the southwest approach to Lansing.

Beaming in on the sign, truckers wheel into the vast parking lot and join the dozens of idling rigs lined up in hulking rows behind the restaurant.

Not just a few trucks, but trucks everywhere—big Volkswagen-eating mothers that have barreled in from all across the Rand-McNally hinterlands of the night.

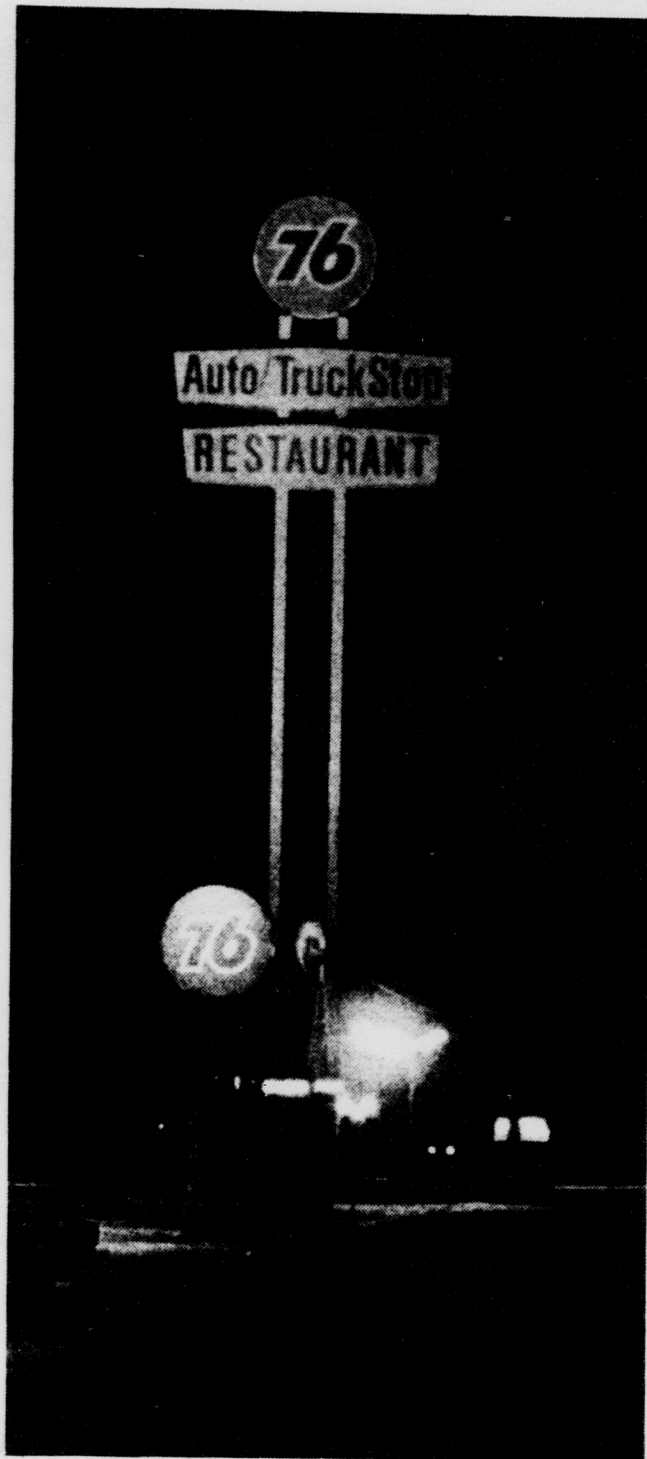
The lot's capacity is from 75 to 100 rigs and it is full of diesels with engines idling low and guttural in a chorus of subdued power. Trucks pull in from the highway and slide up to one of the numerous fuel islands. Trucks move out of their parking spaces and are immediately replaced. The rhythm never ceases.

The lot is a democratic meeting ground for trucks from across America. Aristocratic Kenworth Diesels, Peterbilts and White Freightliners stand amidst plebian Fords and Chevrolets. "Morash the Mover's" Massachusetts Ford sits just down the row from "The Spirit of 76," a flag-bedecked Peterbilt out of L.A. Moving vans and steel haulers, auto transports and trucks loaded



The highway never ends. A white glare develops in front of the eyes and there is little difference between the sun and the moon. There is solitude, plenty of it, and the infrequent pleasing glow of the three little words that tug at the oil-slick building up in the heart: "Truckers welcome here."

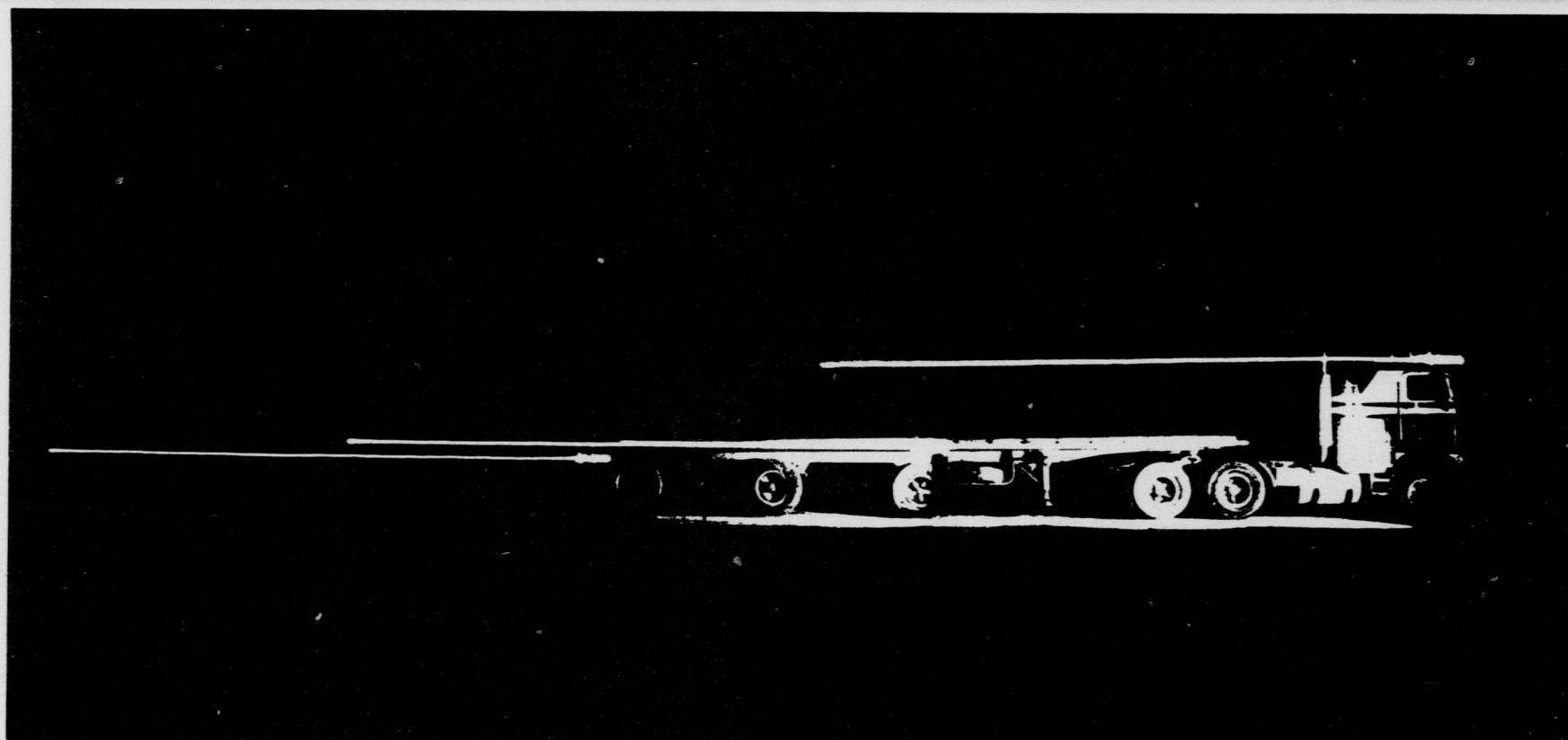
Photos by
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to capacity with obscure machinery mingle beneath the tall light towers that rise high above the lot.

Here are trucks designed to haul freight in an unpretentious, workmanlike manner, and there are lavish, fully-equipped custom jobs—luxurious creations for the connoisseur of diesels.

The trucks line up behind the fueling station and in front of a service garage. Farther down is an older truckers' motel but the focal point of the complex is the new, two-story combination restaurant, motel and truckers' general store.

One of the first things that one sees upon entering the restaurant is a sign prominently hung over the near counter, which reads:

"Reserved for Professional Drivers. Professional drivers operate on a time schedule. This area is reserved to assure they are not delayed."

There they are under the sign, the professional drivers—and not a taxi driver among them.

They crouch down low over their menus in fur-lined vests, plaid shirts, western jackets, battered cowboy hats and clutch worn boots—running fingers over sandpaper faces and won't you please warm up my coffee ma'am?

They sit on the stools at the counter, occasionally grinning at one another as someone recounts a well-remembered tale that might best be forgotten.

They are twice-told tales, to say the least—tales of getting stuck like a mole in a turnpike tunnel, stories of low bridges that can

open up a trailer like a can of beans and dreams of the good luck comin' just down the road.

Carl Harvey operates a small fleet of trucks in Fennville, Michigan. He has heard his share of truckers' stories.

"One of our drivers was in a small town in New York State and had stopped to eat and had parked on a hill above a restaurant," Harvey recalled. "He had just finished his breakfast and was checking out when the waitress said 'Holy smokes, here comes your truck.'"

"The air had bled out of his brakes and the truck came down the hill and hit the waitress' car. The car came right through the big plate glass window and wiped out the whole front of the restaurant completely. Lock, stock and barrel."

Harvey had the look of a man who could cope with having a Mack truck fall on his big toe as he recollected other happy moments.

"I'm on call 24 hours a day. So it's nothing to have a driver call me up at 3 o'clock in the morning and say 'I've got a problem,'" Harvey explained.

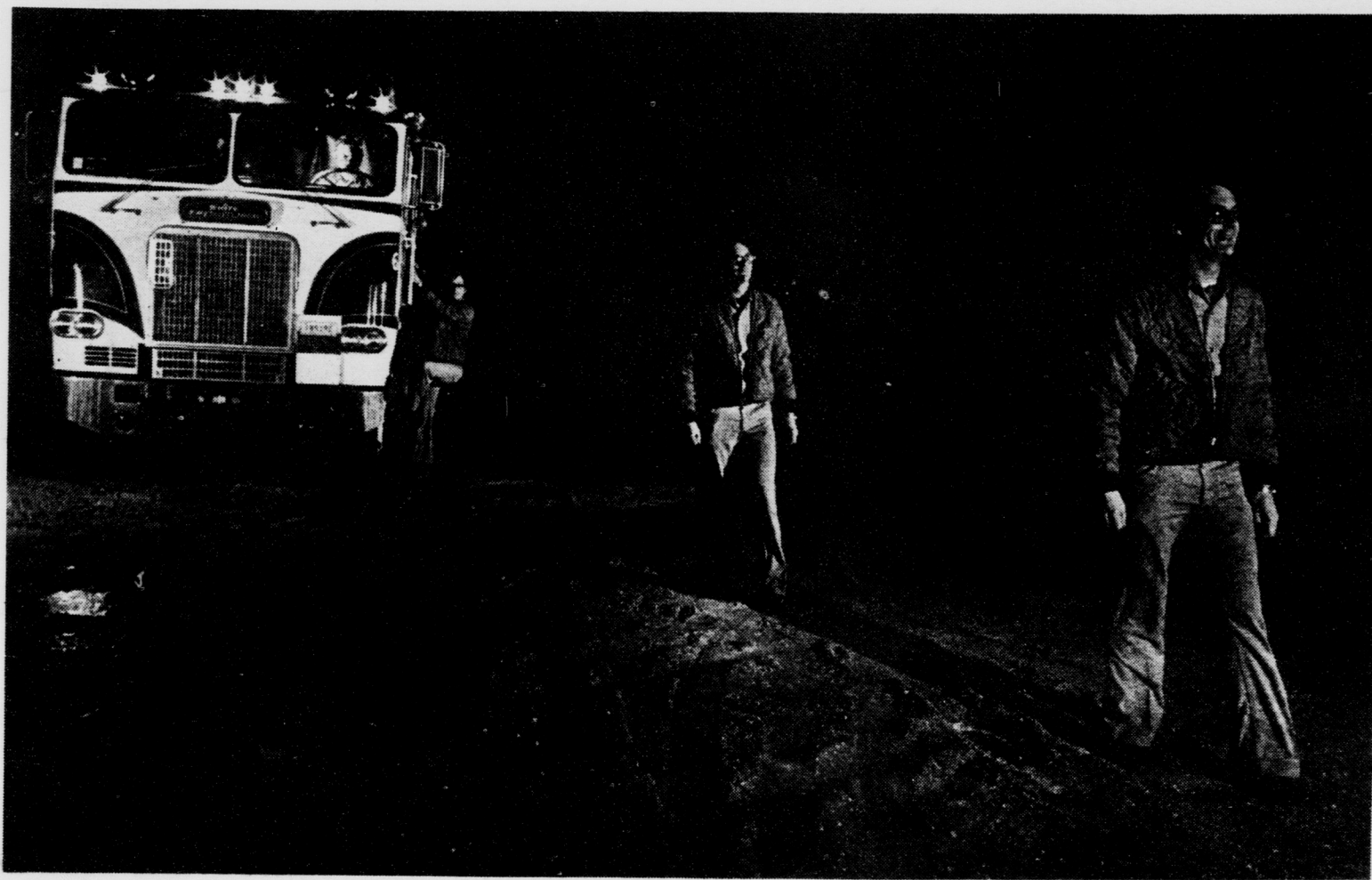
"So I asked him, well what's your problem?"

"And he told me, well . . . you know, my trailer just broke in two right in the middle of Interstate 65 just south of Indianapolis with 22 tons of steel on it.

"It makes you wonder what you've got to do next."

The waitresses know what to do next:

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A trucker's rig is his mother, lover, abuser, companion and soul. He spends most of his waking — several of his sleeping — hours in the cab, the nerve center of his livelihood with hot coffee, stale rolls and the humane crackle of the CB unit to remind him he is alive.

Photos by Dale Atkins



Smokies and plain brown wrappers

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smile, be nice to the drivers and bring more coffee. Joke with the boys, take an interest in what they have to say and keep them happy so they'll come back next time.

"The average trucker is a very friendly fellow, a hard worker," explained Don Millisor, the truck stop's owner.

"But once in a while you get one who is irritable or tired, particularly when the weather is bad and things haven't been running smoothly. We try to keep our spirits up and keep them happy."

"There are a lot of trucking companies who run I-96 every day of the week. So we get to know these drivers who run the expressway. My waitresses and my fuelers become very attached to these people," he said.

Millisor said truckers' evaluation of the service at a truck stop can make or break a business.

"The drivers have a grapevine that you wouldn't believe—and that can go good or bad. If you do a good job you're going to get a good reputation and if you do a bad job you're going to lose your business in a hurry," he said.

"We do a lot of business that isn't truckers. We do a lot of tourist business, but our truckers are number one as far as we're concerned."

The Windmill's interest in truckers is reflected in the plethora of items in the truckers' general store which opens a few feet off the restaurant.

It's a Macy's of the open road. The shelves are lined with western shirts, jackets, slacks flared for pointed-toed cowboy boots, mirrors, red warning flags, wrenches, Mack Truck belt buckles and fancy stick shift knobs.

Then there is the display case full of citizens' band (CB) radio gear, which is becoming



Angels in padded shoes and support hose.

Waitresses in a truckstop, heroines of countless off-key country ballads, always ready with steaming Java or to lend an ear to everyone's woes.

How many gallons of coffee to they pour in a night? How many sizzling hamburgers do they deliver to hungry truckers who devour them in three bites and out the door?

How often do they fend off the same over-used lines from characters who imitate W.C. Fields and come off like Joe Potatoes?

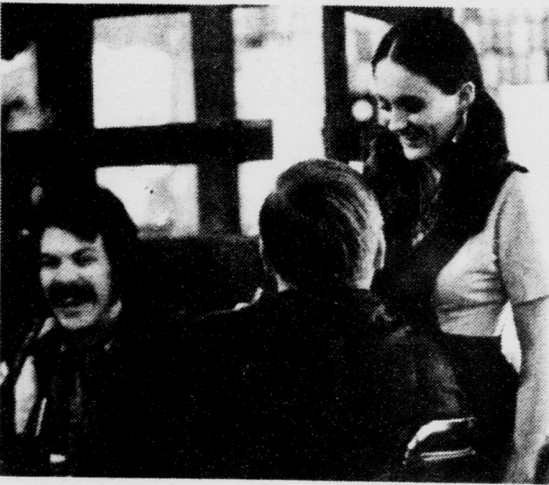
But they maintain. They keep their cool and they bolster the spirits of countless denizens of the night who wander in for dinners of chocolate cake and ketchup.

They recommend the pie of the



day and serve up special childrens' portions that are mashed into unrecognizable nothingness by fiesty little tykes who snap at them with cappistols and point at them like waitresses who came from Mars in space helmets.

But they never show fatigue, never fail to laugh at tired humor or to say that some ominous little beast scattering sugar all over the floor is the cutest little trucker on wheels.



"... to Smilin' Ed from Mary Lou — playin' that sweet country music for all those turtle-smashin' truckers out on Highway 61..."

essential equipment for any well-outfitted rig. These short range, two-way radios are used by truckers to report accidents, find out the weather up the road, relay important messages — and check out the cops.

"Legally they're supposed to have the radios registered and use call letters, but I don't know anybody who does," Carl Harvey explained.

"So the truckers use 'handles.' Everybody has a handle. This is a code name. These are everything from 'Dope Addict' to 'Kingfish' to 'Deerslayer' to 'Fifth Wheel' to 'Piston.' Some of them are real winners."

"If you don't understand what they're saying, it's a completely foreign language," Harvey added.

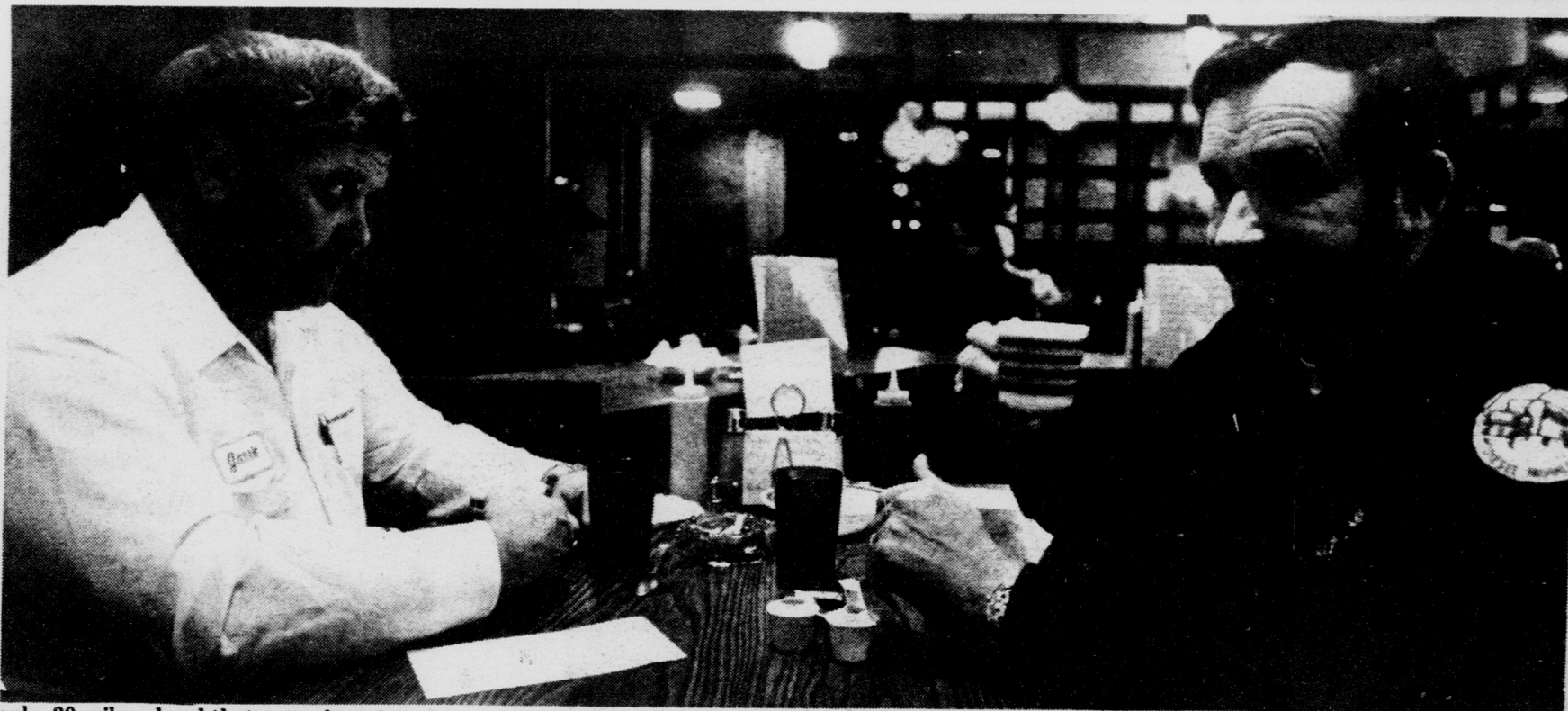
When one has a little knowledge of the truckers' CB argot, listening to them out on the highway can be a real gas. A state cop becomes a "smokey," a state cop in an unmarked car is a "smokey in a plain brown wrapper," or in a "Tiajuana Taxi," is he's in a marked car. A deputy sheriff is a "county mountie." A "picture taker" is a radar cop and a "scalehouse" is a truck weigh station.

"It's really hilarious when a picture taker shows up," Harvey said. "Everybody knows it's there but you'll hear the same message a hundred times. One guy will pass the radar, see it and report it. Then the next guy behind him will confirm it."

"Then the next guy will say, 'yes, it's still there, everybody watch out for a picture taker at 19 mile marker on the north bound lane,' and so on," he said.

Harvey explained that drivers have been getting far less tickets since the advent of the truckers' CB network.

"They have a constant communication with other drivers and know where every police officer is and where radar is set up. They know



at 25, maybe 30 miles ahead that, say, there is radar set up at the 16 mile marker. So they know when they get to the 18 mile marker to start slowing down is they are in fact speeding."

Harvey said police agencies do not get off on CB equipment at all.

Out in Don's parking lot, sitting in a high cab festooned with decals and a small American flag, a trucker sips his lip-blistering coffee and flips on his AM radio. Immediately he picks up on the overdrive voice of Charlie Douglas, broadcasting the "Charlie Douglas Road Gang on Radio Interstate 87," from radio station WWL, New Or-le-ans."

And our boy Charlie is in fine form tonight:

"...the Charlie Douglas Road Gang, broadcasting this morning in West Memphis Arkansas, the Mid-Continent Truck Stop at the Highway 61 by-pass north of the freeway..."

Now you must understand, Charlie Douglas is no ordinary DJ. No way. He's out there in the middle of the God-awful night at some fried catfish truck stop in the South broadcasting to dry-mouthed, wide-eyed truckers all over the high-gear flatlands of America.

"...we're at Interstate 55..."

Charlie is in the groove tonight, plugged right in, he is...moving like an overloaded steel hauler down a steep grade. He's pushing truck stops and friendly truckers' motels from Florida to Mississippi, from Massachusetts to all points down the line.

"...trucks using the Royal Guard by-pass filter on the Royal Guard 30-60 program can extend oil change intervals to 60,000 miles..."

Charlie is talking to visiting truckers on the air, hyping the hospitality just down the road and dedicating Merle Haggard tunes to Smilin' Ed from Mary Lou—playin' that sweet, sweet country music for all those turtle-smashin' truckers out on Highway 61...

"...and that was 'All I Have to Offer You is Me,' from Charlie Pride. And that's for A.H. Montgomery, a National Foods driver out of New Orleans going to Baton Rouge, from Rosemary to Ozona Mississippi..."

And its 3 a.m. on the darkened highways and glowing truck stops from here to the paved horizon—and the trucks are rolling.



The conversation is free, the coffee cheap, as the hours crawl by and the days are measured in concrete, and it's only a short while before the rig is refueled. On your way again, tipping your hat to the gods of the highway, hoping you're still around for the next cup of coffee.



Rhapsody in rosewood

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things like this and he doesn't want to be hassled," McNeil explains.

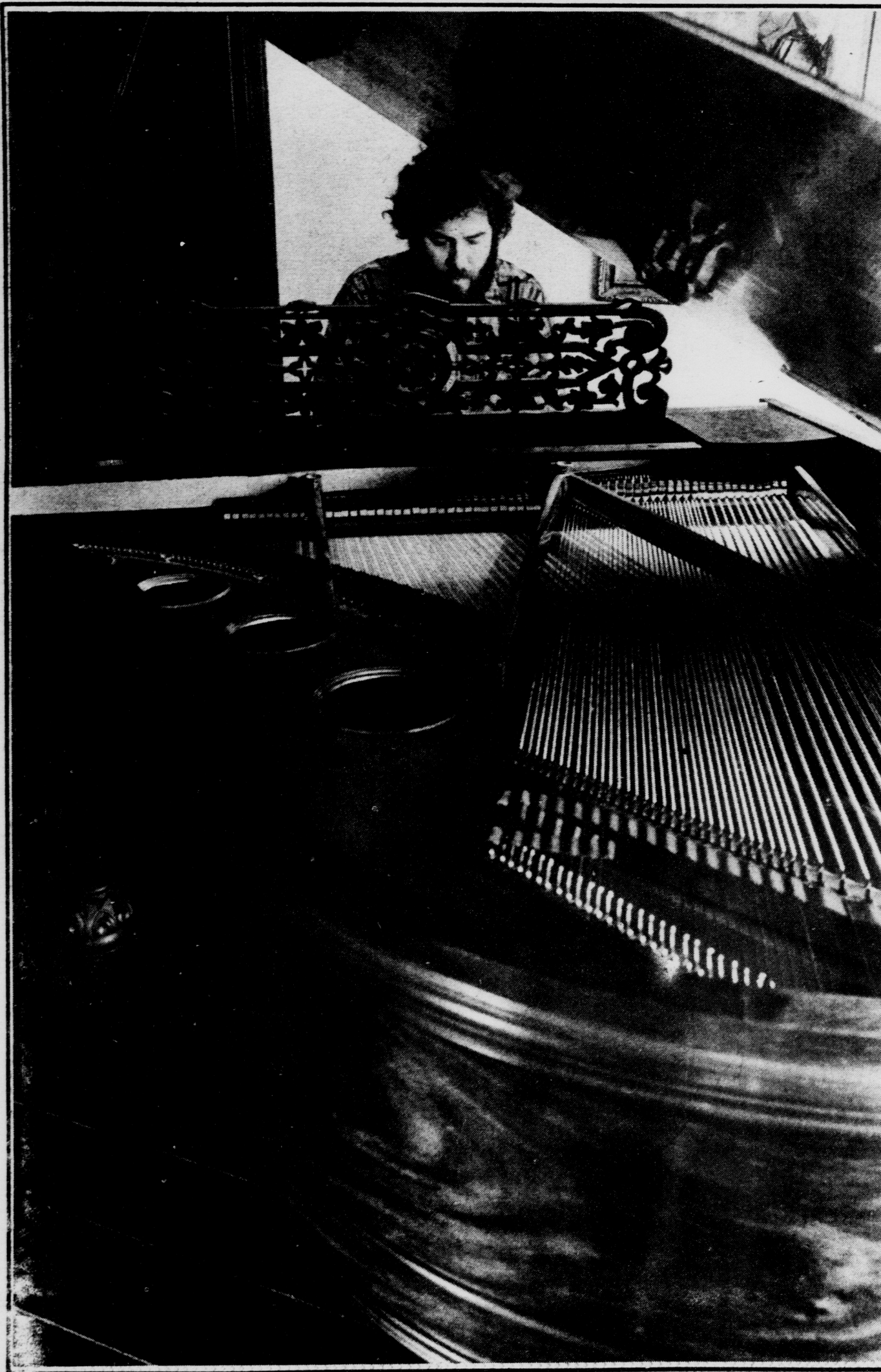
McNeil also claims a longtime interest in woodworking and points to a refinished in rosewood 1860 model grand he rebuilt for friends as his piece de resistance.

His future plans include completing his masters in musicology and becoming a resident piano technician at a university. He has checked

out a couple of offers but says they were not substantial enough.

Meanwhile, he does a lot of work for MSU, sings in the Plymouth Congregational Church choir, and improves on his craft.

Whatever his future plans hold, McNeil is living evidence that there is an elusive beauty in the hands of men that surfaces in those who construct the instruments of music as well as those who play them.



Tom McNeil, 28, has been rebuilding grand pianos for a quarter of his lifetime. A graduate student in musicology at MSU, McNeil's talented hands and fingers transform quaint wooden relics into sculptured instruments with clear, delicate sound. He has studied pianos and played them longer than he has repaired them, and occasionally visits his finished products. This one, rebuilt for his friends Tom and Lisa Hamerski, is a circa 1860 model McNeil declares his masterpiece.

Photos by
Dave Olds