The Rest of Your Life
Physicians of Notes Share Their Love of Music

I
n 1964, when C. Wright Pinson, M.D., was just 11 years old, he bought his first set of Ludwig drums.

The price tag was $300, "which was 100% of my net worth at the time," quipped Dr. Pinson, professor of surgery and chairman of Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, Tenn. Dr. Pinson went on to play in garage bands as a teenager and through his college years.

After medical school, Dr. Pinson played the drums "from time to time, but not on a regular basis. That changed in the summer of 1998, when Vanderbilt University Medical Center CEO Norman B. Urry, a guitarist, invited him to a jam session with other university colleagues. The effort led to the formation of a band that initially called itself "Five Middle-Aged Guys and a Chick."

The nine-piece band renamed itself Soul Incision, and this year released its second CD, "Wide Open," a collection of rock 'n' roll staples you'd expect to hear at a wedding reception, including "We Are Family," "I Will Survive," and "Dancing in the Street" (www.soulincision.com).

The band plays several gigs a year from coast to coast, including fund-raisers, weddings, and medical conferences, and has even shared the stage with notable names such as Charlie Daniels, Billy Dean, Vince Gill, and Delbert McClinton.

"Everybody in this band is a type A personality," said Dr. Pinson, who uses the set of Ludwig drums he purchased as an 11-year-old when the band performs live. "Everybody really works at their part and tries to get good at it."

He considers his involvement a crucial outlet for creativity and stress.

"There's no question that our medical lives are pretty stressful," Dr. Pinson remarked. "A lot of our professional behaviors are very tightly prescribed, compared with other businesses. In the medical profession, you're pretty regimented. ... It's pretty tight in terms of pressure. So, then you go over to the studio or you go out on a gig, you change clothes, you change appearances, and you gotta start going with the flow. You gotta get into the groove. The rigidity has to go away, and the creativity has to start coming out."

Stephen Moshman, M.D., can identify with that. In 1982, he founded the Albert Einstein Symphony Orchestra in Bronx, N.Y., because "it was a part of my life that was missing."

A former violinist, Dr. Moshman had turned his musical attention to composing and conducting when he informally asked his musically adept colleagues about their interest in putting together a small ensemble. "I had no trouble getting people because they had put their violin away. They thought it was in mothballs for life and they said, 'At last! I have an outlet.' They really came to this. It was quite something."

The orchestra conducts rehearsals and stages four concerts per year in a large lecture hall provided by the medical school.

"Every other year we do a complete concert performance of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera," he said. "Then we have singers and soloists as well, so we swell to 65 people or so on a small stage. It's tight."

Dr. Moshman has written about two dozen compositions and is completing a score to mark the orchestra's 25th anniversary next year.

Jeffrey K. Pearson, D.O., a guitarist and singer, is also an avid songwriter. One section of his Web site (www.music-in-medicine.com) contains downloadable songs he's written for an eventual CD he plans to title "Dad's a Dork."

He creates the material at home in the corner of a spare bedroom where his guitar, amplifier, and 16-track recorder are stored. The amount of time he devotes to playing and recording varies. "Lately, it's been 1-2 hours a night because I'm working on a song," said Dr. Pearson, who practices family, sports, and industrial medicine in San Marcos, Calif. "But I may skip a week, too. This is strictly for fun."

Still, by music's principal use, his potential and current patients recognize he has a personality, that I'm a real person," he said. "They like that and they download the songs."

Earlier this year, William L. Shoemaker, M.D., spent more than $8,000 to participate in the Los Angeles-based Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp 2005, a 5-day immersion in instruction from several rock musicians, including the Who's frontman Roger Daltry, Jane's Addiction's Perry Farrell, and Simon Kirke of Bad Company.

Although I don't take a banjo lesson every day, I do practice daily. The kind of banjo music I'm trying to get my fingers around—the bluegrass three-finger picking style—requires regular repetitive practice. But I hardly know what keeps me at it. Part of it, I'm sure, is the pile-driving beat and infectious cheer, as well as the rowdy, melodic, raucous in-your-face sound. I wouldn't say that it's an addiction, but I do feel energized after a practice session, similar to the way I feel after an hour of exercise—minus the sweat. Are endorphins at play here? But whether I'm playing the clarinet or banjo, or my colleagues are sawing away at their violas or cellos, we are enchanted not only by the music, but by some trivial matters as well. For instance, there is the camaraderie and fellowship between effort and results. The more you practice, the better you get. Even the most difficult passages yield to slow repetition. Few of life's endeavors offer such a predictable reward for effort.

Success in science, for example, relies on serendipity, luck, and good guesses—at least as much as it does on hard work and long hours—which in themselves don't guarantee anything. Not so with the banjo. Play the two to five slide on the fourth string or an Earl Scruggs' lick enough times and you've got it. It's in your fingers.

Playing in a band or orchestra also brings rewards beyond the obvious allure of music. When I rehearse with the Rhode Island Wind Ensemble on Thursday nights, I'm transported back to my middle school days. My concerns as a parent, teacher, administrator, and investigator fade away. In place of those concerns, I suffer from the same embarrassment as I did in middle school (humiliation is now more like it) when I arrive 5 minutes late and have to weave through my already-ready seated colleagues and their music stands to find my seat.

On Thursday nights, I don't worry about a grant renewal or whether the investigator in Pittsburgh will beat me to publication. I worry about whether I practiced enough. When the conductor scolds that we're out of tune, I worry that maybe he's talking about me.

What's different about these worries now is that, tinged with nostalgia and filtered through decades of perspective, they come with the comfort of an old pillow. On Thursday nights, I'm not a boss or a mentor, I'm a peon. I'm not expected to know anything other than the music in front of me. It feels great.

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