

# **Venus Smiles**

**Original title: Mobile**

**by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009**

**Published: 1957**  
in »Science Fantasy«



Low notes on a high afternoon.

As we drove away after the unveiling my secretary said, „Mr Hamilton, I suppose you realize what a fool you’ve made of yourself?“

„Don’t sound so prim,“ I told her. „How was I to know Lorraine Drexel would produce something like that?“

„Five thousand dollars,“ she said reflectively. „It’s nothing but a piece of old scrap iron. And the noise! Didn’t you look at her sketches? What’s the Fine Arts Committee for?“

My secretaries have always talked to me like this, and just then I could understand why. I stopped the car under the trees at the end of the square and looked back. The chairs had been cleared away and already a small crowd had gathered around the statue, staring up at it curiously. A couple of tourists were banging one of the struts, and the thin metal skeleton shuddered weakly. Despite this, a monotonous and high-pitched wailing sounded from the statue across the pleasant morning air, grating the teeth of passers-by.

„Raymond Mayo is having it dismantled this afternoon,“ I said, „If it hasn't already been done for us. I wonder where Miss Drexel is?“

„Don't worry, you won't see her in Vermilion Sands again. I bet she's halfway to Red Beach by now.“

I patted Carol on the shoulder. „Relax. You looked beautiful in your new skirt. The Medicis probably felt like this about Michelangelo. Who are we to judge?“

„You are,“ she said. „You were on the committee, weren't you?“

„Darling,“ I explained patiently. „Sonic sculpture is the thing. You're trying to fight a battle the public lost thirty years ago.“

We drove back to my office in a thin silence. Carol was annoyed because she had been forced to sit beside me on the platform when the audience began to heckle my speech at the unveiling, but even so the morning had been disastrous on every count. What might be perfectly acceptable at Expo 75 or the Venice Biennale was all too obviously pass at Vermilion Sands.

When we had decided to commission a sonic sculpture for the square in the centre of Vermilion Sands, Raymond Mayo and I had agreed that we should patronize a local artist. There were dozens of professional sculptors in Vermilion Sands, but only three had deigned to present themselves before the committee. The first two we saw were large, bearded men with enormous fists and impossible schemes—one for a hundred-foot-high vibrating aluminium pylon, and the other for a vast booming family group that involved over fifteen tons of basalt mounted on a megalithic step-pyramid. Each had taken an hour to be argued out of the committee room.

The third was a woman: Lorraine Drexel. This elegant and autocratic creature in a cartwheel hat, with her eyes like black orchids, was a sometime model and intimate of Giacometti and John Cage. Wearing a blue crêpe de Chine dress ornamented with lace serpents and other art nouveau emblems, she sat before us like some fugitive Salome from the world of Aubrey Beardsley. Her immense eyes regarded us with an almost hypnotic calm, as if she had discovered that very moment some unique quality in these two amiable dilettantes of the Fine Arts Committee.

She had lived in Vermilion Sands for only three months, arriving via Berlin, Calcutta and the Chicago New Arts Centre. Most of her sculpture to date had been scored for various Tantric and Hindu hymns, and I remembered her brief affair with a world-famous pop-singer, later killed in a car crash, who had been an enthusiastic devotee of the sitar. At the time, however, we had given no thought to the whining quarter-tones of this infernal instrument, so grating on the Western ear. She had shown us an album of her sculptures, interesting chromium constructions that compared favourably with the run of illustrations in the latest art magazines. Within half an hour we had drawn up a contract.

I saw the statue for the first time that afternoon thirty seconds before I started my speech to the specially selected assembly of Vermilion Sands notables. Why none of us had bothered to look at it beforehand I fail to understand. The title printed on the invitation cards—*Sound and Quantum: Generative Synthesis 3*—had seemed a little odd, and—the general shape of the shrouded statue even more suspicious. I was expecting a stylized human figure but the structure under the acoustic drapes had the proportions of a medium-sized radar aerial. However, Lorraine Drexel sat beside me on the stand, her bland eyes surveying the crowd below. A dream-like smile gave her the look of a tamed Mona Lisa.

What we saw after Raymond Mayo pulled the tape I tried not to think about. With its pedestal the statue was twelve feet high. Three spindly metal legs, ornamented with spikes and crosspieces, reached up from the plinth to a triangular apex. Clamped on to this was a jagged structure that at first sight seemed to be an old Buick radiator grille. It had been bent into a rough U five feet across, and the two arms jutted out horizontally, a single row of sonic cores, each about a foot long, poking up like the teeth of an enormous comb. Welded on apparently at random all over the statue were twenty or thirty filigree vanes.

That was all. The whole structure of scratched chromium had a blighted look like a derelict antenna. Startled a little by the first shrill whoops emitted by the statue, I began my speech and was about halfway through when I noticed that Lorraine Drexel had left her seat beside me. People in the audience were beginning to stand up and cover their ears, shouting to Raymond to replace the acoustic drape. A hat sailed through the air over my head and landed neatly on one of the sonic cores. The statue was now giving out an intermittent high-pitched whine, a sitar-like caterwauling that seemed to pull apart the sutures of my skull. Responding to the boos and protests, it suddenly began to whoop erratically, the horn-like sounds confusing the traffic on the far side of the square.

As the audience began to leave their seats en masse I stuttered inaudibly to the end of my speech, the wailing of the statue interrupted by shouts and jeers. Then Carol tugged me sharply by the arm, her eyes flashing. Raymond Mayo pointed with a nervous hand.

The three of us were alone on the platform, the rows of overturned chairs reaching across the square. Standing twenty yards from the statue, which had now begun to whimper plaintively, was Lorraine Drexel. I expected to see a look of fury and outrage on her face, but instead her unmoving eyes showed the calm and implacable contempt of a grieving widow insulted at her husband's funeral. As we waited awkwardly, watching the wind carry away the torn programme cards, she turned on a diamond heel and walked across the square.

No one else wanted anything to do with the statue, so I was finally presented with it. Lorraine Drexel left Vermilion Sands the day it was dismantled. Raymond spoke briefly to her on the telephone before she went. I presumed she would be rather unpleasant and didn't bother to listen in on the extension.

„Well?“ I asked. „Does she want it back?“

„No.“ Raymond seemed slightly preoccupied. „She said it belonged to us.“

„You and me?“

„Everybody.“ Raymond helped himself to the decanter of scotch on the veranda table. „Then she started laughing.“

„Good. What at?“

„I don't know. She just said that we'd grow to like it.“

There was nowhere else to put the statue so I planted it out in the garden. Without the stone pedestal it was only six feet high. Shielded by the shrubbery, it had quietened down and now emitted a pleasant melodic harmony, its soft rondos warbling across the afternoon heat. The sitar-like twangs, which the statue had broadcast in the square like some pathetic love-call from Lorraine Drexel to her dead lover, had vanished completely, almost as if the statue had been rescored. I had been so stampeded by the disastrous unveiling that I had had little chance to see it and I thought it looked a lot better in the garden than it had done in Vermilion Sands, the chromium struts and abstract shapes standing out against the desert like something in a vodka advertisement. After a few days I could almost ignore it.

A week or so later we were out on the terrace after lunch, lounging back in the deck chairs. I was nearly asleep when Carol said, „Mr Hamilton, I think it's moving.“

„What's moving?“

Carol was sitting up, head cocked to one side. „The statue. It looks different.“

I focused my eyes on the statue twenty feet away. The radiator grille at the top had canted around slightly but the three stems still seemed more or less upright.

„The rain last night must have softened the ground,“ I said. I listened to the quiet melodies carried on the warm eddies of air, and then lay back drowsily. I heard Carol light a cigarette with four matches and walk across the veranda.

When I woke in an hour's time she was sitting straight up in the deck chair, a frown creasing her forehead.

„Swallowed a bee?“ I asked. „You look worried.“

Then something caught my eye.

I watched the statue for a moment. „You're right. It is moving.“

Carol nodded. The statue's shape had altered perceptibly. The grille had spread into an open gondola whose sonic cores seemed to feel at the sky, and the three stem-pieces were wider apart. All the angles seemed different.

„I thought you'd notice it eventually,“ Carol said as we walked over to it. „What's it made of?“

„Wrought iron—I think. There must be a lot of copper or lead in it. The heat is making it sag.“

„Then why is it sagging upwards instead of down?“—I touched one of the shoulder struts. It was springing elastically as the air moved across the vanes and went on vibrating against my palm. I gripped it in both hands and tried to keep it rigid. A low but discernible pulse pumped steadily against me.

I backed away from it, wiping the flaking chrome off my hands. The Mozartian harmonies had gone, and the statue was now producing a series of low Mahler-like chords. As Carol stood there in her bare feet I remembered that the height specification we had given to Lorraine Drexel had been exactly two metres. But the statue was a good three feet higher than Carol, the gondola at least six or seven across. The spars and struts looked thicker and stronger.

„Carol,“ I said. „Get me a file, would you? There are some in the garage.“

She came back with two files and a hacksaw.

„Are you going to cut it down?“ she asked hopefully.

„Darling, this is an original Drexel.“ I took one of the files. „I just want to convince myself that I’m going insane.“

I started cutting a series of small notches all over the statue, making sure they were exactly the width of the file apart. The metal was soft and worked easily; on the surface there was a lot of rust but underneath it had a bright sappy glint.

„All right,“ I said when I had finished. „Let’s go and have a drink.“

We sat on the veranda and waited. I fixed my eyes on the statue and could have sworn that it didn’t move. But when we went back an hour later the gondola had swung right round again, hanging down over us like an immense metal mouth.

There was no need to check the notch intervals against the file. They were all at least double the original distance apart.

„Mr Hamilton,“ Carol said. „Look at this.“

She pointed to one of the spikes. Poking through the outer scale of chrome were a series of sharp little nipples. One or two were already beginning to hollow themselves. Unmistakably they were incipient sonic cores.

Carefully I examined the rest of the statue. All over it new shoots of metal were coming through: arches, barbs, sharp double helixes, twisting the original statue into a thicker and more elaborate construction. A medley of half-familiar sounds, fragments of a dozen overtures and symphonies, murmured all over it. The statue was well over twelve feet high. I felt one of the heavy struts and the pulse was stronger, beating steadily through the metal, as if it was thrusting itself on to the sound of its own music.

Carol was watching me with a pinched and worried look.

„Take it easy,“ I said. „It’s only growing.“

We went back to the veranda and watched.

By six o’clock that evening it was the size of a small tree. A spirited simultaneous rendering of Brahms’s Academic Festival Overture and Rachmaninov’s First Piano Concerto trumpeted across the garden.

„The strangest thing about it,“ Raymond said the next morning, raising his voice above the din, „is that it’s still a Drexel.“

„Still a piece of sculpture, you mean?“

„More than that. Take any section of it and you’ll find the original motifs being repeated. Each vane, each helix has all the authentic Drexel mannerisms, almost as if she herself were shaping it. Admittedly, this penchant for the late Romantic composers is a little out of keeping with all that sitar twanging, but that’s rather a good thing, if you ask me. You can probably expect to hear some Beethoven any moment now the Pastoral Symphony, I would guess.“

„Not to mention all five piano concertos—played at once,“ I said sourly. Raymond’s loquacious delight in this musical monster out in the garden annoyed me. I closed the veranda windows, wishing that he himself had installed the statue in the living room of his downtown apartment. „I take it that it won’t go on growing for ever?“

Carol handed Raymond another scotch. „What do you think we ought to do?“

Raymond shrugged. „Why worry?“ he said airily. „When it starts tearing the house down cut it back. Thank God we had it dismantled. If this had happened in Vermilion Sands...”

Carol touched my arm. 'Mr Hamilton, perhaps that's what Lorraine Drexel expected. She wanted it to start spreading all over the town, the music driving everyone crazy—'

„Careful,“ I warned her. „You're running away with yourself. As Raymond says, we can chop it up any time we want to and melt the whole thing down.“

„Why don't you, then?“

„I want to see how far it'll go,“ I said. In fact my motives were more mixed. Clearly, before she left, Lorraine Drexel had set some perverse jinx at work within the statue, a bizarre revenge on us all for deriding her handiwork. As Raymond had said, the present babel of symphonic music had no connection with the melancholy cries the statue had first emitted. Had those forlorn chords been intended to be a requiem for her dead lover—or even, conceivably, the beckoning calls of a still unsundered heart? Whatever her motives, they had now vanished into this strange travesty lying across my garden.

I watched the statue reaching slowly across the lawn. It had collapsed under its own weight and lay on its side in a huge angular spiral, twenty feet long and about fifteen feet high, like the skeleton of a futuristic whale. Fragments of the Nutcracker Suite and Mendelssohn's „Italian“ Symphony sounded from it, overlaid by sudden blaring excerpts from the closing movements of Grieg's Piano Concerto. The selection of these hack classics seemed deliberately designed to get on my nerves.

I had been up with the statue most of the night. After Carol went to bed I drove my car on to the strip of lawn next to the house and turned on the headlamps. The statue stood out almost luminously in the darkness, booming away to itself, more and more of the sonic cores budding out in the yellow glare of the lights. Gradually it lost its original shape; the toothed grille enveloped itself and then put out new struts and barbs that spiralled upwards, each throwing off secondary and tertiary shoots in its turn. Shortly after midnight it began to lean and then suddenly toppled over.

By now its movement was corkscrew. The plinth had been carried into the air and hung somewhere in the middle of the tangle, revolving slowly, and the main foci of activity were at either end. The growth rate was accelerating. We watched a new shoot emerge. As one of the struts curved round a small knob poked through the flaking chrome. Within a minute it grew into a spur an inch long, thickened, began to curve and five minutes later had developed into a full-throated sonic core twelve inches long.

Raymond pointed to two of my neighbours standing on the roofs of their houses a hundred yards away, alerted by the music carried across to them. „You'll soon have everyone in Vermilion Sands out here. If I were you, I'd throw an acoustic drape over it.“

„If I could find one the size of a tennis court. It's time we did something, anyway. See if you can trace Lorraine Drexel. I'm going to find out what makes this statue go.“

Using the hacksaw, I cut off a two-foot limb and handed it to Dr Blackett, an eccentric but amiable neighbour who sometimes dabbled in sculpture himself. We walked back to the comparative quiet of the veranda. The single sonic core emitted a few random notes, fragments from a quartet by Webern.

„What do you make of it?“

„Remarkable,“ Blackett said. He bent the bar between his hands. „Almost plastic.“ He looked back at the statue. „Definite circumnutation there. Probably phototropic as well. Hmm, almost like a plant.“

„Is it alive?“

Blackett laughed. „My dear Hamilton, of course not. How can it be?“

„Well, where is it getting its new material? From the ground?“

„From the air. I don't know yet, but I imagine it's rapidly synthesizing an allotropic form of ferrous oxide. In other words, a purely physical rearrangement of the constituents of rust.“ Blackett stroked his heavy brush moustache and stared at the statue with a dream-like eye. „Musically, it's rather curious—an appalling conglomeration of almost every bad note ever composed. Somewhere the statue must have suffered some severe sonic trauma. It's behaving as if it had been left for a week in a railroad shunting yard. Any idea what happened?“

„Not really.“ I avoided his glance as we walked back to the statue. It seemed to sense us coming and began to trumpet out the opening bars of Elgar's „Pomp and Circumstance“ march. Deliberately breaking step, I said to Blackett: „So in fact all I have to do to silence the thing is chop it up into two-foot lengths?“

„If it worries you. However, it would be interesting to leave it, assuming you can stand the noise. There's absolutely no danger of it going on indefinitely.“ He reached up and felt one of the spars. „Still firm, but I'd say it was almost there. It will soon start getting pulpy like an over-ripe fruit and begin to shred off and disintegrate, playing itself out, one hopes, with Mozart's Requiem and the finale of the Gotterdammerung.“ He smiled at me, showing his strange teeth. „Die, if you prefer it.“

However, he had reckoned completely without Lorraine Drexel.

At six o'clock the next morning I was woken by the noise. The statue was now fifty feet long and crossing the flower beds on either side of the garden. It sounded as if a complete orchestra were performing some Mad Hatter's symphony out in the centre of the lawn. At the far end, by the rockery, the sonic cores were still working their way through the Romantic catalogue, a babel of Mendelssohn, Schubert and Grieg, but near the veranda the cores were beginning to emit the jarring and syncopated rhythms of Stravinsky and Stockhausen.

I woke Carol and we ate a nervous breakfast.

„Mr Hamilton!“ she shouted. „You've got to stop it!“ The nearest tendrils were only five feet from the glass doors of the veranda. The largest limbs were over three inches in diameter and the pulse thudded through them like water under pressure in a fire hose.

When the first police cars cruised past down the road I went into the garage and found the hacksaw.

The metal was soft and the blade sank through it quickly. I left the pieces I cut off in a heap to one side, random notes sounding out into the air. Separated from the main body of the statue, the fragments were almost inactive, as Dr Blackett had stated. By two o'clock that afternoon I had cut back about half the statue and got it down to manageable proportions.

„That should hold it,“ I said to Carol. I walked round and lopped off a few of the noisier spars. „Tomorrow I'll finish it off altogether.“

I wasn't in the least surprised when Raymond called and said that there was no trace anywhere of Lorraine Drexel.

At two o'clock that night I woke as a window burst across the floor of my bedroom. A huge metal helix hovered like a claw through the fractured pane, its sonic core screaming down at me.

A half-moon was up, throwing a thin grey light over the garden. The statue had sprung back and was twice as large as it had been at its peak the previous morning. It lay all over the garden in a tangled mesh, like the skeleton of a crushed building. Already the advance tendrils had reached the bedroom windows, while others had climbed over the garage and were sprouting downwards through the roof, tearing away the galvanized metal sheets.—All over the statue thousands of sonic cores gleamed in the light thrown down from the window. At last in unison, they hymned out the finale of Bruckner's Apocalyptic Symphony.

I went into Carol's bedroom, fortunately on the other side of the house, and made her promise to stay in bed. Then I telephoned Raymond Mayo. He came around within an hour, an oxyacetylene torch and cylinders he had begged from a local contractor in the back seat of his car.

The statue was growing almost as fast as we could cut it back, but by the time the first light came up at a quarter to six we had beaten it.

Dr Blackett watched us slice through the last fragments of the statue. „There's a section down in the rockery that might just be audible. I think it would be worth saving.“

I wiped the rust-stained sweat from my face and shook my head. „No. I'm sorry, but believe me, once is enough.“

Blackett nodded in sympathy, and stared gloomily across the heaps of scrap iron which were all that remained of the statue.

Carol, looking a little stunned by everything, was pouring coffee and brandy. As we slumped back in two of the deck chairs, arms and faces black with rust and metal filings, I reflected wryly that no one could accuse the Fine Arts Committee of not devoting itself wholeheartedly to its projects.

I went off on a final tour of the garden, collecting the section Blackett had mentioned, then guided in the local contractor who had arrived with his truck. It took him and his two men an hour to load the scrap—an estimated ton and a half—into the vehicle.

„What do I do with it?“ he asked as he climbed into the cab. „Take it to the museum?“

„No!“ I almost screamed. „Get rid of it. Bury it somewhere, or better still, have it melted down. As soon as possible.“

When they had gone Blackett and I walked around the garden together. It looked as if a shrapnel shell had exploded over it. Huge divots were strewn all over the place, and what grass had not been ripped up by the statue had been trampled away by us. Iron filings lay on the lawn like dust, a faint ripple of lost notes carried away on the steepening sunlight.

Blackett bent down and scooped up a handful of grains. „Dragon's teeth. You'll look out of the window tomorrow and see the B Minor Mass coming up.“ He let it run out between his fingers. „However, I suppose that's the end of it.“

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Lorraine Drexel sued us. She must have come across the newspaper reports and realized her opportunity. I don't know where she had been hiding, but her lawyers materialized quickly enough, waving the original contract and pointing to the clause in which we guaranteed to protect the statue from any damage that might be done to it by vandals, livestock or other public nuisance. Her main accusation concerned the damage we had done to her reputation—if we had decided not to exhibit the statue we should have supervised its removal to some place of safekeeping, not openly dismembered it and then sold off the fragments to a scrap dealer. This deliberate affront had, her lawyers insisted, cost her commissions to a total of at least fifty thousand dollars.

At the preliminary hearings we soon realized that, absurdly, our one big difficulty was going to be proving to anyone who had not been there that the statue had actually started growing. With luck we managed to get several postponements, and Raymond and I tried to trace what we could of the statue. All we found were three small struts, now completely inert, rusting in the sand on the edge of one of the junkyards in Red Beach. Apparently taking me at my word, the contractor had shipped the rest of the statue to a steel mill to be melted down.

Our only case now rested on what amounted to a plea of self-defence.

Raymond and myself testified that the statue had started to grow, and then Blackett delivered a long homily to the judge on what he believed to be the musical shortcomings of the statue. The judge, a crusty and short-tempered old man of the hanging school, immediately decided that we were trying to pull his leg. We were finished from the start.

The final judgment was not delivered until ten months after we had first unveiled the statue in the centre of Vermilion Sands, and the verdict, when it came, was no surprise.

Lorraine Drexel was awarded thirty thousand dollars.

„It looks as if we should have taken the pylon after, all,“ I said to Carol as we left the courtroom. „Even the steppypyramid would have been less trouble.“

Raymond joined us and we went out on to the balcony at the end of the corridor for some air.

„Never mind,“ Carol said bravely. „At least it's all over with.“

I looked out over the rooftops of Vermilion Sands, thinking about the thirty thousand dollars and wondering whether we would have to pay it ourselves.

The court building was a new one and by an unpleasant irony ours had been the first case to be heard there. Much of the floor and plasterwork had still to be completed, and the balcony was untiled. I was standing on an exposed steel crossbeam; one or two floors down someone must have been driving a rivet into one of the girders, and the beam under my feet vibrated soothingly.

Then I noticed that there were no sounds of riveting going on anywhere, and that the movement under my feet was not so much a vibration as a low rhythmic pulse.

I bent down and pressed my hands against the beam. Raymond and Carol watched me curiously. „Mr Hamilton, what is it?“ Carol asked when I stood up.

„Raymond,“ I said. „How long ago did they first start on this building? The steel framework, anyway.“

„Four months, I think. Why?“

„Four.“ I nodded slowly. „Tell me, how long would you say it took any random piece of scrap iron to be reprocessed through a steel mill and get back into circulation?“

„Years, if it lay around in the wrong junkyards.“

„But if it had actually arrived at the steel mill?“

„A month or so. Less.“

I started to laugh, pointing to the girder. „Feel that! Go on, feel it!“

Frowning at me, they knelt down and pressed their hands to the girder. Then Raymond looked up at me sharply.

I stopped laughing. „Did you feel it?“

„Feel it?“ Raymond repeated. „I can hear it. Lorraine Drexel—the statue. It’s here!“

Carol was patting the girder and listening to it. „I think it’s humming,“ she said, puzzled. „It sounds like the statue.“

When I started to laugh again Raymond held my arm. „Snap out of it, the whole building will be singing soon!“

„I know,“ I said weakly. „And it won’t be just this building either.“ I took Carol by the arm. „Come on, let’s see if it’s started.“

We went up to the top floor. The plasterers were about to move in and there were trestles and laths all over the place. The walls were still bare brick, girders at fifteen-foot intervals between them.

We didn’t have to look very far.

Jutting out from one of the steel joists below the roof was a long metal helix, hollowing itself slowly into a delicate sonic core. Without moving, we counted a dozen others. A faint twanging sound came from them, like early arrivals at a rehearsal of some vast orchestra of sitar-players, seated on every plain and hilltop of the earth. I remembered when we had last heard the music, as Lorraine Drexel sat beside me at the unveiling in Vermilion Sands. The statue had made its call to her dead lover, and now the refrain was to be taken up again.

„An authentic Drexel,“ I said. „All the mannerisms. Nothing much to look at yet, but wait till it really gets going.“

Raymond wandered round, his mouth open. „It’ll tear the building apart. Just think of the noise.“

Carol was staring up at one of the shoots. „Mr Hamilton, you said they’d melted it all down.“

„They did, angel. So it got back into circulation, touching off all the other metal it came into contact with. Lorraine Drexel’s statue is here, in this building, in a dozen other buildings, in ships and planes and a million new automobiles. Even if it’s only one screw or ball-bearing, that’ll be enough to trigger the rest off.“

„They’ll stop it,“ Carol said.

„They might,“ I admitted. „But it’ll probably get back again somehow. A few pieces always will.“ I put my arm round her waist and began to dance to the strange abstracted music, for some reason as beautiful now as Lorraine Drexel’s wistful eyes. „Did you say it was all over? Carol, it’s only just beginning. The whole world will be singing.“

