

A Fifty-five Year Old Dream.

by

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The memory of *where* Herb Silverstein fashioned his dream to become a jazz pianist is far clearer than when. The where, was in center-city Philadelphia. It was a time when street gangs owned the destiny of anyone who trespassed on their turf. Herb's primary preoccupation back then was survival: to sneak home from school by hiding between the buildings. It was during one of his daily street-gang avoidances, Herb mentioned (in the same breath) that he had a classical piano lesson that night and that John Coltrane was practicing just blocks away. He was only ten years old. Most his age did not even know who John Coltrane was, but Herb did — Coltrane played jazz.

Bill Evans had already invented his blues phrase Db-D-F in the key of Bb — this meant something to Herb. It was 1945, and his parents were stressed to the limit, worried about how far Hitler's arm might reach out from Germany. Herb was worried about the street gangs.

The neighborhood was devoid of play areas. If Herb wanted to engage in any outside games, he had to play in the street. And he was forever running from the police because a neighbor would call and tell them he and his friends were causing trouble.

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Herb reconnoitered the street; three more blocks to negotiate. He bolted. Eight more years of this without incident did not set the law of averages in Herb's favor. But once again, he made it to his house unscathed. He leapt up the steps and burst through the door and into the entryway. The five-story building served as both a home for the Silverstein family and an office (on the first floor) for Herb's father. He was a neuropsychiatrist, an expert in mental disease.

Even though the frail notes of a Brandenburg Concerto were playing, Herb's young ears were sensitive to the Creator's whispers: "Jazz, Herb. You are destined to write and play jazz." Herb was listening, he heard, he tried (sneaking into jazz clubs at thirteen years old — using a forged draft card), but his earthly father's voice was too loud. Herb's father denied Herb the opportunity to learn Jazz piano, and was daily irritated after Herb took up the drums instead. It was a strange phenomenon to stand on the street, watch patients parading in and out of the front door, and hear the primitive beat of drums floating from the open, upstairs windows. Can you imagine Herb's father quietly counseling a patient while the ceiling and walls vibrated with percussive rhythms? So, Herb's father made it clear: "You can be either a classical pianist or a physician, not a drummer nor a jazz pianist."

It was like having a childhood dream of one day walking on the moon but being told you had to dig to China instead. So, at age sixteen, Herb Silverstein, the jazz-pianist-dreamer set aside his piano lessons and drums to begin studying medicine.

Upon entering medical school, he immediately became interested in research and development. The operating microscope had just been introduced for microsurgery in the ear, and Herb became fascinated by the possibilities for research in this field. But he continued to frequent the jazz clubs to hear The Greats play.

By the time Herb Silverstein completed his residency in 1963, Bill Evans had developed his own chordal voicings (the series of notes used to express a chord) and Miles Davis was joined by Herbie Hancock. And Herb Silverstein filled every moment of spare time with listening to jazz recordings or visiting jazz clubs.

His years of medical school, teaching at Harvard for seven years, and teaching at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School for four — he still teaches there, and hours of surgery have steadied his hands. But he wanted to use them to make music. Instead, to honor his father's plan, Herb became an ear surgeon.

But Herb's every thought was connected to music. One day, while listening to a song that came out of the swing era, an idea came to him. He knew that the Germans used to poke a hole in the tympanic membrane of their pilots so they could climb and dive their planes and not experience the pain from the fluctuation in air pressure. The only problem was that within a few weeks, the eardrum would heal, and it would have to be punctured again.

Herb thought about that, and decided he could use the body's natural ability to heal itself and develop a device and a procedure to penetrate the eardrum membrane and inject

medication right to the inner ear. The MicroWick™ is a Dr. Herb Silverstein invention. The patients treat themselves with drops in the ear, similar to how an eye doctor treats with eye drops. Because of his inventions, Herb's days were filled teaching, lecturing, and performing surgery around the world.

In an attempt to escape his hectic schedule, Herb paid a visit his cousin who had retired to a home on Bird Key in Sarasota, Florida. Herb saw the area, the sunset, the water, and the lifestyle and decided *he* needed a lifestyle change.

In 1974, Herb moved to Sarasota but did not slow down; and jazz was becoming a dust-covered memory. In 1978, he developed a procedure to stop vertigo attacks from Ménière's disease. The procedure is to cut the balance nerve, thus stopping the abnormal impulses coming from the ear to the brain. This stops vertigo and yet preserves hearing. Because of his contributions to the elimination of vertigo from Ménière's disease, he has received six Gold Medal Awards from the E. A. R. Foundation in Nashville. And in 1979, he founded the Ear Research Foundation. He was also the author of over 230 scientific publications and six books. But he smiled little.

There was always the success of accomplishment, and yet the daily assessment of failure. What could he say to his friends, relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, and neighbors for the reason he had not yet succeeded at his destiny's goal? And then there was the pressure of the urgency that time was running out. Self-satisfaction was absent. Each day Herb Silverstein felt all of these emotions. You could see the pain in his eyes from the gnawing, relentless agony. How he must have awakened each day in a fog of depression.

There was the constant dilemma of spending time learning in his current profession, where his income was being derived, or learning in his dream profession. Was he to continue performing as a surgeon or direct his efforts to perform in his dream profession, as a jazz pianist?

The suspended dream was like the continuous sound of nails down a blackboard. How does someone live like that and not self-destruct? Herb redirected his creativity — that is what kept him sane. Instead of writing and playing jazz, Herb created operating procedures, medical devices, and performed surgery.

But there is nothing more agonizing, more depressing, more irritating, and demoralizing than an unfulfilled dream. And even though Herb was prominent in his community — and in medical circles around the country and the world — there was still a group of people within whose circle he was not accepted, or even known — jazz enthusiasts.

With the flood of musicians born in Philadelphia like Frankie Avalon, Kenny Barron (another Silverstein idol), Chubby Checker, Stanley Clarke, Jim Croce, James Darren, Daryl Hall, Joan Jett, and Stan Getz who recorded with Bill Evans in 1964, it is no wonder there was music in Herb Silverstein's blood. And as fate would have it, Herb had unknowingly settled in a community that was home to one of the largest jazz organizations in the country.

Then in 1980, Herb's son told Herb that jazz was back. So, in 1983, at age 48, Herb made a right turn on his road to destiny and began taking piano lessons again. He had to relearn how to play, making his fingers move quickly — reading and playing in time — and making the music swing. No classical lessons this time — jazz, just jazz.

Sometimes though, having a goal is a double-edged sword: it can provide both enthusiasm and depression. Herb struggled to translate his medically trained dexterity from the operating room to the keyboard. He remembered some piano technique from his early childhood lessons, but it was classical technique — jazz is freer flowing. The mechanical preciseness needed to play the exact tonal and rhythm relationships of Bach, did not translate easily to the music of Bill Evans or Herbie Hancock.

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Fifteen years passed, it was now 1998, and Herb had been volunteered to play at a couple of nonprofit functions where the appreciation was moderate, understanding of jazz was low, and the pay was nil. And even though there was applause, the dream of playing jazz like Oscar Peterson in a club with a trio was still just a dream.

“I feel as if I’m running out of time,” Herb would confess. He feared that he would leave this world before achieving his dream. He practiced every spare moment he had; and allowed nothing to interfere with his jazz piano lessons.

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I am not a jazz musician, and I did not know how to help Herb with his dream, so I picked up the phone and called an old friend, Freddy Cole, Nat King Cole’s brother and a 2001 Grammy-nominated jazz performer.

“Just tell him to keep putting himself in situations where he has to improve. Play out all the time, in clubs. Make sure his trio members are better than him,” said Freddy. “He should get a club gig. Once he begins playing out regularly, he will improve greatly.”

I told Herb of Freddy’s words of wisdom, and Herb listened. He reorganized his trio and only a few months from Freddy’s suggestion, while the moon was high in the sky and

the lights on The Bay were more a reflection from The City than the stars; the piano, drums, and bass entered my ears in Herbie Hancock's Dolphin Dance, an appropriate name for a piece of music for the area in which Herb lived.

Herb's surgical fingers manipulated his instrument. He lightened the pressure, then quick staccato thrusts then — holding steady — he listened, and waited for the bass player's riff. The audience applauded. Dr. Silverstein, the surgeon, the inventor, the author, the composer, was performing and concentrating on what he was playing. "Trying to relax and make good music... to play jazz that sounds both great and is accepted by the pro's," Herb would say.

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Under the snare drum, the bass lays down a lazy close-your-eyes-and-feel-it introduction and Herb follows with a classic Evans counterpoint melody that will haunt the piece throughout. With laser beam precision, the surgeon plays Bill Evans's Interplay.

Some of the audience members closed their eyes, and drifted wherever Herb let his music take them. I closed my eyes and realized I was listening to a dream come true. Herb was an ear surgeon, playing jazz. The ten-year-old was sitting at the piano with *his* eyes closed.

The set finished, the crowd applauded, and the owner walked over and handed Herb a check. Herb looked at it and smiled. It was much less than an hour's pay he receives as a surgeon, but its symbolism held more satisfaction than any amount of money derived from his physician's degree.

He walked toward me, I stood, we embraced, and he said, “I’m getting better, can you hear it?”

“I sure can,” I said.

A fan wishing for an autograph on Herb’s first CD interrupted us. He blushed, but acquiesced. I choked back the tears of joy. He did not run out of time. Having to wait a couple of years to fulfill a dream is common. Waiting ten to twenty years is more analogous to a prison term. Having to wait fifty-five years is a life sentence. But at age 65, Herb fulfilled his childhood dream: his trio was in a club, hired to play jazz, and people came to listen.

The End.