Cultural Daily

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How a Latin Tutor Got Me Up On Stage

Jaz Dorsey · Thursday, June 7th, 2012

I was the only boy in the reform school to have a Latin tutor.

I'd been taking Latin before they locked me up and my mother insisted that I continue. This may have had something to do with the fact that my great-grandmother, who was still alive, had spent 50 years as a Latin teacher. In Senoia, Georgia.

Who would think a town that small would have a Latin teacher?

Where mother found this dude I will never know, but if you looked up "Latin Tutor" in the dictionary, there'd be his picture. He was about 6'6?, weighed about 130 pounds and reminds me in memory of Big Bird. I can't remember his name, so we'll call him "Gary" for a reason that will soon become apparent.

I was only in that particular reform school for a year before they kicked me out (who gets kicked out of reform school?) but twice a week every week for that year I had a 2 hour Latin session with Gary – who had a serious obsession with a popular band of that era called Gary Puckett and the Union Gap (which is why I remember dude as "Gary") My final assignment – translate LADY WILLPOWER in to Latin.

I had no clue, but "Gary" was so excited by the assignment that he translated it himself and so excited by the translation that I got an A in Latin. I guess that was my first success as a dramaturg. And I still remember "Gary's" lyrics:

Obstinatio, ad nuc ad nunquam
Dar amorem me et
tib fundam cor cum melitia semper.

Hope I spelled all that right – spell-check doesn't speak Latin.

Well, my next stop was a mental institution – the John Umstead Hospital in Butner, North Carolina, where I spent the last three years of high school (much to my family's alarm, I graduated and went to Chapel Hill on scholarship. Turns out, I wasn't the one that was fucked up.)

These were the 60s and actually John Umstead had one of the most progressive adolescent units in the country, so over those three years, I got an extraordinary if unorthodox education, which included an entire year (11th grade) under the influence of a rather fascinating teacher named Flicka Tate (seriously) whose curriculum for us juniors consisted of an entire year studying the lyrics of contemporary songwriters, from Bob Dylan to Buffy St. Marie to The Beatles and Grace Slick.

One pill makes you larger and the other makes you small. Perfect song for the nuthouse or Woodstock, whichever came first.

This fit right in with the one extracurricular activity that we were allowed – music. We kooky kids

spent most of our free time either in the music room listening to the songs we were studying or sitting on the front porch singing them. The one thing each of us patients had was a guitar. And cigarettes. We all smoked.

Then I went to university and studied Brecht and Weil as a German major – including a year on scholarship at the University of Goettingen in West Germany. Minoring in French, I also read all of the classic drama of that cannon in French. The 17th Century French playwrights were the greatest rhyming geniuses of history and that lays a great foundation for a songwriter. And as it turned out, later in life when I was living and working in New York, I had several commissions to write songs in Spanish and French:

Cantamos, bailamos, estamos aqui
Brindamos teatro con gran frenesi!

I didn't write my first song until I was 27. I had had to drop out of graduate school and hitchhike home to Atlanta after learning that both my grandmother and mother had been hospitalized. So there I was living in my grandmother's decaying mansion at 99 Peachtree Battle Avenue surrounded by dying women. Very Edgar Allan Poe.

I was also trying to have a career in the theatre in a town where everyone said "Well, if you were any GOOD, you'd be in New York."

It didn't take long until that got on my nerves and one day I sat down and wrote my first song – "Manhattan Blues."

I pay my union dues
I read that Broadway news
I'm a natural ham
Still here I am
Singing those Manhattan Blues.

Once the floodgates opened, songs just kept coming. Every time I sat down to write a play, the characters would suddenly burst into song, and in 1981 I knocked out 5 very bizarre musicals. All of which eventually got NYC productions – at the off-off-(off) Broadway level and I enjoyed a kind of cult following as that "playwright from Atlanta." (In 1999 I did have a show on "Broadway" – at the, sadly no longer there, Lambs Theatre.)

Now I live in Nashville – Music City USA and songwriting Mecca of the modern world. I feel at home here because – hey, if you ain't been locked up, you ain't really Nashville. It kind of goes along with the pickup truck, the dog and the outhouse. But I think I'm scarin' these good folks, running around on Music Row yellin' "Musical Theatre!"

What – are you GAY? (Well, yes. But what's that got to do with writing musicals?)

I guess my advice to aspiring songwriters would be – get locked up but be sure and take your guitar.

And get a Latin tutor.

Photo: Jaz Dorsey today.

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