

Words & ideas by Mark Morelli

www.markmorelli.net

Give a Little Whistle

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I knew just enough about jazz to laugh in smarty-pants derision when, in 1992, MTV journalist Tabitha Soren said “Who’s the loneliest monk?” after Bill Clinton told her that his favorite musician was Thelonius Monk.

I was haughtier than I oughta be. I didn’t, for instance, know Monk played piano, let alone play it like no other with splayed finger pecking. I knew that Cannonball Adderly was not one of Gorgeous George’s wrestling opponents, but was he a jazz guy or blues guy?

Name recognition is not music appreciation.

My friends thought that Bird played for the Celtics. I knew Bird played a frantic tenor saxophone. Everyone said Charlie Parker was a genius, which I bought, but couldn’t say why.

I recently shored up what little I knew by watching every second of *Jazz*, Ken Burns’ documentary series on PBS. It gave me a linear history of the names and their eras, what led to what, who passed torches to whom. I had always recognized the big names and had the good sense over the years to go see the likes of Winton Marsalis and Dave Brubeck perform when they were in town. But the jazz documentary helped take my understanding to the next step and I am now, courtesy of the extensive CD collection at the Akron Public Library, exploring a deep and great cross section of this canon on my own.

And paying it forward.

I showed my seven-year-old daughter Olivia the Benny Goodman portion of the documentary and she loved the fantastic footage and crazy cats jitterbugging in zoot suits.

Then we read Jonah Winter’s fantastic new children’s book about Benny Goodman called *Once Upon A Time in Chicago*. Olivia’s storybook concept of royalty now includes a bespectacled King of Swing, and we snapped our fingers to his jumping hits like “Flying Home” and “Clarinet A La King.”

Later, we watched the portion of the Burns’ film examining Miles Davis.

“He plays smooth, cool jazz trumpet,” I said.

The next day, I put on the *Kind of Blue*. I tested my daughter.

“Who is this?”

“Miles Davis,” she said.

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s quiet and simple. Not fancy like Benny Goodman.”

Bring on Britney Spears.

In Burns' film, Winton Marsalis pointed out that jazz couldn't be effectively recorded by overdubbing. The communicative nature of jazz requires musicians to respond to each other musically on the spot. It is the perfect model for the family dinner. Each one digging what the other has to say, nodding in affirmation. Each one getting his turn. (Look at the face of someone listening to jazz. That person is *eavesdropping*.)

It is a live, in-the-moment form of music, never played the same way twice, lasting as long as it hangs in the air and remains in the memory. The life span of an improvisational riff makes the Monarch butterfly seem like Methuselah. Enjoy it, as the philosopher Salvatore Cucchiara says, “and you both shall thrive in the shining now.”

That reminds me of my Wright State University literature professor, James Hughes, who once gave me permission to simply love beautiful things. In a Herman Melville seminar, Hughes opened his copy of *Moby Dick* and read an ornate passage. I wish I could remember which. We English majors, wide-eyed and pale as 60s pop art waifs, hungrily awaited our professor's instruction on what notes to write and why this particular passage gurgled with literary importance.

Hughes gently shut the book and smiled.

“Isn't that just wonderful?” he said, leading his factory-farmed sheep to open grazing.

We've all heard that classical music strengthens children's intellect, improves their math abilities. These are fine things, but peripheral benefits to the richest dividend: Music waters the soul.

One early morning before school, my five-year-old daughter sat on the couch, slowly waking for the day. Softy in the background a CD of Mozart flute concertos played.

“Dad,” she said drowsily, “this is making me teary-eyed. It is so beautiful.”

That she found it so beautiful moved me too, and she belatedly returned the favor two years later.

We sat idly in the car waiting for a train. I could not hear above the din, in the rear-view mirror I could see my daughter moving her lips in song. The caboose whizzed by and in the quiet aftermath I listened to her sing “Agnus Dei, (Lamb of God)” Nicolaus Decius’ 16th-century Latin hymn.

“That is beautiful,” I told her, unaware that she’d even learned it in school. “Would you sing it again?”

In a moment devoid of the self-consciousness that seeps into our media-savvy children like poison, that makes them roll their eyes or mug goofily or shake their booties when all eyes are on them, she sang it again with her eyes closed.