

# the heart's deepest desire

## In the beginning, you fall in love.

It starts in your feet and pretty soon it's in your chest and then your throat and finally you can't think about anything else. For me, it was boogie-woogie — specifically, "Pine Top's Boogie," by the great Chicago pianist Pine Top Smith. My father, Louis Sidran '37, had the record, and by age nine I had it memorized. I played it over and over again, like some kind of personal litany.

I had been playing piano since . . . well, actually, I don't remember *not* playing the piano. My earliest memories include the instrument, and I would spend hours at the piano, turning the pages of a comic book with my right hand while my left hand traced a boogie-woogie pattern. Slowly, unconsciously, I fixed the moves into my motor memory while my mind wandered. So even as a small child, jazz was, for me, the great escape: it spoke to me of something better, another world, greater than the world I knew in Racine, Wisconsin. Years later, when I heard UW Professor George Mosse speak on the importance of alienation in the growth of the personal conscience, I knew he was talking to me. I am living proof. I believe that alienation, to a greater or lesser extent, is at the heart of every jazz musician's story.

I went to school, and in general, led a normal life for a Jewish child growing up in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish, Midwestern community. On Saturdays, I went to temple and stood with the davening Eastern European refugees and pre-

tended to pray, too. I swayed with them and made little chanting sounds. I had no idea what I was saying, but I loved the feeling of being in that hypnotic state. I think of this as my first jam session.

I remember when, a few years later, I performed an impromptu piano recital for my fifth-grade class, and I got a kiss from Miss Pedley, my teacher. I think of this as my first paying gig. Years passed, and I collected records, one after another. I took the bus downtown to

*"It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away."*

— ORIAH MOUNTAIN DREAMER

Trudy White's record shop and traded the money I made pulling weeds and sweating in my uncle's auto parts store for something by Miles Davis, Horace Silver, or the "hottest new group in jazz," Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. I would bring the discs home and go into my room, close the door, and get right next to my little record player, like an Eskimo huddling around a fire, absorbing the heat that came from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. The world was

calling. I listened to Blue Mitchell's trumpet solo on Horace Silver's "Juicy Lucy" so many times that I thought he was related to me, literally — that we were blood brothers.

Life in Racine was generally slow. It got a bit more exciting when my schoolmates discovered anti-Semitism. I don't have to go into the details, as one can imagine how creatively and thoroughly thirteen-year-old boys can torture one another. But when my best friend said to me, "You can tell me, is it really true that Jews drink the blood of Christian babies?" I knew that I was from some other place. And it was jazz, that's the place I was from. Its voice whispered to me of a better life, where all men were brothers, and where having fun was not only serious business, but also the order of the day. The music itself was so warm and comforting, so free and on fire, and the players were so supportive of each other, and the solos — well, the solos were like rhetorical flights where no words were necessary. It meant what it meant, and even as a young boy, I knew it would be a dream come true to be able to speak this language.

After my bar mitzvah, I left the Jewish temple and planned to never return. What had the temple given me, I reasoned? A few memorized lines to say on cue and a sense that the ghetto was still alive and well in Wisconsin. How could it compare to the call of jazz? At age thirteen, I signed on at the temple of bebop, and I've spent the last four decades among the faithful.

in your throat

in your chest

in your feet

Jazz musician  
Ben Sidran  
looked far and  
wide to discover  
the true meaning  
of his music —  
then found it,  
unexpectedly  
beating, inside  
where it had  
always been.

by ben sidran '67  
photos by  
brent nicastro '77

## coming of age

My first major stop was UW-Madison in 1961, where I enrolled in the Integrated Liberal Studies program and took courses from the likes of Wilmott Ragsdale, Herbert Howe MA'41, PhD'48, and Harvey Goldberg '43, PhD'51 by day — and from Steve Miller x'67, Boz Scaggs x'66, and Langdon Street by night. The Vietnam War was breathing down my neck when I headed to the University of Sussex in Brighton, England, where I received my PhD in American Studies. I went back to playing, and Steve Miller and his band arrived in London to make their first record — produced by Glyn Johns, the engineer who had recorded the Beatles. Months after they left, I was still playing — with Eric Clapton, Peter Frampton, and even one memorable session with the Rolling Stones.

By the time my dissertation had been published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston (as *Black Talk*), I consciously decided that it was time to stop studying the informa-

tion. It was time to *become* the information. Judy (Lutrin Sidran'69) and I ended up living in Los Angeles, where I signed a recording contract with Capitol Records. Then my learning really began in earnest. I discovered that to find my own voice, I had to first learn how to *bear* myself. Judy encouraged a move away from the noise of L.A., so we headed back to Madison.

Here, I became the artist that I had been avoiding since taking the academic fork in the road. Here, I began writing songs in earnest, going on tours with a series of bands, making one record a year. I also taught at the university for a year, a course in the Communication Arts department called the Social Aesthetics of Record Production. I earned my living producing pop and jazz records for other artists, and radio and television programs about jazz for NPR, PBS, and various companies, many of them based overseas.

I began a schedule of traveling that has to date kept me away from home for thirteen of the past twenty-five years.

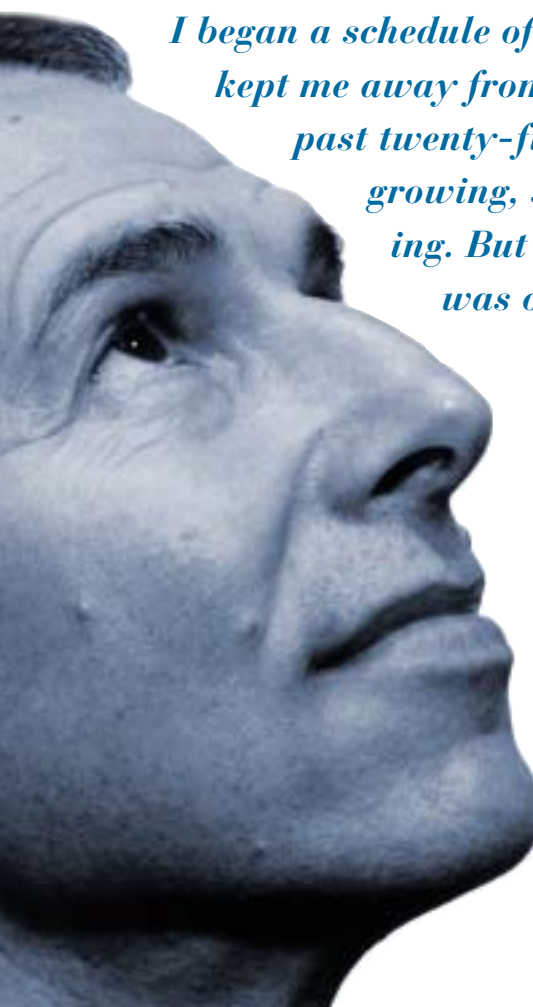
three weeks, he could keep time well enough so that we could play together.

When Leo turned five, I wanted him to have some Jewish experience of his own, something he could feel on his pulse just as I had felt the spiritual energy of those old men back in Racine. I know now that I was also trying to reconnect with my own beginnings. As fate would have it, I happened to wander into the Gates of Heaven synagogue in Madison's James Madison Park on the day that Hannah Rosenthal x'73 was leading her second Rosh Hashanah service. It was wonderful, very hamish (down to earth), with a text and an atmosphere that nimmmed the heart. "The Gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that," she said, "and a person will worship something — have no doubt of that either." What was I worshipping? What was written on my face? And if, as the text said, man is capable of change — indeed, *obligated* to change — was it time for me to change? And if so, what should I be doing that I wasn't doing?

In Hannah's service, God was not an old man or a removed omniscience, but a presence, the sum total of human experience, the knowable and the ineffable. And there was a kind of simplicity in her presentation that made me comfortable to sit among these people and think these thoughts. In my past, Jewish ritual was just that: the hollow scraping of reeds in the wind. Here, I found in the smallest of moments the largest of meanings.

Now I believe that everyone wants and needs to think these thoughts. Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? And, even if there is no retribution or justice on earth, what is the right way for us to walk the path, from the first step to the last?

What was of particular interest to me, however, was the music. The service was full of songs that I found I remembered from childhood but hadn't thought of since I was five years old. Children's songs that were so unremarkable that they normally would have passed without notice. And yet, in this new context, they provoked powerful feelings in me.



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I was actively growing, searching, learning, producing. But the best production by far was our son, Leo, in 1976.

Judy says that Leo, who just graduated with the Class of '99, softened me. Certainly, I became less interested in being "hip" and more open to sitting on the floor in a pile of Legos and things with wheels. Leo loved music, all kinds of music, and it was all around from the moment of his conception. One day, he asked if he could play drums with such a serious disposition that, for his fourth birthday, I bought him a small set. Within

At the end of the service, I went up and thanked Hannah and said that I really enjoyed myself. But there was just one thing. “No offense,” I said very softly, “but your guitar playing is a little distracting. Would it be possible for me to help with the music?” And with that the path branched again.

Year after year, as Leo grew from five to six, and six to seven, and then seven to eight, I prepared and played the music for Hannah’s High Holy Day services at the Gates of Heaven. The night before, she would come by the house and worry me through all the songs. They were so simple — “Avinu Malchenu,” “Oseh Shalom,” “Mode Ani” — that I sometimes lost my way while playing them.

Bruce Paulson, a trombone player in the “Tonight Show” band during Johnny Carson’s reign, once told me, “I played Johnny’s theme song every night for twenty years, and I had to read the music every night. I never could memorize it. I can’t tell you why.” I think I can. It has something to do with ritual, and how it replaces normal consciousness, for better or for worse, with an alternative state.

## life’s a lesson

Every year, I encouraged Leo to sit next to me on the piano bench so he would pay more attention to the service. And every year, as his feet got progressively closer to the floor, he played the music along with me, improvising on the top of the piano while I played the bottom. The same year his shoes actually touched the old wooden floor, Hannah asked me to include the song “Life’s A Lesson” in the service. “It helps me to understand the Kaddish,” she said. “You’ll play it right before we read the prayer for the dead.”

“Life’s A Lesson” is a set of lyrics I wrote in 1979 to a melody by Frank Rosolino. Frank was a legend in Los Angeles, a wild, happy-go-lucky guy who sat in the trombone section of Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show” band right next to my friend Bruce. They called Frank the “Silver Fox” because of his rich,

white mane and his dapper appearance. He loved to sail and play golf, and he enjoyed a lot of friends, a lovely wife, and beautiful kids. All in all, he was on top of the world, leading what appeared to be the best jazz life possible. He wrote this lovely song called “Blue Daniel” back in the fifties. It was a simple, wistful melody, and I had considered writing lyrics to it for a long time. I met Frank in 1973 in L.A., when I hired him to play on my album, *Putting In Time On Planet Earth*. “What’s it about?” I asked. “You know,” he said, “like the Blue Danube? It’s just a waltz.”

Over the years, I kept trying to come up with some words for the melody, but my ideas always seemed too trivial, too inconsequential for the underlying elegance and beauty of Frank’s simple little theme. Then one night in 1979 I got a phone call from L.A. Had I heard about Frank? He had come home that day with a gun and without explanation, he had shot his wife, his child, and then killed himself.

There was a long silence. I couldn’t say anything, so I said nothing, and then we said good-bye and hung up. I was sitting at the piano, so I started playing “Blue Daniel.” And as if from out of thin air, the following lyrics arrived in my head:

*“Life’s a lesson, you can fail it  
you can set your spirit free or jail it  
but setting it free is no guarantee it’s  
gonna fly when you sail it.  
The object is to ride it,  
But setting it free while you’re sitting  
astride it  
isn’t easy.  
You can learn a lot by going crazy,  
you can fail it,  
you can set your spirit free or jail it.  
But setting it free is no guarantee it’s  
gonna fly when you sail it.  
And if you feel like you’re in prison  
and no one is coming to talk or to listen,  
take it easy,  
know that no one ever has it easy,  
no one ever learns to fly by freezing.  
Life’s a lesson you can pass or fail.”*

It was as close as I’ve ever come to receiving a dictation from a higher authority. Subsequently, I rarely performed the song in public. But one day, Hannah heard me sing it, and as she said, it spoke to her of the same questions raised by the Kaddish — a prayer recited in daily synagogue services. So every year thereafter, I sang “Life’s A Lesson” at her High Holy Day services. And year after year, the people leaving the Gates of Heaven Synagogue said to me, “You should record this music.” I knew I would have to do it, and after twenty years of producing records, I knew it would not be easy.

## aligning the axis powers

There was no chance that anybody at a major record label would be interested in financing this kind of recording. At the same time, I was producing a series of jazz records in concert with a Japanese company, and I had an active European distributor from Germany. Whereas the American record companies were already deep into their love affair with gangster rap music, the Japanese and the Europeans were still enthusiastic about the jazz and social commentary albums I was making. I had just started working on the music for a film called *Hoop Dreams*, which no American label would fund, and I had taken it to my foreign partners, who had been receptive.

So, in the spring of 1990, I called a meeting at a nondescript hotel just outside the airport in Minneapolis. We discussed the usual business, and then, at the end of the day, I asked Nobu, my partner from Japan, what he thought about an album sung in Hebrew that would include famous Jewish jazz musicians performing liturgical music. In his wonderful, reasonable way, he said, “I think that would be interesting.” I turned to Vera, the German distributor, and asked how she thought her market would react. “It will be well received,” she said. The Axis powers had just agreed to help finance the Jewish record.

Within weeks, I was in a recording studio. First, I recorded all the songs with just myself on the keyboards and Lynette Margulies '74, who sang at our services, on many of the Hebrew vocals. Then, for the next four years, I traveled the world with tapes under my arm. I would call up a friend, or perhaps just a musician whom I knew had Jewish roots, and make my pitch. Like the call I made to saxophonist Josh Redman, who has an Afro-American father (the avant-garde musician Dewey Redman) and a Jewish mother. "Josh," I said, "I'm doing an album of Hebrew liturgical music, and I've got you down for 'Oseh Shalom.' Are you interested?" He laughed and said, "Seriously, what are you planning?" I repeated myself. It took a couple of tries, but invariably, it worked. They came, they played, and they left with tapes for their mothers. Twenty of America's finest Jewish performers played like angels on songs they hadn't heard or thought of since they were kids.

What was so striking was the similarity of the stories they told me. "I was born Jewish," Randy Brecker said, "but I'm not religious." "I know," I reassured him, "me, too. Just come down and try it, and if you don't like it, we won't use it." He, too, left with a tape for his mother.

There were some deep, almost primitive connections being made in the studio every time this music unfolded. I included only two songs in English — a song I wrote for my sister called "Face Your Fears," and, of course, "Life's A Lesson," which I sang as a duet with Carole King. The sound of Lynette's soaring Hebrew filled room after room, in city after city, as I traveled the circuit documenting our communal jazz childhood. In our day, each one of us had stood as a child in a temple somewhere, swaying and hypnotized by the language and the hope that there was justice in the world, a basic belief that all children bring with them into this life. As the word got out in the jazz community that I was making this record, I started receiving phone calls from musicians, some quite famous, saying things like, "Ben, you can't record 'Avinu Malchenu' with-

out me. That's my song." It was as if to become jazz musicians, we had all taken a fork in the road, and now we wanted to revisit lost territory.

If making this record opened up deep philosophical questions for me, it also opened up urgently practical ones. I got it finished. I got it paid for. I arranged for the Art Institute of Chicago to license Marc Chagall's *Praying Jew* for the cover. I saw to it that the record was distributed in Japan and throughout Europe, where the reviews were very positive, particularly one in Japan's leading music magazine, *Swing Journal*, that was virtually ecstatic about the fact that "Life's A Lesson" was a kind of cultural event, the first recording ever to reunite the two streams of Jews and jazz. But in the United States, I couldn't get my phone calls returned.

It's not that I didn't try. Over my decades as a performer and producer, I had come to know most of the men who ran the business. As the cliché would have it, many of them were Jews, some quite active in the Jewish community and well known for their philanthropy; several had even received the B'nai Brith humanitarian award for their good deeds.

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*Then I got it.*

So originally, I felt confident that one of these gentlemen would see the beauty and the logic in this recording and at least make it available in his home country to his own people. I sent copies to a dozen of these top recording executives.

To a man, they were complimentary about the music. Likewise, to a man, they turned it down.

## "sunday morning"

But as life would have it, a producer at the CBS "Sunday Morning" television show got wind of the record, and about me living a normal life in Madison and yet traveling the world, playing and recording so much different music with such a diverse group of artists. They contacted me, and I agreed to let them follow me around. They filmed me working with Diana Ross in New York, with the rapper Shock G for *Hoop Dreams* in San Francisco. They captured me in the control room with Mose Allison, and performing live in Tokyo. And they kept coming back to me and seventy-five of my neighbors at the Gates of Heaven Synagogue, singing these little songs and following Hannah's service. They even focused on this record that nobody would release.

When the program aired a couple of Sundays after the Jewish High Holy Days in 1994, my phone began to ring and didn't stop for weeks. People the world over wanted to know how they could get this record. But, of course, they couldn't.

I still hadn't learned the lesson life was trying to teach me. I wanted so badly to give my work away, as I had done so often in the past, perhaps so that somebody else might be responsible for my failures. But in the United States I couldn't even give this record away. Because I had promised a few of the folks who called that if they left their names, I'd send them an album, I did, for me, what was a dramatic, last-ditch move. I actually contacted a factory and manufactured five hundred copies of the album. Up until that time, I had lived my professional life by two guiding principles: Do not have boxes of CDs in your basement and avoid the Jewish thing at all costs — only to wind up with boxes of Jewish CDs in my basement. Then I got it.

The record sold and sold. More than twenty-five thousand copies. Out of the basement. The record executives were all

wrong. But that was only the beginning. I began to play the Jewish music in concerts all over the world — at Lincoln Center in New York, at the Simon Weisenthal Center in Los Angeles, at the Odeon Theater in Vienna, Austria, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht. And what was even more profound was that Leo played drums with me at all these concerts. Sitting with him on stage, playing this music that we had played together on the piano bench at the Gates of Heaven for so many years, was an extraordinary feeling. It was as if the contemporary adage, “Think globally, act locally,” had been turned on its head.

There seemed to be no end to where this record was taking me. Until, at last, it finally led me to my own end game of sorts. My whole life, I had been listening to jazz as if there was some way to unravel its message, to penetrate the ineffable and parse the mystery at its core. But perhaps this is the very purpose of this music. It speaks in ways that we otherwise cannot, without all the baggage of verbs and nouns, and it expresses, as the great African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim told me, “the heart’s deepest desire.” And isn’t this what prayer is? The heart expressing its deepest desire. Hadn’t I been praying all these years? Hadn’t I been running toward, rather than away from, my own past?

It’s well known that jazz is a means to transform grief into joy. (The expression is, “I love the blues, they hurt so nice.”) When the jazz musician plays, he is in fact transforming himself. During all those long hours he works not just to master the piece of metal in his hands, but to make himself the vessel, to learn to listen to the voice in his own head, and to sing it to the world. Marshall McLuhan taught us that the medium is the message. In jazz, the musician himself is the medium, so his life becomes the message. The kind of vessel you become is determined by your heart’s desire. I believe we all want to do something important, to be connected to something greater than ourselves. And jazz training, where you are forced to find your own voice, to accept yourself for what you truly are, to be yourself completely, is a kind of religious training.

## wanting to play

In the spring of 1999, only days after Leo graduated from UW-Madison with a major in history, he and I went to Minneapolis to play a gig. As we often do when we travel together, we hired local bass and horn players to fill out the band. This time, we were joined by saxophonist Irv Williams at a little club called the

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Artist’s Quarter. Irv was born in Arkansas eighty years ago and has lived in the Twin Cities for the past fifty. He has wonderful stories about his days on the road with Duke Ellington’s band and nights with Lester Young, but the best part of hanging out with Irv is the twinkle in his eye and the wisdom of his playing.

He acts as if he’s still in his midlife, and he plays with a romantic lyricism and a calm command that is the signature of the self-realized jazzman. The sounds that come from his old horn are as cool as fresh-squeezed juice on a hot day. In his music, he says only what he wants to, and he rarely repeats himself. He makes you play better when you play with him, because to hear him is to understand that your role in life is not to prove yourself, but to *be* yourself.

My favorite example of this axiom is something the great saxophonist Phil Woods told me. He is perhaps the most gifted and thoroughly accomplished saxophonist of our day, having worked with many of the great legends of this music

— Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk. His command of the horn is nonpareil. Several years ago, I asked him, “What is it like to be able to play absolutely anything you can hear? It must be liberating.” He just looked at me with those big, sad eyes of his and said, “Oh, playing is no problem. *Wanting* to play — that’s the problem.”

This reduction of the artistic process to a search for desire — the desire for desire — is, I think, at the core of jazz. Those who think that artists are merely flexing some abstract or intellectual muscle on a daily basis are really missing the point. Art is a transformative process, and the artist is constantly transforming himself, first of all, and his audience by extension. It’s this hunger to experience change — real, physical change — that drives the artist. If it’s a need to experience “wholeness” or “completeness,” then it is a wholeness with one’s own potential that one feels. It’s as if there is an almost genetic unfolding in the human heart of this potential, an internal command to follow this voice.

And isn’t this similar to the theme of the Jewish High Holy Days — the belief that man can change, that we can transform ourselves, and that there is a spiritual commandment that we do so? It is an act of surrender, of giving oneself over to something greater, and this, of course, is what musicians do. John Coltrane was not the first to say that “music belongs to no one — it passes through us all.” In the daily attempt to surrender, to transform oneself through confronting a brass tube or a row of piano keys or a set of drums, one is engaged in learning the heart’s desire, as a truth on the pulse, not as an abstract idea.

This is what I was thinking as I watched Leo and Irv play together. Or perhaps I was thinking nothing at all.



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When people ask Ben Sidran ‘67 how he can live in such a small town, he smiles and says, “The road leads from New York City to Madison, not the other way around.”