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MUSIC

Not too long ago



I tracked down my childhood guitar teacher, a well-established New York studio musician who has played with many of the great names in jazz over the years, but who nevertheless used to make the weekly trek to the New Jersey suburbs to go door-to-door, peddling 45 minute lessons to 7th & 8th graders, some of whom had expensive new guitars far superior to the one with which this man had built his entire career.

I was one of those rare beginners who had to be admonished by his parents to "please practice less."

Three hours a day was never enough for me, and schoolwork—or dinner—was always a bothersome interruption. Despite such early passion, I was not destined to carve out a career as a professional musician. Instead, I traveled a spiritual path, inspired by a deep longing to grab hold of the meaning of life, coupled with chronic depression. I remember well the day I made the choice:

I was standing in the double bass section of the Northwestern University Orchestra, when something stopped me in the middle of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, and I looked around. What I noticed was how desperately *earnest* everyone was, eyes glued to the black notes on the page before them. (I should also mention, however, that one of my music teachers once told me that I suffer from *negra-nota-phobia*, the "fear of black notes.") Somehow I knew there was more to life, a bigger picture than the one represented on the music stand, a meaning larger than the mere making of *sound*. Eventually, after perhaps 20 years of soul-searching, I figured out what it was: *silence*.

Silence, the echo of a great Emptiness out of which all form and music emerge. It was as if, were I a painter, I ceased being entranced by the beauty of art and instead developed a fascination for the canvas itself.

I would go on to spend a great deal of my life exploring silence, usually in retreat settings. And now at 50, although my soul knows how to rest in emptiness, I find myself wishing I once again had three hours a day to devote to the simple joy of playing music. And I also wonder if perhaps had I remained as devoted as those guys I used to hear in the Northwestern practice rooms even on Friday



Sic and the *rest of my life...*



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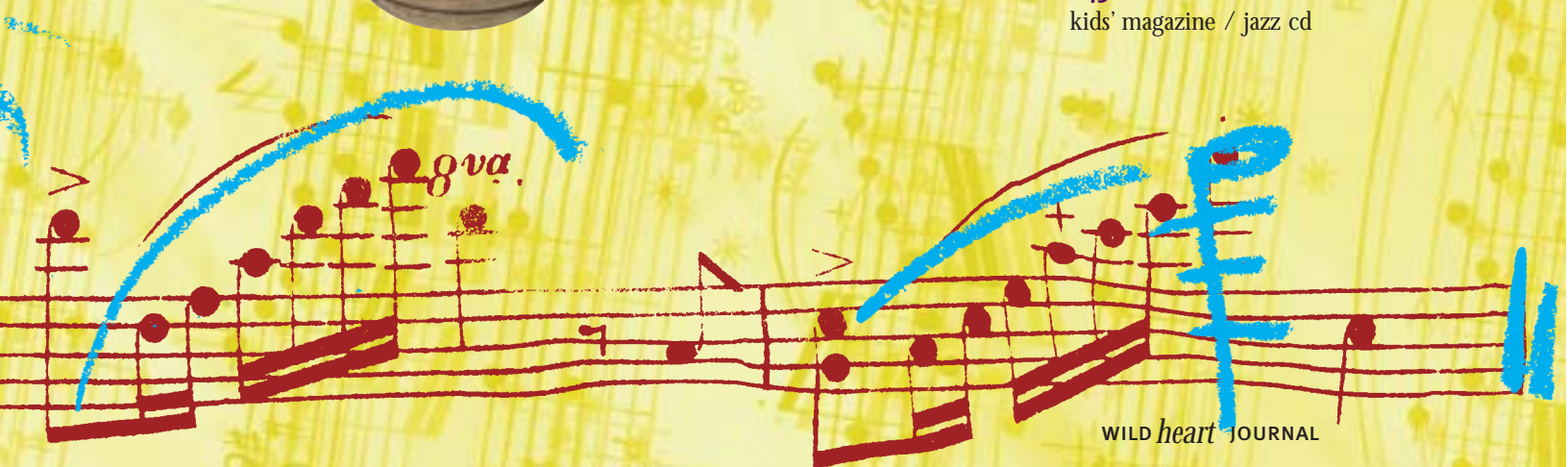
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ART I T O R I A L

continued



nights—clearly party time—I might have arrived in the same place. For ultimately, the making of music, when done with passion and awareness, can transport both player and listener out of the busyness of mundane reality into the infinite, empty, silent expanse of the soul. I was the last kid on the block to understand that “music can be your meditation,” and art your spiritual path.

So I tracked down my childhood guitar teacher, and learned that he had also become an accomplished jazz pianist in the intervening years, gigging, doing studio work, playing at an Atlantic City hotel for many years. And then he said something that floored me: “But you know, I’m 72 now, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life playing in restaurants.”

When I hung up the phone it hit me like a ton of bricks: for the creative artist, no matter how old, there is always a great

big space of possibility called “the rest of my life.” Maybe that’s true for all of us, but it’s not often I hear people in other professions, in their 70s, still wondering who to be when they grow up. They mostly seem *done*. The true artist—and I mean the artist of *being*, someone who remains awake and alive in their very core, someone who hasn’t been lulled to sleep as a result of having lived a mechanical, “going-through-the-motions” life of mere conformity and the pursuit of comfort at any expense—is never done. The silent spacious realm of conscious existence forms a never-ending backdrop for the new harmonies and counterpoint of creative choice, the improvised melodies of the rest of our lives; lately, I’ve been going through my old sheet music.

—Eliezer Sobel

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