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Page: A1

MY FATHER'S PRIDE AND JOY, HIS STEINWAY, MADE WHOLE

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They call it the "Steinway sound." It's rich, full, warm. Strong.

It can also be quiet. Poignant. Profound.

It can break your heart. And fill it up.

People who listen to pianos for a living say they can hear the difference between a Steinway piano and every other kind. It comes from the exacting way the piano is made, each instrument built completely by hand, using methods and tools that have been around for more than 100 years.

To me, that sound is my father, in all his tortured glory.

I heard it again this month for the first time in years, in a cavernous brick workshop on Broad Avenue in Memphis.

His piano, his Steinway, is home again. Ten years after his death from AIDS, the instrument he loved is completely restored and soon to be in my Memphis living room.

I didn't expect that hearing him again would be so painful. Or so healing.

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Bob Kleinmann might have been a prodigy, if his parents, first-generation descendants of German immigrants in Cincinnati, had been given to such overstatement.

He had perfect pitch. He could play anything you requested, and his memory for tunes and harmonies was encyclopedic, though he didn't read music.

I never heard him practice. He just played.

If he was aware of his musical gift, it didn't matter nearly as much as what he saw as his many failings.

In the 1950s, he and my mother, Janet, headed to California, escaping the pressures of family and tradition in the Midwest. It looked like things were going pretty well - he had a copywriting job with a hot Los Angeles ad agency, a new house, a beautiful wife and two tiny daughters - but by the early 1960s things were coming unraveled. Fueled by martinis

and late nights, and an illness that was variously diagnosed as schizophrenia and manic depression, Dad began to lose his grip on normal life.

He eventually had to be hospitalized, but in Cincinnati, where there was family to help. Mom sold everything and moved us home, too.

At the end of that dark time, there was a piano. Dad's piano, the first one he'd ever owned. Of course it was a Steinway.

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My first memory of Dad's piano was in our apartment in Cincinnati, early in 1965. It's a Model M or "studio" grand, and Dad bought it used for something like \$6,000. His parents probably helped with the cost, hoping that a return to making music, even in a small apartment, would be therapy and healing for him.

It was. He was thrilled with that piano, and so proud of it. Even as a little girl, I knew it was a Steinway. I knew it made him feel special, too.

Steinway & Sons was founded 150 years ago in New York by a German cabinetmaker who found a market in America for fine, handmade pianos. By the turn of the century, Henry Steinway and his five sons had built a factory that still stands in Queens, and come up with nearly half of the 114 patents in piano design and construction the company owns, essentially defining the modern piano.

Today, Steinway is the gold standard, and dozens of musicians, from Emanuel Ax to Diana Krall to Billy Joel, play Steinways.

"With a tone so rich, I would never be afraid of the dark," said Harry Connick Jr. in a Web site testimonial.

Dad's piano was born eight years before he was: Model M number 211963 was manufactured in 1922, and sold to America's first authorized Steinway dealer in Albany, N.Y. Who knows how it got from Albany to Cincinnati, but somewhere along the way it was rebuilt by someone who was not a Steinway technician. It had acquired a non-Steinway walnut-colored finish that had yellowed with age and a fake Steinway & Sons decal on the fallboard that covers the keys.

But the best of what makes a Steinway - the soundboard and the action, or the parts that move when you press the keys - was authentic, says Don Nicholson, the Memphis-based Steinway technician who reconditioned the piano.

In describing how he replaced the hammers, Nicholson shared a detail that explains the Steinway virtuosity: Most replacement hammers come "ready made," already shaped and hardened. Nicholson and his technicians "sculpt" the felts of raw Steinway factory hammers depending on the kind of sound they're trying to achieve - round, percussive, sweet, brilliant - then lacquer them to strike the keys with exactly the power each needs.

“Shaping a set of Steinway hammers takes months of perfecting your technique,” he said. Nicholson, who owns Excell Piano and is affiliated with Amro Music, works only on Steinways.

“Anyone can work on a Yamaha or some other kind of piano,” he said. “But with a Steinway, you can turn it into something mystical. Something more than wood and steel.”

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There’s no doubt that Dad’s Steinway was magic for him.

It was solid ground, a fine, strong thread that ran through his - and our family’s - stormy times. Playing it brought out the best of him, the best of all of us together.

It was the background music of my childhood, when he would play after he came home from work, before dinner. Cole Porter. Rodgers and Hammerstein. Broadway show tunes. Beethoven.

He’d make a great ceremony of propping open the lid of the piano, a central presence in our house.

He’d always start with a cascade of notes, bass to treble, then some chords, in a key that suggested his mood. There was no talking, no joking, and no singing. He often stared intently at his hands moving over the keys, and sat hunched, concentrating. He was in another place.

Usually, if I were listening, he’d start with my song. It never had a name, or words. It was measured and beautiful, a little mysterious. It was the deepest essence of what he felt about me, who I am. I can hear it clearly today, though I haven’t heard it played in more than 10 years. It sounds like love.

Then he’d play my sister’s song, which we called the Honeybun Waltz. In a lilting 3/4, it danced and smiled, resolving with a slightly darker tone. It’s essentially Jane.

When I was older, I loved asking him to play the latest pop hits and movie themes. Simon and Garfunkel. The theme from The Godfather.

And when I came home to Ohio from college and later my job in New York, I could take the temperature of what was going on with my dad by listening for the piano.

If things were good, relatives over for holiday dinners would gather after the dishes were done to hear him play and make requests. Occasionally we’d make up silly songs, or put together little shows for our friends.

After Jane and I moved out of the house, Mom and Dad would play and sing together. Dad was the bandleader, Mom the girl singer, the time the 1940s Big Band era. They must have been great.

If the piano was quiet, though, or the keys were covered, something bad was happening.

By 1988, the piano was quiet a lot.

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My mother, the rock of our family through Dad's illnesses and their 37-year marriage, was fighting breast cancer. I was newly wed and living in Chicago, trying to ignore what was happening.

After Mom died, it was a long time before I heard him play again, or even talk about it. But eventually a new life emerged, one that in some ways had the piano at its center.

The depression that Dad had fought his whole life seemed at last to be under control.

He had found a new set of friends, and a new life. I didn't see it at first, but it's clear to me now that he began to value his music, his ability, in a way he never had when he was trying to fit into the mold of a conventional suburban husband and father and feeling like such a failure. He wrote songs for AIDS/HIV fund-raisers. He even practiced.

He began working on a cabaret act, and was delighted when a downtown Dayton hotel booked him to play in its lounge. He wrote the titles of all of the songs he knew on 3 x 5 cards, and there were more than 1,000 of them. He bought an Armani tuxedo. He gave red roses to the women in his audience.

Friends and family who saw him then say he was a delightful entertainer, enjoying the crowd, taking their requests.

I wish now I had heard him. It would have meant so much to him. But I just couldn't bring myself to go. The changes that had happened in his life since my mother died, and my own anger and pain about them, stood in the way.

He acted like he understood how busy I was. I wonder if he really did.

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I don't remember the last time I heard my father play his piano, the lovely mahogany instrument that contains so much of my heart.

But I know at least part of what he played that last time. And as the piano restoration came close to being finished, I was desperate to hear my song again.

So on a rainy morning not long ago, I sat alone at my dad's piano in the tiny office that Don Nicholson has built into the side of his piano workshop on Broad.

The notes of my song came surprisingly easily, even for an untrained musician like me. I could see my dad's face as I played it over and over, perfecting the melody, orchestrating it in my mind, hearing the chord changes.

It sounded like love.