

SCOTT MINAR

Music Therapy

It's Saturday night in the 1980s. My band is engaging in another timber-rattling, bass-thumping, ear-splitting jam to Credence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" at the local Pub, and the house is packed. I can see Jerry at the bar. Jerry always makes me feel good. He's got a great smile and a kindly way about him. I feel better when he's in the room. Jerry is one of a crowd of Vietnam vets who live miles outside of town under somewhat mysterious circumstances. I once saw Jerry forcibly eject one of two brawlers right in front of the stage, and he wasn't a hired bouncer. He just knew what to do—and he did it. He grabbed one idiot by the belt and the collar and frog-marched him out the door. My bandmate Bruce, a local bartending legend, was right behind him with the other guy in the same grip, exactly the same. Athens, Ohio—an occasionally rowdy town—is also the "San Francisco of the Midwest" according to my grad school professor, renowned Jack Kerouac scholar Warren French.

Years later, when I take a job at Antioch College, I bring Warren in for a terrific lecture on the Women Beats. On our way back to the airport, he tells me the story of his adventures in World War Two as a trained "tank-killer." Warren is a short, intense man from Patterson, New Jersey—very tough and kind—a bit of a genius. He's on a ship with 600 soldiers, 595 of whom are seasick by the end of the first day. After supper and bored as a ghost, he snoops around and finds a projector in a closet, along with the Hollywood adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Amazingly, he spends the rest of the war, first chasing Germans and then the Japanese back to their respective countries, showing *Gone with the Wind* in one camp or bivouac or base after another. And here's the interesting part—he did it on no one's orders but his own. In a missing chapter from a Joseph Heller novel, he is simply known thereafter as "the projectionist," the guy with the movie—

since there's only one—though no one actually assigned him the task. It's a classic army screw-up of the sort that might have resulted in a Martin and Lewis movie if it had gone public. Warren's journey was one wartime iteration after another of "After all...Tomorrow is another day!" Vivian Leigh's gaze fixed on the horizon after Clark Gable has just walked away from her—from the only war the US would ever face against itself on its own homeland.

The lyrics of "Fortunate Son" go like this: "Some folks are born, made to wave the flag / Ooo that red, white, and blue / But when the band plays 'Hail to the Chief' / Don't they point the cannon at you, Lord...."

Think about that in the age of Donald J. Trump.

Something happens to me when we play "Fortunate Son." It's a kind of therapy. The crowd is with you. You see it in their faces and in the dance that seems to coagulate and gather as if in ceremony. After singing it for years, I've concluded that "Fortunate Son" may have been group therapy for the whole country. We needed it. One of the things I've thought about lately is why I was drawn so hard to music and performance. A bit of an extrovert on stage, I've been terrified by music too. I was so nervous the first time I sang in a college bar, my vibrato tripled in speed. I sounded like a backup singer for Alvin and the Chipmunks. But over the years, you learn to settle down. You have no choice really. The fear becomes background, record-player popcorn on a used LP. There is a spirit that can enter a musician on stage; it may be a kind of Haitian Loa, a voodoo god. When it comes on you, everything goes away but the song and its wings, the particular wings of this moment. It's one reason why we see rockers play into their sixties and seventies: you always want more of that, a repeat trance. I've heard it said that heroin gives addicts such a high only once, and then they spend the rest of their lives chasing a worm they'll never catch because biochemistry won't let them. It's impossible. But with music you can get it back, though it's not easy and the experience is rare. To love music is sometimes to be given this gift. And when you no longer have

it, for one reason or another, it is hard to live without. Still, it doesn't kill you. I think it might make us stronger.

My voice is not tough. I'm not a natural blues singer. More like a balladeer. But I strain into "Fortunate Son." I give it everything I have and burn my voice to the ground in a kind of personal napalm tactic. I'm a little self-destructive, but it won't last. My wife has a "sweet boy" hypothesis, in which she asks "Have you ever seen how sweet some young boys can be? And then the world takes that out of them? Well, that sweet boy is still in there." She still thinks I'm one of them, and I hope she's right. I really do.



I started actual counseling sometime around the spring of 2005. I'd used music as a sort of therapy for years, but there is only so much running vis-a-vis song one can do in this life. I'd hit the barricade at the dead end of my own lost desert road. The grey wooden sign—a placard now hung on a single nail where it swung like the tongue in a grandfather clock—read, "No way out. Road closed." Coping mechanisms that are a kind of genius when we are young—at least according to psychologist and writer Alice Miller in her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*—save youthful minds that otherwise can't handle troubles adults might foist upon them. But they also eventually purple and bruise over to the point where we realize this wound has to be lanced or we'll die. So I dug in and got some help. I was fast as counseling clients go. About a year and half and I was out on my own again, my trusty journal fixed on a shelf above my desk. I'd slain monsters in those pages, battled Grendel and swatted Gollum off the rope. I'd sworn more than usual, and I employ profanity in the right moment with some regularity. But where had it washed me out? I was like actor Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption* who said of his much younger self, the one who committed the murder for which he was incarcerated, "I want to find that young man. I want

to shake him, talk to him.” What I thought and sometimes said after counseling, when thinking about some of my own hurtful mistakes was, *I don’t recognize that guy. I don’t know who he is.* And I meant it. I still don’t know. It’s the Jungian mystery living inside some people after they discover the trouble in which they’ve been living since they were children. There is a stranger planted firmly in their memories, and we want to reach out to him/her and say the right things.

One of my favorite moments from therapy was a time when we were discussing a relative who had a pattern of hurting by putting distance up between loved ones instead of building the familial anchor of compassion and reliability, of uncompromising and unqualified affection. I had just described a pretty gruesome set of circumstances and actions that would have hurt any child and ones, unfortunately, which had lingering echoes and effects continuing into the present for me. This was the dark hour or place of my soul, the place from which the darkness that poured into me originated. It was a sad tale I was weaving. After I grew silent for a while, Susan, my therapist, said of this person’s capacity to hurt others, to ignore, to marginalize, to disappear... “It isn’t personal.”

I laughed out loud. I think I actually snorted.

I said, “Well, it sure feels that way!”

We talked about her observation for quite a while. The funny thing is I knew intuitively and immediately she was right. The ensuing conversation only helped to cement that feeling. It is possible for people to behave very badly indeed and not have any personal animosity toward their victims. I myself have done it in small ways from time to time. We all have. We take it out on others, but the animus, the spirit of the thing is elsewhere. We transfer into the moment some hurt from the past, from another place and other people than those standing or sitting here right now. We carry forward, often in complete or partial ignorance, some suffering we were unable to resolve at the time of its occurrence.

Bad things that happen to children are particularly pernicious this way. There is no cognitive mechanism inside a child's head to handle an adult's problems. The child is lost in a kind of helplessness or impotence. So she/he turns to anything, anything at all that might mediate that pain and suggest some control over it or release from it. These moments can cut us off from ourselves. Truth itself is lost for a time—though not irretrievably. If the adults attempt to dissuade or order the child not to exhibit his/her pain, it only makes things worse. Much worse. It leads to despair, directly—and no child should ever feel that. No adult should either, but at least adults have access to a brain developed enough to imagine solutions. A child nearly drowns in despair because she/he has not yet learned to swim. And half-drowning inside is a terrible thing. A child who becomes an adult and survives is very lucky indeed. I was one. I can't say how grateful I am because of that. But there are whole portions of my past that seem to belong to another person. Perhaps it's a small price to pay for health and well being later.



Music is a comfort and a catharsis. That's how Blues music was born, country and bluegrass too. Jazz is insider music: it's more fun to play than to listen to—unless you are seriously educated about melody, chord theory, and improvisation. My guitar teacher, virtuoso-level player John Manfredi of Elmira, New York—originally from Philly—taught me to improvise on guitar using a rubber stamp graphic of the fretboard on which he would draw dots representing various musical scales I was learning. John suggested I could play any series of dots that I wanted to, but also that I should stay away from playing a scale per se. “Make a melody you like,” he suggested. Then he said something really interesting. He added, “And, every once in a while, play something crazy.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. He demonstrated by laying out a three- or four-note riff quickly, in the middle of what was otherwise a great improvisation. The “crazy” notes were outside of the musical scale of the song, outside of the key he was in. Normally, that would produce a train wreck or boating accident of sound. But the effect in this case was amazing. The ear registers this anomalous tactic as something unusual, of course, but also as a sort of magical bridge, if it’s done right, greatly enhancing what has come before and what comes after. It’s like that moment when a great drummer disrupts the rhythm of a song in a noticeable way that, rather than wrecking the groove, actually enhances it the way a booster rocket enhances flight. Miles Davis famously said, “There are no wrong notes,” meaning that the success of a riff depends on what comes before or after it. Blues players will bend a guitar string in half steps, just a little; or whole steps, up to the next whole note; or out to the stratosphere in some wild incantation of melodic thrust meant to demonstrate emphasis and strength of emotion as much as musical expression or flight.

When I think about the life lessons of “Play something crazy” and “There are no wrong notes,” I have to admit I am comforted quite a bit. Somewhere between the liberating insanity or risk and the freedom of expression in the Zen of improvisation, the trapped musician can rise, and the child comes with him or her.



Somehow, in my immediate family, I was the only one who got the performance bug. My brother Mark sings like an angel, better than I do. People sometimes tell me that I’m really good: he’s better. My Sicilian uncles, Tony and Leo, along with my Aunts Mary and Louise came to see me play at the Holiday Inn in Cleveland after I finished college. Leo told me I was a pretty good player, but also that he could “play any song in any key”—by which he meant any jazz standard in any key. For many jazz musicians, *standards* are the sum and total of the plural noun *songs*. The

other music just doesn't exist. It would be decades before I figured out how that key-changing flexibility could be done. It takes a lot of chord theory and creativity to do it on guitar.

John Manfredi told me about a wonderful experience with jazz great Les Paul once. Paul is one the most famous electric guitar innovators of all time and was a great player as well. A Les Paul guitar from the 1950s can reach absurd values at resale. John had two of these, worth anywhere from \$15,000 to \$25,000 apiece to collectors. He bought them both new when he was very young. In the 2000s, Les Paul was still playing at The Iridium in New York City once a week, where he invited players to come and join him for fifteen minutes at a time—strictly regulated—vis-à-vis a signup sheet at the bar. John signed up over the phone, then drove the four hours from Elmira to Manhattan in order to take his turn.

This is how good John is on guitar: He stayed on that stage for two hours. Paul wouldn't let him leave.

I've known many superb, even thrilling soloists on guitar. I've met and warmed up for Richard Thompson, a guitarist's guitarist from England and a great songwriter. But Manfredi was the only instrumentalist of whom I thought, after getting to know him a little, *This guy is a virtuoso*. My wife Robin, a great lover of cats, says that when a young cat wants to jump up on something, it's as quick and effortless as thought. John is the only player I've ever known of whom that is true. He routinely does so many extraordinary things, it appears like the only challenge is *what*, not *how*. In solo performance, he also uses a set of foot pedals made for an electronic organ. He plays the bass parts of the songs he is performing using his stockinged feet. It looks pretty hard, undoable really. He's that kind of player—past the edge of the known, of reason. He is a model to me, a roadmap of impossibilities reimagined as improbabilities that one may morph into action, if one has the will and the time. And the desire to practice. He once told me, "Play with anyone who will sit with you for a while. You can learn something from anybody, and people will surprise you." Sometimes when I've been really down, a friend, a colleague will sit and talk for a while. Though I could have

never expected it, I found therapists there too or, more accurately, friends who knew much more than I would have credited—probably because my own ignorance wouldn't open that aperture and let me see what they knew and were capable of until I needed these things from them. This is as close to grace as I've gotten in a social way, and it felt mighty damned good.



I had my bout with depression, though it came much later in life than it does for some. Maybe people who like to belt—to sing loudly, with energy—are those who like to cry without knowing how much they need to do it. No one really wants to stare things in the face that are core ugly, worth weeping over in a gut-wrenching way. And some of us are unable to do it at all. We keep that side of ourselves—the hurt; the despair; the unanswerable, feral quality of sorrow—hidden inside rationales or self-made illusions, rewritten and retold histories slightly askew or worse. I've written elsewhere about how unreliable memory is, particularly mine. Singing loudly, passionately is a kind of crying or crying out. It releases something dog-tied and usually muzzled inside of us, except for the vocalizing moment—and even that is usually projected as something else, not really the thing itself, but an avatar, a simulacrum, although it too can be pure and accurate in its way.

A child's despair is a thing to survive since children don't have the cognitive tools or strategies to confront it and make it through. I thought my truths would destroy me...so I didn't let them. I hid and reconfigured, buried and reworked the story into a friendlier version. I turned my lemon into not quite lemonade, but a fuzzy, somewhat obscure picture of a glass of it. I think I tried to make it art without knowing how or why. But art has to be authentic in its arc and moment. You can't lie your way to health and well being. I've learned that some hurts are not made that way. Like abscesses, they will break through to the surface sooner or later.

Somewhere in that bar—in all the bars, the stages and coffeehouses, black box theaters and hallways, the street corners—I found my cure or at least my healing. And much more. I found friendship and wisdom, questions that needed answering and people to embrace. One of the things that needs to be said about therapies of various sorts is that sometimes healing becomes a matter of will. Perhaps on occasion even of revolution. The crowd shouted and sweated and thronged. They danced to what it was we were doing. I caught a wind of chance in those places, a moment of flight that might be brought up and expanded with some work, some practice. Because of Jerry's and Bruce's and Robin's kindness, I learned to ask for help and to tell my story, strength and tenderness in equal measures. I learned how to revolt and fight, but also how to accept and give, even to love—which had eluded me for a long time. Sacrifice and protection I finally saw for what they were—expressions of giving necessary to the health of the tribe we all belong to. How little it costs to ask people how they are doing and mean it. Through pain there is much learning that cannot be achieved in any other way. So I just had to remember to sing it, to speak the words and mean them.

To say after all—without hatred, animus, or ill intent—I ain't no senator's son, y'all.