



Ben Sidran: A Life in the Music

(The True Story of
Everything I Ever Knew)

Nardis Books



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ALSO BY BEN SIDRAN

Black Talk

Talking Jazz (Vols. 1, 2 & 3)

*There Was a Fire: Jews, Music and the American
Dream*

For my son, Leo
and my father, Lou

“And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

“I’ll tell you the true whether I knew or not.”

— Mel Brooks, *The Two Thousand Year Old Man*

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Electronic Edition Preface:

I can honestly say that I have very few regrets with this book, but there is one: I never liked the title, “A Life in the Music”. It was so clearly the result of compromise and indecision, the opposite of everything it took to write the thing in the first place, and I still wince when I see it. It is like that infamous horse designed by committee, only in this case, the committee wasn’t really interested in going for a ride.

I know one should never ask others for advice about titles. I knew it then, but not as well and certainly not as surely as I know it now; compromise on the title and you lose a little piece of sleep every night. The title should be that great leap of faith, the moment when disbelief is suspended and you allow the fates to sing your song.

My friend, the elegant authoress Lorrie Moore, told me during my period of waffling that she recommends closing your eyes, opening the manuscript to any page, and pointing, and

wherever your finger lands, there is the title. I told her that's what I did when I wanted to call the book "Raised by Wolves". She saw through the ruse immediately. "I don't think your eyes were closed," she said. She was right.

Along the way, the list of alternative titles included both "Music, Meaning and the Long Way Home" and "Love, Loss and Desire at Century's End". Thankfully, those fevers passed. Then there was "Take Me to the Bridge" and, for a period, "The Rhythm Method". Both winners but ruled out.

I was adrift. Soon I was caught up in the shoals of "The Jazz Lesson," "Adventures in the Jazz Trade" and "A Chronicle of the Jazz Years". But there were those who, perhaps rightly, cautioned against using "jazz" in the title – too restrictive, they said for such a wide-ranging effort – and I heard them, abandoning even "Jazz: the Verb" and "Jazzed".

As the search continued, "Sing Me a Love Song," "On Becoming" and "I'm Telling" were thrown into the pot, a pot that was ultimately left to stew unattended when, for a period of time, I insisted

the book be called “How I Learned to Read the Trees.” What? I still think it’s a poetic metaphor for trying to parse one’s life. Still, I can see where it might be confusing, perhaps more appropriate for the biography of an arborist. Not unlike “A Runner’s Heart,” the title that seemed like the clear winner until my wife pointed out that people would think it was the memoir of a marathoner. “That’s right!” I said, not entirely convinced myself. “Life is a marathon.”

What makes this confession particularly painful is that I knew what I wanted to call the book all along. It came flying out of my mouth one afternoon while still working on the text. I was sitting in a coffee shop when a friend casually asked me what I was doing. I told her I was working on a book. “What’s it about?” she asked. “It’s the true story of everything I ever knew,” I said.

— Ben Sidran, November 2010

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PROLOGUE

August 6th, 1991

Red Rocks, Colorado

I'm standing on stage in front of twelve thousand drunk, screaming teenagers. In the front row, a plastered sixteen-year-old girl is lifting up her T-shirt to flash me. I see her mouth open, she's screaming but I hear nothing. Up in the sky, up behind the churning sea of bodies, a helicopter lifts off, taking another poisoned kid to the neon room. But I hear nothing. In my ears, I have molded monitors that no sound can penetrate. I'm supposed to be plugged into the module on my belt, listening to the band, listening to myself. The greatest mix ever. On top of the world. But I'm unplugged. I look down at my hands. I'm still playing. But behind dark shades, in my cocoon of silence, on this bright hot August

afternoon, I hear nothing, I see nothing, I feel nothing. Way in the distance, Steve Miller is singing “Big old jet airliner, don’t carry me too far away....” But I’m already gone. Almost fifty years old. Man, I’m almost fifty years old. We’re all almost fifty years old. Up on the hill in front of us, they’re all fifteen and sixteen and they are absolutely pissing in their pants. I can only think about that cold November afternoon, some twenty years ago, driving Paul Pena home from the recording studio the day he first recorded “Jet Airliner.” Him blind and me lost and he’s directing me through the streets of Boston, and we get to his house and all his blind friends are there and we all get stoned and start playing music and then it gets dark outside and then there are no light bulbs in the lamps because, of course, they’re blind, and suddenly, I am the one who is blind. And now it’s twenty years later and “Jet Airliner” is one of Steve’s big hits, and I’m on stage and I’m blind again, and deaf too, Oh Lord, up on this stage in front of a howling party mob....

PART ONE

Expand, expand, keep expanding

CHAPTER ONE

*“In a world of fugitives
The person taking the opposite direction
Will appear to run away.”*

-- T.S. Eliot

* * *

1943 - 1955

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 pianist Pine Top Smith. My father had the record, and, by nine, I had it memorized. I played it over and over like some kind of personal litany, rocking back and forth, almost in a trance. I had been playing piano since...well, actually, I don't remember not playing the piano. My earliest memories include the piano, sitting at the keys, turning the pages of a comic book with my right hand and watching my left hand trace a boogie 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, a world greater than the world I knew. To this day, I believe that alienation is at the heart of every jazzman's story.

I was born in Chicago in 1943. It was my father's city, but I didn't really know him. Sometimes it seems I awoke from a dream and he was gone. I do remember, as a small child, the sour smell of his sweat, the toasty odor of his cigarettes and the roughness of his cheeks. These things are ingrained in me. But he himself is truly a ghost. And maybe he always was.

Before my second birthday, he enlisted in the army and left home. My mother moved us — my sister and me — to Racine, back to *her* mother and her childhood home. She was born Shirley Gordon in Racine in 1915. The Gordons first landed in Wisconsin around the turn of the century, when great grandpa Charlie Gordon got off the train too soon on his way from New York to somewhere else and decided he had arrived where he was going. He stayed, got a horse and wagon and went around selling vegetables. He had three sons; Max, the oldest, married Ida, who had arrived in Racine after her father abandoned their homestead in the Badlands of North Dakota. As a child, I remember my grandmother saying, “*Of course* they gave you the land for free if you stayed there; *nobody* could stay there.” Max and Ida had two children; the youngest was my mother Shirley.

My earliest memories in Racine, then, are of being with the women, with my grandmother in the kitchen, fussing with pots on the stove, or with my mother, who told me a recurring bedtime story about a magic place at the base of a big tree. Each night as she tucked me into bed, she would say, “You slip through a tiny doorway

hidden at the base of the tree, and, down a spiral staircase, you go into a world where you can have anything you want.” Each night, as she turned out the light, she would ask me, “Benny, what do you want?” And I always pictured this great-lit chamber with people dressed in fantastic outfits, like cowboys and firemen, and there were fountains of ice cream everywhere...and there was music. Always music; music animated everything. At first it was “Tubby the Tuba,” or “In The Hall of the Mountain King,” but when my father returned from the war, it was Benny Goodman and Nat King Cole and Erroll Garner and Pine Top Smith. He was the one who brought these exotic voices into my head.



Ben and Maxine on Carmel Avenue

In our living room on Carmel Avenue there was an old upright piano, and it became the center of my universe. That's where I read my comic books, ate my snacks and watched time pass. I made up little songs and, eventually, I took piano lessons. Then I quit and refused to take any more. But I kept playing the piano. Next to the piano there was a large Magnavox console with a radio and record player, and one day I heard Jimmy Forrest's "Night Train" come roaring out of the speaker with a huge shouting saxophone and shiny trumpets, and I got so excited that I ran around the room in a kind of ecstatic frenzy until I broke something. It was my father's prized copy of Benny Goodman's "King Porter Stomp." When he found out, he was so angry he couldn't even look at me, but I didn't care: I had ridden the night train, and music was now my driving wheel.

In general, I lived a pretty normal life for a Jewish kid growing up in a small Midwestern town — "The Central Stranded Time Zone," as Del Close once called it. On the High Holy Days and,

occasionally, on Saturday mornings, I went to temple with my family and stood amongst a small gathering of Eastern European refugees and pretended to pray. I swayed with them as they davened and made soft chanting sounds, rocking back and forth, almost in a trance. I had no idea what we were saying but I loved the rise and fall of the voices and the feeling of being hypnotized. I've come to think of this as my first jam session. My father liked to comment on the action, and my sister and I were his best audience. Talking out of the corner of his mouth, like a bit player in an old gangster movie, he'd say something like, "See that fat narishkeit over there, Mrs. Baublatt? Ted Savides is going to name a hog after her..."

Ted was my father's best friend. He lived on a farm outside of Baraboo, Wisconsin, a couple of hours north of Racine. Before Ted moved to the farm, he and his family lived around the corner from us on Carmel Avenue. They had a big brick house with a large wooden barn out back. Ted was a Runyanesque character, an old baseball player, and one of my father's favorite pastimes was sitting with him around the radio on a Sunday afternoon, listening to the Cubs game. Pop would wear his Cubs hat, and the two of them would laugh and talk and swap stories or statistics that went back to Honus Wagner and came all the way

forward to put Ernie Banks in his rightful place. In the background, Jack Brickhouse would be announcing, “From Bingo to Bango to Addison Street...” and Ted and my father would both laugh. I don’t know if Ted ever actually had a hog named Mrs. Baumblatt, but I do know that he had a magic black baseball bat, beautifully balanced, easy to swing and rumored to hit a ball all by itself. He kept it in the hayloft out in the old barn.

I climbed up to that loft every chance I had. There I found the most amazing things: boxes full of ribbons and medals from the Civil War, from the D.A.R., and The Grand Army of the Republic. And there were old steel contraptions, small devices with spinning balls and webbed pulleys or wind-up keys that trapped animals or shot missiles or did other ingenious things. It was the long forgotten collection of Ted’s father-in-law, Mr. Edmonds, who had built the house and the barn back in the eighteen hundreds. Mr. Edmonds had been an inventor, and the loft was the final resting place for his work. Now, like the ribbons and the beautiful black bat, the contraptions were just gathering dust and waiting for history to claim them. That was me. I first discovered this sanctuary while climbing to the loft with Kathy Foote. We went

up there to take off our clothes and hug each other. We must have been seven or eight years old and it is still among my most delicious memories. I can still smell the damp wood of the barn; see the sunlight poking through the walls, as we stood, silently caressing each other's naked bottom.

One day climbing down from the loft I came face to face with a snake. My sister Maxine and the Savides girls were already huddled around it, frightened and fascinated. I got closer to see what was going on and a small reptile tongue darted out at me. Without thinking, I picked up a brick and dropped it on the snake's head. Suddenly, the snake was no longer a magical thing. It was a small lifeless piece of skin. I stood there, transfixed. Then my sister and I ran home to tell my father. He was sitting in his favorite chair with his Cubs cap on, reading the paper. After I told him my story, he just kind of reached out and whacked me across the back of the head with the newspaper. "That's for ever killing a living thing," he said.

* * *

Maxine and I rarely wandered far from home. In the fall, we played on the grassy hill by McKinley Junior High School, a block from our house. We were told never to go down to the creek at the bottom of the hill because tramps came up from the railroad tracks. In the winter, McKinley hill was great for sledding. One winter, the snow piled up so high we could dig tunnels from our front door out to the street and never see the sky.

In the summer we tried to plant grass on the muddy patch we called our front “lawn.” In the beginning we put stakes in the ground and my sister and I hung string between them to keep people off. But we never managed to grow grass. Not even weeds would grow, only ruts from our bicycle tires. By July, the “lawn” was mud, caked hard as stone, and the roots of the big elm by the curb had spread under the sidewalk and jacked up the pavement. One day while riding my bike there, I hit a large crack and went sprawling to the concrete. By the next morning, my arm was swollen up like a vegetable, and several days later my mother became worried about me. I felt okay, but she kept asking me what was wrong. I remember I was lying on the

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