



Blues in the Night: A Story About Cultural Transmission

By Tsvi Blanchard

My friend George called me the other day to tell me that his family is in crisis. George did not seem to want to talk on the phone, so I asked him to come over. When I answered the door, I found George, his parents and his sister Aliza. I invited them all to come in.

George's parents are both serious musicians. Dad plays and teaches the cello and mom plays and teaches piano. Music is the center of family life. They go to concerts together and, although George trades commodities for a living, he still thinks of himself as a musician. His parents agree and the three of them often play as a trio.

So, I asked them, what is the crisis? Clearly distraught, George's mother told me in a whisper that Aliza, the other child in the family, rarely plays her flute any more.

"I urge her to play with us and she will sometimes. But she is usually too busy doing something else. I mean there is nothing wrong with what she is doing, but in our family it's music that makes our lives. We have always dreamed that our children would make music important in their lives."

Aliza interjected, "I do play jazz flute every once in awhile. And don't forget that sometimes I also play guitar, classical and folk. What's the matter with that?"

"Folk guitar? Jazz flute?, once in awhile? Or sometimes?" her mom asked in an exasperated tone. "All right, I admit that I am disappointed that it is only once in awhile that you play the profound pieces for classical flute that you learned as a child. But I can live with that. After all, one day you may play more often. Or perhaps our grandchildren will rediscover the love of great music. But jazz flute? Folk guitar? Aliza, my child, be honest, without instrumental focus and playing only once in awhile and sometimes---is this music you can transmit to your children? You yourself are barely a musician. How can you expect your children to be musicians?"

We sat staring at each other in silence. George and his parents seemed to be saying, "Please, if you can't talk her out of all this nonsense, can't you at least offer us some comfort?" The best I could offer was the cold, hard truth.

"I can see how concerned you are. I wish I had something more reassuring and comforting to say to you. In your mind, you know exactly what it means to be a real musician-."

They jumped in, "Yes, yes, a real musician knows at least one instrument well and with that instrument plays the great classics as often as the circumstances of life allow."

I picked up where I had left off, "And you have always hoped that your children and your grandchildren and even your great-grandchildren too would be, at least in some measure, great musicians. But if they could not be great musicians or even musicians, you hoped that they would always love and be committed to music. And now, in a world with so many life choices besides music, you worry that this will not happen." They nodded in agreement.

"But perhaps," I continued, "just perhaps, in order to transmit a love of music, it is enough to teach your children how to, every once in awhile, consciously and with a sense of satisfaction do something musical. It may not matter exactly how or how often you do these things. It may not matter if it's jazz, folk or classical music. It may not matter if they play, listen or just read about music. If you want to transmit a commitment to music, you may only have to help your children discover the value of intentionally choosing to enjoy doing something musical, whatever it is and however they do it, whether it's been done before or is new to them."

And they seemed comforted. Why? Was it because they were rethinking what they mean by music, loving music or musician? Was it because they secretly hoped for musician grandchildren? Or was it simply that they were resigned to preserving their own music as they were grateful for the fact that this was not going to be the day the music died? I really don't know.

