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4336 Words

Bass Deaf

The bright November Sunday after my brother's memorial service near Chicago, I packed up my rented Corolla, not with books or pictures or baseball mitts or the other expected knickknacks of the dead, but with musical gear: a classical guitar, a newly purchased Stratocaster, two amplifiers, a box of pedals and effects, a drum machine, a four-track tape recorder, and a microphone. Instead of spending the better part of this last summer writing, I spent it sorting through that equipment, testing the cables for shorts, figuring out which knobs do what, even composing song fragments on my computer. In the most literal way, as if I didn't know it already, Todd's musical life has become my inheritance.

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I can't say why or when in the months since my father and I cleared out Todd's North Side apartment jazz has begun to make more sense. It's not so much that it suddenly makes more sense because it gives tone to my mourning—though it does, as does all good music. Instead, I've come to realize that I hadn't been hearing jazz's more predictable patterns, its shared vocabulary, its various figures or tropes. Now, I find it easier to anticipate the next chord change, even as the players take liberty and toe the chords, testing the waters for a plunge into their individual solos. In short, even though I already owned Charles Mingus's "Blues and Roots" and Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue,"

I’ve begun to hear jazz’s larger structural connection to the tradition of the blues. I should have known earlier. I’d been playing the bass guitar for 15 years, and though not formally trained, I certainly had enough experience playing blues-based music—mostly rock and roll, R & B, and insurgent country—to be able to hear the various forms it takes. But my understanding of music has been generally an intuitive one; I’ve really had no reason to give much thought to what I do as I pluck and pull at the lower notes.

Nevertheless, what I am now hearing in jazz makes me aware that I’ve been guilty of a “deafness” similar to what others have exhibited towards the bass. Soon after I picked up the bass, Eric, a guy from my college dorm, announced in a moment of sincere confusion, “It’s not like anyone would know it’s missing if it weren’t there.” The summer before, when I was planning to stop renting and actually buy my first Squire Precision from the Highwood guitar store, my father said much the same thing at the kitchen table. He was supportive, indulged my instincts, but, as with many things, didn’t seem to get my particular interest, and said, “I just don’t see why anyone would want to play the bass.”

In fact, most people don’t know what the bass player adds to a song; or rather, they do not know how to listen for the bass’s structural contribution. They can tap their feet, they can dance, they can feel their adrenaline surge or their heart rates slow, but when it comes to knowing what in the music is compelling those reactions, they simply shrug. The ideal bass line in a blues song is felt more than heard, as necessary to the groove as a roux is to gumbo. But like a roux, the line itself isn’t exactly a flavor. Since so much of popular music is derived from the blues, it stands to reason that the bass line in everything from “Jailhouse Rock” to “Smells Like Teen Spirit” should also come from

the same tradition: it gives motion to and reinforces the major or minor quality of the chord and threads together the larger chord progression. It may even get “bluesy” itself by passing briefly through the minor 7^{th}. But, beyond that, the standard blues bass line is mostly a beat-keeper with a rudimentary sense of harmony; it rarely has much of a melodic presence. Certainly, the examples of Paul McCartney’s slides in “Come Together,” Rick James’s sexually confident sass in “Super Freak,” John Deacon’s deceptively simple line for Queen and David Bowie’s “Under Pressure” show there are any number of memorable bass lines. But unless the song makes deliberate room for the bass line—through an opening riff, through the measures set aside for a rare solo—most listeners enjoy the song as blissfully unaware of the origins of its pulse as they are of their own heartbeat. The bass speaks more to our bodies than to our conscious minds; its simplicity and ubiquity seems beneath our need to notice.

One might wonder, then, as long as the listener identifies in some way with the emotional world behind the song—a wonderful and necessary feeling—does it matter what he or she is consciously aware of? Coleridge once said that poetry could be experienced even while it is imperfectly understood; the same applies to music, both in terms of the larger tradition and to a song’s component parts. Yet Coleridge’s wisdom goes only so far in helping me explain why I’m now hearing what I’m hearing at this particular point in my life. Something in my brother’s death has put these concerns before me.

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Everyone in my family is musical except for my father. A pastor, he had the good sense to step back from the pulpit microphone during hymns. At most, he sang softly

when he wore his lavaliere. My mother, on the other hand, sang and occasionally soloed in our churches’ choirs and still plays piano. By the time I was old enough to be aware of the talents of my siblings, Lisa was already accomplished in her piano playing and was dressing in period velour costumes to sing in Larkin High School’s madrigals choir. Soon thereafter, Todd was receiving attention for his natural ear and his facility with the guitar despite the finger-shredding action of his first one, an Epiphone acoustic; he would later major briefly in jazz in college and play in his university’s jazz band. Beyond our immediate household, nearly every story I heard from my maternal grandmother involved the embarrassment of musical riches that was the Hitchcock brood, riches quickly demonstrated at the summertime family reunions near Myrtle Beach when, during the evenings, everyone would sing old favorites for grandma. As a child, not knowing the songs’ words, I just sat there running my hands across the sandy pinewood floors.

Surrounded by so much music from the beginning, how was I to compete? Being the youngest and a retiring child, I gave up before I even tried to join the rest of my family on the musical stage. So, when it did come time for me to take piano lessons, I lacked the ambition to practice with any sort of determination. What I remember telling my parents (and myself) in grade school was that the music my piano teacher Mrs. Mueller asked to me to play—simplified Joplin and Debussy, classically flavored instructional songs with names like “The Canyon”—wasn’t interesting to me, not like the “Theme from *SWAT*.” My parents required two years of lessons from me, but I managed to get sick a lot.

Still, I fantasized about creating music, but it wasn’t until I was out of my parents’ home and in college that I was able to come to music on my own terms and find the

incentive and patience to take up an instrument myself. The bass seemed a natural enough choice: I had been listening to Geddy Lee and Chris Squire; in my mind, bass was more associated with rock and roll than the piano; it had two fewer strings than the guitar (and would, I told myself, be easier to learn); guitar playing is too showy for my personality anyway, and since Todd already played guitar, it would give us something to do together as friends, besides stuffing a towel against the crack of his bedroom door to keep the pot smoke from creeping down the hallway.

Todd was encouraging initially, once bemoaning the fact that I didn’t play an instrument because, he claimed, my instincts would make me a “monster.” And he showed me how to cop riffs from LPs, tapes, and CDs—which has comprised the bulk of my subsequent training. He first taught me Michael Anthony’s straightforward part for Van Halen’s “Ain’t Talkin’ About Love,” then Sting’s line from the Police’s “Can’t Stand Losing You.” He also showed me the proper hand position that keeps the thumb perpendicular to the neck and parallel to the other fingers, one per fret, on the fret board. He told me always to know where I am in the song and to pay close attention to what the other musicians were doing. He insisted that I listen—always closely.

But I tend to romanticize Todd’s role in my musical life; the truth is, once I started finding my way across the strings with a little more confidence, and once I returned to the University of Illinois for my sophomore year, I didn’t learn as much from him. Not that I didn’t try. Not that I ever felt I was beyond learning from him, or even now, could ever feel that way (from what I know of his education and imagine of the rest). But when we would jam in my bedroom at my parents’ place, over holiday breaks or on summer afternoons—him on his Gibson Paul, me still on my Squire—it rarely

amounted to more than my giving him a platform to demonstrate his virtuosity through his lengthy solos. By taking up the bass, I knew I was taking up an accompanying role. But jamming with Todd merely served to reinforce the fallacy that the bass provides only a foundation for the larger song, that the bass is nothing more than the important but invisible basis upon which other, more beautiful, structures might be built.

Despite his advice to me, I got the impression that Todd listened only casually to what I was doing; as long as I supported the chord he wanted to solo through, he didn’t seem to notice anything beyond his own fretwork. At the time, I didn’t understand what the problem was. I didn’t understand what a groove is—that it develops from the space created *between* the players. Later, I would hear James Brown’s “Super Bad” and discover that the groove emerges not from the rhythm section alone but from the interplay of the drummer, bassist, and other players paying close attention to each other. Todd grew less able to model his own advice and to really listen to my playing. I needed him to suggest alternative phrasings or ways to steady the beat, things I now know would have helped me appreciate sooner the bass’s full relationship to the song. Instead, it was as if I was learning nothing but patience for another’s indulgences; his leads led me nowhere except to the desire to get on to other things.

That desire also began to manifest itself during many of our phone conversations once I moved to Knoxville and his drinking began to chip away at his esteem and reason. At first, my trying to end the calls quickly was purely financial: I couldn’t justify paying for so much long distance time while he ambled off to the bathroom, only to forget he was on the phone. Then, it became more emotional: I couldn’t afford losing the time to the depression I followed him into after hearing him slur and rage about my parents. I

didn’t want my listening quietly 600 miles away to seem to him like my signature of assent.

It became clear once I started graduate school in Tennessee that my interests and accomplishments couldn’t be of interest to him, at least for very long. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to take an interest; the alcohol robbed him of the ability. When I told him about a great gig with the Mystery Dates, the insurgent country band I was in at the time, he’d respond with, “Why do you always find the good musicians to play with?” When I told him about my engagement to my then girlfriend Melissa, he said, “But I’m five years older. I’m the one who should be getting married.” At heart, he knew that I was merely sharing with him the events of my life. But depression and reason rarely keep the same schedules. He clearly couldn’t hear me, and I decided to keep my updates to myself.

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Milan Kundera once said that writers write so that their families will listen to them. Todd’s waning capacity to hear what I was actually saying proves in part that Kundera is right. But even outside my relationship with my brother, I have a growing feeling that my accomplishments in my family’s eyes have not seemed as notable as Todd’s, my problems not as severe. My freshman year in high school, I brought home a paper on the guitarist Jeff Beck, showed it to my mother, who, in turn, shared my teacher Mr. Terzi’s praise with my father. Without reading the paper, he said he had seen both my writing and Todd’s writing before (we were both, five years apart, students in his Confirmation class), and that he couldn’t see what the teachers who praised me were seeing. Todd, on the other hand, could write a thoughtful paper.

Fortunately, my relationship to my father has improved over the last fifteen years. He’s made a great effort to become more emotionally available, and I’ve grown to give him a break. Still, Todd’s problems held center stage in his perception. During a recent visit to my parents’ home in Georgia, I wanted to share with my father my thoughts into how much depression has influenced my emotional reality for the bulk of my life. When I tried to broach the subject—why I missed so much school, why I frequently didn’t feel like I deserved my allowance or birthday presents, why I never completed Confirmation class, why I gave up on the piano—he simply responded, “Maybe, but you’re depression hasn’t been as serious as your brother’s.”

There’s a reason why there are so few bass solos in popular music or jazz. The thickness of the strings, the potential for literal inaudibility in the mix, forces the good bass player to choose notes judiciously, tactfully. As Francis Davis recently noted in an article about bassist Charlie Haden, “…in most hands, bass solos are a recipe for boredom... After a succession of horn solos even the fleetest and most artfully conceived bass solo risks being anticlimactic.” The limited range of the bass instrument and the attention level of the audience hinder its options for expression and force the player to seek out other roles. The conversation with my father was one of the few moments when my concerns actually welled up to the surface and passed through their own minor 7^{th}, the blue note. But, in my father’s ears, they quickly resumed the supporting line to the Billie Holiday of Todd’s life…the pills, the booze, the time in psychiatric hospitals…the markers of the real blues. My mistake, it seems, has been to manage my problems so artfully.

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Because he knew he had our attention, Todd often tried to position himself as the family seer / soothsayer. He had nothing to lose by enumerating my father’s insensitivities or the instances of my mother needing to believe only the best. In his mind, the damage had already been done, not only to his psyche, he was sure, but to all of ours. In a way, what I’m doing now stems from the critique that he began. From my end, however, the motivation behind his critique—the need to account for the ambiguous origins of his private pain—often led him to exaggerated conclusions. Because of its severity, I’ve come to believe that biology was the primary cause of Todd’s depression. And Todd thought so too, but that explanation did little to soothe him. For him to curse his biochemistry alone would be to curse the same accident that created his natural intelligence, his sense of humor, and his musical ability; that is, the very things he enjoyed about himself and that others enjoyed about him. Small wonder he contrived external events—stories that would make Oprah’s audience hiss—to account for his suffering. Even the uncertainties of conjecture must have seemed more palpable than the invisible cocktail of hormones coursing through his veins.

So I am sympathetic. In part because I feel that biology has been ultimately kinder to me; in part because I suspect my own biology still predisposes me to occasional bouts of savage self-doubt. But Todd, Lisa, and I grew up in the same household, experienced much the same life, and still have come to process those experiences in very different ways. What distinguishes Todd’s life from the lives of my parents or my sister or myself is that something in him couldn’t embrace what he had, something in him had to invent circumstances to account for the constant burn of his depression, something in him didn’t want him to live. After years of serious, lonely drinking that compromised his

spirit, he was going back to church, had joined a dating service, had been taking acting classes; after years of serious drinking that compromised his liver, he was combining his anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications with codeine he ordered illegally over the internet from a pharmacy in South Africa. If contradiction is at the heart of all great tragic characters, then Todd’s life is tragic because he suffered for years for no good reason, at least emotionally speaking; no amount of love or support could deter what his genetic makeup predisposed him to. His stories explained nothing really, except maybe how crazy he was making himself trying to figure out what to grieve beyond the simple brute fact of his depression.

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In a meeting with my counselor Victoria a few weeks ago, I told her I was writing again and that I felt myself moving past my temporary estrangement from it. When I’m depressed and still able to write, I’m able to confirm my spiritual, subterranean worth. For nine months after Todd’s death, however, my inability to write only served to exacerbate my grief. Victoria seemed pleased that the words were coming again and wondered if I found a similar spiritual connection in music, especially the music I heard growing up in my father’s churches. I said, in terms of church, I really didn’t. As a child, I never found much pleasure singing the Methodist hymns. My voice never seemed to fit the songs, and the hymns always left me feeling more winded than spiritually alive. My voice is as thin as my father’s, but, in the devotional clamor of the congregation, I didn’t need to step back from the microphone to hide it.

Instead, the sole pleasure I ever knew in church music was that which I observed in my mother as she harmonized in church. While I was scrambling back and forth

between octaves, my mother chose freely between the harmony lines, finding to my untrained ear the one most appropriate for the hymn’s expressive moment. If I was aware of anything spiritual, it was in what she was doing, in the opportunity the hymn afforded her to exercise her very real skills. And it was a chance for me to see her purely personal interests in action. I was well aware from dinner table conversations of my mother’s political interests, and remember her crying as Todd and I cleared the dishes the night the Equal Rights Amendment failed to pass, but I didn’t see those commitments as things that defined her individually. Her ability with music was another matter. Whether or not she was responding to the hymn’s particular theology, she seemed to respond to something larger than herself. And yet, she didn’t seem compromised or overwhelmed or diminished. Instead, she seemed simply to enjoy her own uniqueness, her singularity, precisely because it contributed to the music’s larger whole.

I never heard that kind of spiritual connection in Todd’s playing, though it was skillful, though it came from an ear much more refined than mine. There was always something desperate in his solos, something impressive in the effort yet incomplete in the statement I heard him trying to make. Incomplete, I think, because the solo is never the greater song. Incomplete in part because to focus on the solo alone is to be merely solitary, to be engaged in the misguided effort to break free and even to stand clear from the motivating song.

And yet this very reaction to Todd’s playing reminds me of why I should shy away from talking about spiritual matters. During one of our more balanced phone conversations, I remember telling Todd that I was grateful for the opportunity to play the bass, to serve both the song and the larger tradition, and to play with other musicians who

felt the same way. I wasn’t lying; I am deeply grateful for that opportunity. But now I realize that behind what I was saying was much more a smug admonishment than it was an invitation. In my mind, I assumed that because I played the bass and kept that playing closer to the roots of the chords, somehow I was more connected to the song itself, to the emotional core, perhaps even more connected to the earth. In short, I believed my approach to music gave me the richer inner-life. It is a foolish and self-deceiving assumption. My big brother was exhausted and sick, and I was asserting my own musical experience to capitalize on the shifting roles. I wouldn’t let myself hear everything I was saying in order to solo, so to speak, over someone I knew was feeling especially vulnerable. I was using what I honestly felt to be true to make myself feel superior.

Because, really, how could I presume that Todd didn't have a spiritual life? For me to exclude his personal struggles or anything else from spiritual activity is self-righteous and naïve; there's groundwork to be done for any important endeavor. It's one of the lessons I should have learned when I realized that I had to come to music on my own terms. Each of us must find his or her own way through whatever keeps us from the spiritual inside us. There are certain standards we shouldn’t dare hold others to, despite what so many evangelists suggest. Writing and playing music have helped me realize that I in fact have a spiritual side; the death of my brother has shown me how much work I still have to do to be able to learn from it. It might be easier for me to deal with the fact of Todd’s death by trivializing his spirituality. Having a disability that interferes with one’s personal and professional life would be frustrating, demoralizing. Having a disability that interferes with one’s spirit would be terrifying. It’s hard enough thinking of him dying alone…

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The beautiful, intangible thing about live performance is that the musicians feed off each other; someone’s mood can hinder the entire band or bring everything and everybody else in line. No one plays consistently. Some are lucky enough to play more consistently than others. I don’t know quite why this happens; it may be a matter of developing 3 ears: one ear to keep on the ideal song that could be played, one to keep on the other players and the song they're actually playing, and one for one's own part, the middle ground. How much should we accommodate what the others are doing? How much should we keep playing and tune out their mistakes? How well do we know the ideal song ourselves, and how do we know that what the others are playing isn't the truer version? We don't, at least in every moment, or always at the same time. We may remark on someone's instinct and intuition being better than someone else’s...but intuition by definition cannot be taught or learned directly. It's knowledge and perception that exists outside our formal training; it’s something, I suppose, like faith.

Much more so than my playing, much more so than Todd’s, my mother’s singing has become for me an emblem of the faith needed to harmonize. My mother sang, in her own way, to what she heard in the larger song, not the one being sung with varying degrees of accuracy in the sanctuary, but the one that we all could potentially sing. On rare occasion, I’ve experienced something comparable playing bass on stage. There’s a moment, after the song is underway, when something extraordinary can happen. It’s the moment when every musician, on guitar, on keyboards, on bass, on drums, can alter his or her part, even conceivably at the same time, and the song still endures, like a delicate engine chugging powerfully between the instruments. Each player then has room to

meander off, together or alone—from mistake or inspiration—and the song’s pistons still fire smoothly. It’s the moment when the musicians who create the song start to be created by the song, when something outside training or talent or stamina starts to drive the player. Maybe this happens when that something allows the players to know the instruments so deeply that their fingers and feet know instinctively where to fall, when the players begin to know the song’s fundamental structure so well, every note or beat falls into synch with it, even if the song has progressed to a point, as in jazz, where the chords press towards dissonance and the changes are merely implied. Whatever that engine is, it pulls us towards the inaudible—where so much of our daily listening fails to go—and discovers in us new textures, new vocabularies, new metaphors, new shadings to the grand old feelings.

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