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Julie Wittes Schlack

Right Brain, Wrong Mind

When my husband gave me a beautiful used Selmer Alto Sax for my forty-fifth birthday, I knew this was his sweet and indirect way of preparing me for our pending empty nest. Still, I was thrilled. I've listened to and loved jazz for most of my life, but other than playing clarinet for two years in junior high and, for a year in high school, strumming on my guitar every Donovan and Leonard Cohen song that could be played exclusively with the chords of A, C, G, and E minor, I'd never played an instrument. Still, I have some innate musicality. I can recognize tunes, sing them, even spontaneously harmonize a little. I can quickly pick out melodies and read music as well as any increasingly far-sighted, dilettantish, once-a-week-if-I'm-being-really-good sax player.

And the Selmer is such an inspiring instrument. Shiny, shapely, and tight, it positively glows against the black velveteen in its case. Blowing into it is effortless, the keys offer just the right amount of resistance, and the sound that emerges is unambiguous and bright. It's far from the top of the line, but not a student horn either, and playing it is like driving a German car.

But as wonderful as the Selmer is, I decided a few years later to invest in a used tenor saxophone. I didn't want to sound bright and clear—I wanted to sound dark and smoky and aged. I wanted that breathy, sexy tone that could come only from the vibrations of a bigger reed and a longer shaft to carry the breath.

The used Yamaha I ended up with lacks the class of the Selmer. It's dinged, the D-natural tends to stick, and the whole horn is just a little too big for my hands, causing my left pinky finger to lock every time I reach for the B flat in the lowest register. But now and then, it takes me to that frequency where I am in the groove, unthinking, my fingers and tongue powered by their own intelligence.

Now let me be clear. Me being in the groove is nothing like Cannonball Adderley, my saxophone hero, being in the groove. I'm

a two-year old, flailing, and occasionally hitting a toy xylophone with the tiny mallet clutched in my sticky fist; Cannonball is Arthur Rubenstein in tails, grazing and caressing the keys of a concert grand. But how I feel when I'm playing as well as I can play may not be so different. It's like my brain is getting a steaming hot shower and I feel warm, clean, and energized.

Which is why it's been so startling to find myself in my Jazz Ensemble class emotionally back in eighth grade Algebra—confused, frustrated, and deeply embarrassed as I fail to comprehend what is so self-evident to everyone around me—the structure of the music we're playing. I hear "intervals" and "Lydian mode" and "dominant seventh" and my stomach clenches, my hands get clammy, and I look for the Exit sign.

At first I gave myself a break. "This is all new to you," I'd tell myself, "like learning a foreign language. Just give it time." But the language, Aramaic some days, Finnish others, still eludes me five years later. I'm a very literal person, and the relative nature of music completely exasperates me. The fact that the same note can be called and notated as a B flat in one context or an A sharp in another strikes me (irrationally, I know) as deliberately perverse. I perpetually confuse the key signature and the chord and struggle with the fact that chords' relationships to one another are expressed in arithmetic terms, as are the individual notes within each chord. It's bad enough that the two within one chord can be the three within another, I seethe, but then to compound that relative reality by referring to the relationship between chords as twos, fives, and ones adds insult to injury. After five years of playing, through three teachers and three different jazz ensembles, I remain the only person in the room who doesn't get it.

My first jazz ensemble teacher was Jesse, a bass player. Twenty years younger than I, but still old enough not to be a kid, Jesse was calm and kind—no mean feat considering who he was trying to corral into making music together. Our heavy-handed pianist relentlessly sapped the swing out of every song, turning sultry sambas into polkas and blues into marching band anthems. The other sax player was a heartbreaking guy, a forty-year-old schizophrenic who was generally well-enough medicated to keep

the voices and talking jags in check, talented enough to play beautiful or explosive glissandos that left me winded with envy, but tottering so close to the brink of lucidity that each solo opportunity was a cliffhanger as we waited to see if he would have it together enough to bring his horn to his almost toothless mouth. But Jesse's bass kept us all afloat in some chaotic musical seas, and when he'd tap out the beat on his chest, I understood how a musician could surrender his fingers to the metronome of his heart.

Over the pulse of Jesse's notes, I gained the confidence to solo and improvise, to cautiously pick an alternate path through the structure of the song. And when a superb jazz vocalist named Patrice replaced Jesse as teacher, and a violinist named Mary joined the group, I found moments of actual joy in playing. Mary and I began to converse in two- and four-bar riffs—a halting, simplistic, and etiquette-bound conversation, but oh so engaging. And Patrice—shaking marimbas or dancing or standing right up in my face and placing her gorgeously sung words and syllables in the air between our mouths with such range and deliberate adventure—made playing feel like bungee-jumping without the fear. You couldn't say no, couldn't deny the music that she just knew was inside of you and was coaxing out by any means necessary.

Playing with Patrice taught me to play with abandon and with tone—to shape notes better with my mouth, to intentionally let them morph out of pitch, to find a good note and not be afraid to blow it for one measure, for two, for as long as my breath would last. When Mary was afraid to improvise, Patrice quoted Thelonius Monk, reassuring her that "There are two kinds of wrong notes—notes that sound good and wrong notes. "Don't worry, Mary," she said. "I know you can play some notes that sound good."

And though the words weren't directed at me, I took great comfort in them and coasted on their power for two whole terms.

But now, in ensemble number three, I'm butting up against the limits of my musical instincts (not to mention my ongoing passive-aggressive refusal to practice scales). My classmates are a classically trained violinist and her husband, a blind guitarist named Richard, and they intellectually and physically understand

the rules of music. When we start a new scale exercise or tune, our teacher Kaella simply tells Richard the chord changes, and to my envy and amazement, Richard plays it—a song he's never heard and will never see. He's incorporated those intervals, those two-five-one or one-four-five patterns, so thoroughly that Kaella need simply to say, "In B-flat" and Richard knows where to go. Meanwhile, like a kindergartener, I'm still cycling through the Circle of Fifths—a deceptively friendly-looking circular chart of notes and key signatures that adorns the wall of every music school—counting out on my fingers how many flats and which flats are in the key of B-flat. And even when I figure it out, I'm absolutely clueless as to what to do with that information. My ear gets it; carried on the rhythms of Kaella's bass my body gets it; but my mind is like a snail—coiled in on itself, oozy and dark, hanging on to some rock for dear life.

There are still good moments, songs that I glide through on pure sensation, like a skier in a crouch, knees bent and almost touching the mountain. But even then I'm kidding myself. I think I'm improvising a new trail through the vast distance of the song's form, only to zoom out and discover that I've traversed an inch on a continent of possibility.

To be really free to explore, I need to study and memorize the map. Otherwise I'm just walking around the block—sometimes on my hands, sometimes wearing a green jacket, sometimes early in the morning—but never straying far enough from home to really grow up. I need to play scales, practice standard chord progressions, and develop a muscle memory that's informed by musical principles.

That's what I need to do (just like I need to lose weight, take two of those giant-sized calcium supplements a day, hem the pants that have been sitting in my trunk with the price tag still on them for over seven months, and vacuum the inside of my car). Is it something I will do? Probably not. But then I hear John Coltrane play "In a Sentimental Mood" and like the child I once was, gazing at pictures of Swiss Alps and Norwegian fjords and South Pacific beaches in my geography textbook, I think, "There. I want to go there."