

THE PIANO

When I was in 6th Grade I saw Alan Breed play the piano during recess. He was one grade ahead of me and his mother was the local piano teacher. He was also my next-door neighbor. I was jealous of him because he could play "Wipeout" on the piano and all the cute girls were very impressed and gave him a lot of attention. I wasn't good at hardly anything, except being a nerd. Something really deep inside of me needed to be good at something; I needed to be special. So I chose the piano. I knew I was going to get good at that. I don't know how, but I just knew. Probably because I wanted to show Alan Breed that I was better than him and mainly because I wanted the attention of those cute girls. I think that's the real reason why I became a musician: so I could get girls.

The first song I have any memory of seeing or knowing about was "Wipeout." When Alan Breed played that, all the kids thought he was a genius. More important, the pretty girls thought he was cool.

It was pretty impressive. He could play it with two hands. But that's all he could play. He was a one-trick pony. But it didn't matter to anyone because back in those days that's all you needed to know to break the ice with all the cute chicks. I just needed my own way to break the ice. I still need that (when there isn't a piano around). If there is, I'm basically all set. That is, unless there's another piano player who's better than me, then I'm really sunk. I hate to admit it, but if a really good piano player is around me, I get really insecure and feel like I'm not special anymore. It's terrible. I'm basically like Superman unless there's Kryptonite around (like another piano player who's better than me). When that happens, I'm unable to breath, speak, or defend myself. Certainly NOT able to walk up to a pretty chick and break the ice. Because, as we all know, taking the risk of being told to buzz off is one of the most horrifying experiences anyone could ever go through.

I came home from school that day and asked my mother if I could take piano lessons from Mrs. Breed. She said, why, of course you can. My mom wasn't excited or happy for me; she was just like, okay, why not? My request came out of the blue and she was just very nonchalant about it. Little did she know at that time how my life would end up as a direct result of my love for the piano.

When I started with Mrs. Breed, there were only two weeks left in her teaching cycle with a big recital coming at the end. She took me on anyway. Mrs. Breed was a great little piano teacher, even though (I found out later) she had a lot of trouble with her husband with alcoholism and of course her son ended up getting into drugs, etc. Alan didn't take lessons from his mother; he was a total rebel and was always in trouble with the authorities. He was always getting kicked out of prep schools and stuff.

Even though there were only two weeks left, I had to play some little dinky songs in front of all the other kids and parents. I remember it was the John Thompson Piano Method, Book One, and I must have only been on page five or six. I was totally scared, and I could barely play, but somehow I showed up. Of course my mother was there and she turned out to be very proud of me. There were probably 15 students all together with an assortment of moms and dads. Some of the kids were really good and I was jealous that they could play so well. One of them was Chinese and I could tell that she practiced ALL THE TIME because there's no other way she could have been as good as she was. She could play "Flight Of The Bumblebee" and it was very impressive.

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Most of the kids were older than me and MUCH better players. Some of them were my age, though. I had a crush on Pam Holbrook and Nancy Solow who were both students there at the time. Maybe I stayed on because I wanted to impress those two.

I always had little crushes on girls as far back as I can remember. I even had a crush on my kindergarten teacher, Miss Blackstone. I used to tell her that I would write her love letters as soon as I knew how to read and write. I even ended up writing to her all the way through second grade until my infatuation wore off.

I got really good really fast at the piano. My parents NEVER told me to practice. I practiced because from the get go I just loved playing. I worked really hard and there is NO substitute for working really hard at something in this life. That's how it was with me. It didn't take long before I excelled. I knew that I had something special right away. I would run home from Mrs. Breed's house after my lesson because I couldn't wait to try all the new stuff I was learning. I also could play by ear and figure things out from memory by listening to the radio. I used to spend long hours at night in bed with a little radio listening to all those great old songs from the early '70's: Donny Osmond, The Jackson 5, The Partridge Family... whatever was on the radio would do, I didn't care. I pretty much liked all those old songs. I lived in a private little world and I connected with it like nothing I had ever experienced before. In less than a year's time I knew how to read music well enough that I could understand how to play simple pop tunes. I had a great ear and could figure things out really fast, too. Between having a great ear and being able to read some, I had a lot of freedom and power. I'd buy big fat piano songbooks of the '70's with 100 songs in them and learn about 20 of my favorite ones right away. Songs like, "Go Away, Little Girl," "Theme from M.A.S.H.," "Tubular Bells," "Aquarius," "I Write The Songs," "Bennie And The Jets," "Piano Man" — all those cool old songs. If I had heard a song before and liked it, I was able to play it by memory and be able to read enough of the chords and melodies and figure out the rest by teaching myself how it went. I learned hundreds of songs that way. I still do this today. I probably know 5,000 songs from memory.

The piano I learned on was really crappy. I mean REALLY crappy. It was out of tune, had a couple chipped keys, and barely worked. In fact, it was a full half step flat and not even concert pitch. Basically, any chance I would've had of being able to learn perfect pitch was shattered by that out-of-tune, flat piano. Maybe I resent my parents more for that simple fact than anything else they may have done that bothered me. Chain me to a fence and beat me, electrocute me and torture me, but don't make me practice on a piano that is out of concert pitch! Didn't they know how sensitive my little ears were?

I mentioned this dire fact to my parents as soon as I found out how out of tune that raggedy piano was and all they would say was stuff like, "Life isn't fair," or "You're lucky to be alive," or "Think of all the starving people in China."

The piano tuner would come over to our house every now and then and he'd tell me stuff about how bad the piano was and that it was destroying my ear. He somehow would make the piano get in tune with itself, so that if you didn't know any better it sounded sort of okay. I managed to have a pretty good ear, even if it was a half step flat.

Not only did my parents tell me ridiculous stuff about starving people in China, my mom even used to tell me that the crusts on toast had the most nutrition and that's why I had to eat them. The truth is, crusts on burnt toast have ZERO nutritional value and are basically empty calories and a form of food torture to a little kid.

I would never abuse a child like that. We even had a rule at the dinner table that you had to eat everything on your plate, even if it made you sick or if you could barely tolerate it.

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I could tell that I had talent. Anyone with talent knows they have it because it's plain obvious. Would I show off? You bet your ass I would! Any chance I could play a piano in front of any audience of any kind I was there. If I was at a friend's house, I would always ask if they had a piano and if they did I'd manage to find my way over there and just start playing. I'd always make a good impression with everyone, especially the moms.

For some reason, I always used to be friends with my friends' moms. I even had a few crushes on a couple of them. I think they thought it was cute. My friend, Kristy Holland, had a super hot mom. I would go over there and complement her and tell her how pretty she was. She thought I was SO cute for that and loved all my little compliments and flirting. She would say that I was going to be very handsome when I grew up. I liked hearing that, and she just fueled me to go further into the flirting thing.

I used to practice a lot because I loved the piano so much. I still do. It's probably saved my life 100 times. I used to practice so much that I'd just keep going and going until I'd lose total track of time. It would be time for dinner and my step-dad would yell from upstairs, "Dinnertime, get up here!" and I'd keep going and going until I nearly got into actual trouble for interfering with dinnertime.

My first musical influence was Chico Marx, from the Marx Brothers. I used to watch a lot of television and always liked funny movies, like the Marx Brothers and Jerry Lewis. Chico Marx fascinated me. I'd heard he was an excellent pianist in real life, but he could also do so many other very impressive things. He could play the piano with his feet and had these funny hand gestures like Art Carney from *The Honeymooners*, which used to crack me up. Of course I was totally obsessed with Elvis Presley- who wasn't? The funny thing was, pretty much everyone in my family didn't care about Elvis like I did, except for my sister, Breena. When Elvis was on TV, one of us would scream for the other to run downstairs to the basement so we could watch our hero on the black and white TV. My sister and I would spend hours together watching tons of old, cheesy movies with Elvis, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Frankie Avalon, Dick Van Dyke, etc. Elvis was a real hero to us and still is to this day.

After Chico Marx, my second musical influence was the Captain from the Captain and Tennille.

He wore that cool, stupid, little sailor captain hat and the '70s teardrop sunglasses; now THAT was cool. Plus, when I saw him on one of those variety show specials he had all those keyboards and synthesizers all stacked up on a stand and I thought that was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. *Love Will Keep Us Together* and *Muskrat Love*, man, those were the kinds of songs that really got me going. I liked all the cheesy guys, like Neil Sedaka, The Carpenters, Andy Williams, and Barry Manilow. I had a real soft spot for sappy love songs and I still do.

I was playing piano professionally by the time I was 13. That meant I'd make some money. It wasn't much, but at least it was better than nothing. I would play little parties, or Bar Mitzvahs, or school plays, or at restaurants or ice cream parlors-anywhere, really, where there was a piano and at least one person and at least a dollar or two to be made. I even had a business card that said, "Cliff Brodsky — Pianist."

I was always a self-starter and little entrepreneur. At first I'd play for a free ice cream sundae, which I considered a great deal because I was gonna play the piano anyway and getting a bonus of an ice cream sundae was great. Billy McFadden, my basketball friend and neighbor up the street, had his mom give me a crappy little electric piano made by Wurlitzer. It was really old and beat up but it worked well enough to play. And, it was super heavy. Today, those things are considered vintage and not crappy at all. But I guess it was pretty cool and it was portable and even had a little speaker in it. I could take that thing and play in front of people even if there wasn't a piano around.

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My first actual paying gig was for Lisa Hirsch's little sister, Audrey's Bat Mitzvah party at the Dartmouth Outing Club on Occum Pond, by the golf course, where lots of events were held. Lets face it: I grew up in a totally utopian, preppy, New England town, with lots of money and beautiful, healthy people.

I had to play "Have Nagila" just once. Then I could just jam on whatever I wanted, noodling around on background music, with little pop/rock/jazz tunes morphing into each other, all the while improvising and making up little sonic vignettes.

I was famous. I had arrived. I was the keyboard guy and the life of the party. Drunk old people would hang out with me and we'd appear to be having involved, detailed conversations while I played and nodded and pretended to listen. They'd make compliments and give me all kinds of attention. I loved that! I was hooked. They may not have known or realized that it was REALLY hard to play the keyboard, listen, and talk back, all at the same time. I guess they were just drunk and lonely and didn't really care if I was listening or not, they just wanted to talk to SOMEONE.

There are a lot of people like that in the world today. Maybe I should be a therapist instead of a keyboard player, it's 99% the same gig.

Quite often a therapist is someone who listens to someone who really needs to talk to someone, anyone, just as long as they are paying attention. So many people are sad because they have so much to say, but no one will listen. Or even worse, if they do find someone who will listen, they'll make that person feel bad for having something to say.

Most people have no clue how to communicate, how to listen, or how to honor other people's feelings. That's why there's so much hate and fear, which ultimately causes war. Most people just don't know how to behave. Period.

My first real steady gig was at Cheese Etc. in the Beer Garden in the back. I was 14 at the time. It was less than a mile away from my house and my step dad would be cool enough to drive me up there, roadie for me (help me carry my VERY HEAVY electric keyboard), and then pick me up at 1 a.m.

They had a little area outside in the back with about 20 tables where the college students would go and drink beers and eat their sandwiches. I used to play there on the weekends, sometimes up to four hours. Some nights I would literally play for four hours without stopping, or maybe only stop once, to eat a free roast beef sandwich, and then get back to work. I was so into playing music that time literally stopped. For me, it wasn't really work. It was my time to learn a bunch of songs, improvising the whole time, morphing between songs and memorizing tunes. It was really the beginning of me getting good really fast.

That place had the BEST roast beef and cheese sandwiches on homemade French rolls-unbelievably good. I had a tip jar on my keyboard and sometimes I'd make \$20 in tips alone, and maybe another \$40 from the owner. I always got compliments on my playing from the Dartmouth students and locals.

I'd spend time analyzing the crowd and depending on who was there I would think of songs I imagined they'd like. I had already learned a huge, eclectic repertoire of show tunes, jazzy tunes, and mostly tons of pop/rock hits. I'd do my own arrangements and make odd, quirky versions of songs that you wouldn't normally expect from a 14 year-old kid. Like, I'd do a lounge version of "Stairway To Heaven," just to mess with people and see if they'd notice. Once in a while, someone from the audience would look up, realize what I was doing and either give me a thumbs up sign, or make an acknowledging face that meant they were on to my game. I got really good at reading a crowd.

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The owner of Cheese Etc. was this eccentric, crazy lady named Madame Denman. She always yelled at her workers and threw food at them and got all irate and crazy. She had this stoner son named Rob, who used to live upstairs in one of the apartments. He was a good-looking, European kind of dude, with a foreign accent of some kind, probably Danish, or German. He always had a hot chick up there and he always had great pot. He was such a stoner that he could take six bong hits in one breath. Very impressive. He had a bong that had a gattling bowl on it where you could fill six little one hit chambers that spun on its axis so you could pass it around without having to refill it every time. But he was able to do all six in one breath! I was really pretty impressed that his lungs could handle that much smoke. He was famous in my little pot world of stoner friends for his incredible lung capacity.

Even though I was only 14, I had already been smoking pot for a couple years. It was hard to find, so I couldn't smoke it every day, but I wanted to. I had found the perfect combination that made everything in my tumultuous mind serene: marijuana and music. Certainly not a unique combination by any means, but man oh man, it worked like a charm on me. I would get stoned and play the piano endlessly, getting lost in the melodies and harmonies that would one day turn into a deep love and understanding of music that literally would shape my destiny.

What started out as a way to get attention from the girls (and as a way to show up Alan Breed) ended up being my saving grace. If it weren't for the piano and my love of music -- listening to it, playing it, teaching it, producing it -- I don't know where I would've ended up. Probably in jail, or in a psych ward, or maybe in the White House as President of the United States, which in my opinion would be WORSE than jail and a psych ward put together.