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Hearing Things

I arrived at James Campbell's office for an appointment. I don't remember what time, but I would have had to walk down the tree-lined streets of Bloomington to the Indiana University music building after a friend dropped me home from high school—my clarinets, corked Custom Yamahas (a Bb and an A), strapped to my shoulders in a black Altieri gig bag.

"When you think about it," Campbell said, "there are thousands of professional clarinetists. They play in orchestras and other places around the world." He looked at my unsure sixteen-year-old eyes through his large-framed glasses. "You can be one of the two or three really good ones...if you want to."

A hiss filled the silence after his words, like steam coming out of a pressure cooker. He couldn't hear it, but I couldn't block it out. The sound lived in my ears. Over the previous two years, while I had achieved some of the highest levels of performance for a young musician, I had also increasingly experienced a symptom known as tinnitus.

My love of music began long before any tinnitus. When I was growing up, a pair of floor speakers stood on either side of the main picture window in the family room of my childhood home. They had brown wooden casings that matched the stereo receiver and record player. One of my earliest memories is dancing to the Linda Ronstadt version of "Love Is A Rose." I was four years old—not much taller than those speakers. I spun around and around as Ronstadt's voice soared over the banjo and the bass drum beat.

After singing in elementary school concerts, I asked my parents if I could learn an instrument. I'd seen a sign for saxophone lessons and we happened to have a close cousin of the saxophone in the house. My father played clarinet as a young person, so at nine years old I picked up the plastic case of his Student Model Buffet and unsnapped the metal hinges.

The inside of an instrument case has its own distinct smell. Clarinets come with cork wax, woody reeds, and cleaning swabs. The pieces lay un-assembled in soft spaces, little nests that fit snug around their silver keys. (My dad's case was lined with maroon velvet.) I learned how to fit the bell and barrel to the main parts of the horn, then the mouthpiece, and how to adjust the ligature. I also learned how to shape my lips and breath and body around the instrument to produce the warm, nostalgic tones for which the clarinet is famous. My early training was classical. I did later pick up the saxophone to play jazz. And I also taught myself to play my uncle's old drum kit so I could be in a rock band with friends.

It felt so right to be surrounded by sound. Most of the time I had an instrument in my hands, or music playing on the speakers, or a song in my head. Bach, Coltrane, Zeppelin. Fitzgerald, The Fugees, Dylan. I took it all in, growing with each new influence.

I remember one afternoon how our band director wanted a passage played with more feeling. The band went over and over the music, but it fell flat.

“Angus,” he said, “stand up.”

He asked me to illustrate what he meant by playing the passage in various ways: upbeat, tired, angry. At that age, twelve years old, I didn't really understand what I was doing as I thought of a musical example for each emotion and brought something out from my memory—a change in rhythm, volume, or texture.

But though I had natural talent, performance didn't come easy. There were a lot of rehearsals, and a lot of solo practice. When I was a fourteen and living in rural Nova Scotia, I rode the bus every couple of weeks for private lessons. Five hours across the province. Then four hours with my clarinet teacher. An hour or two to take notes afterward, followed by five hours again back home. I'd read and do school assignments on the bus. I'd also run through melodies in my head, silently sounding out the notes as I watched the forest pass by outside the big window.

My clarinet teacher at that time, Stan Fischer, had a saying. I'd play him something, a tricky passage from Poulenc or Mozart. He'd ask for changes requiring me to tune in to the sensations in my ears, hands, or stomach. I'd breathe and make the changes, sometimes only after five or ten attempts. Then I'd get it and he'd pause.

“That was good,” he’d say. “Now do it again.”

Do it again. Do it again. At home, I drilled exercises in my room, then practiced full pieces out in the hallway where the acoustics were better. I would savour the notes at the ends of passages as they settled perfectly into silence. The satisfaction of the trailing resonance was the reward for my effort.

But one evening as I lay in bed I heard something like the stand-by signals television stations used to broadcast in the early morning. *Dooooooooooooooooooooo*. A clear note, round and full. Somewhere in the mid register. I got up and searched my room for the source. I couldn’t find anything. Then I covered my ears with my hands. *Dooooooooooooooooooooo*.

The sound continued. It was inside me.

The Mayo Clinic describes tinnitus as, “the perception of noise or ringing in the ears.” According to their research, it affects one in five people. The most common cause is exposure to loud sounds. In some cases, tinnitus arises intermittently. Tones, clicks, or buzzing start as if someone has turned a volume knob, then fade out after a moment, or a week, or a month. But other people experience tinnitus chronically, every hour of every day. And it can hurt, emotionally and physically. The perception of sound needles into your head with tangible pressure. The pressure expands. It pushes, pricks, burns.

Like many forms of pain, tinnitus is psychosomatic. It’s a mixture of things going in both the mind and the body. The more you think about it, the worse it gets. You desperately want the sound to stop, but your best hope for relief is to accept it as it is. There’s no cure yet for some of the underlying causes. Many of the therapies for treating tinnitus involve a sort of mindfulness.

Unfortunately, the first doctor I asked for help didn’t do much more than check my ears for wax build-up. The assumption seemed to be that I would grow out of whatever I thought I was experiencing. I felt frustrated, unheard, my pain ignored.

Before I found anyone to teach me tinnitus therapies, I used to scan the radio at night, looking for a place on the dial between stations with static that would soothe my head. (I would later learn that white noise machines are indeed used for tinnitus sufferers, both to mask sounds and to train the

mind to focus on something other than tinnitus.) And I did what I could to address it during the day. I tried ginkgo supplements and got musician's earplugs. But it wasn't constant, so I also tried to pretend it wasn't there. I focused on the much more exciting possibilities in my life.

One evening I overheard my older brother in the kitchen. It was just after I'd made it to the Canadian Nationals at fifteen and he was a senior in high school. He sat with my father in the two rockers by the windows.

"What does it mean that Angus is going to Nationals?" he asked. "How good is he?" I was wondering the same thing.

I played and played and played. I wanted to be the best. But as the tinnitus got worse, I also sought out more doctors and more tests. I needed a better diagnosis and a better way forward than denial.

The first formal therapy I tried, at sixteen years old, was biofeedback. Sitting in a psychiatrist's office, I placed my hand on a small device shaped like a computer mouse. The top of the device had gleaming metal plates. I put two fingers on the plates and a tone emerged. It was high. Not loud, but insistent. Similar to some of the tones in my head.

Deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. My job, the psychiatrist explained, was to relax.

The device turned electrical signals from my nervous system (gathered through the skin on my fingers) into the sound we could both hear. (This is analogous to what happens in the brains of many tinnitus sufferers. When extremely fine hairs inside the inner ear are damaged, the brain interprets the change as a constant signal to produce a sound.) As I relaxed, my body generated less electrical activity, and the pitch and volume of the device lowered. *Deeeedaaaaadoooooowwwwwww.* The biofeedback was trying to show me that stress makes tinnitus worse.

Not long after Campbell and I discussed my future music career, I lay in the dark in my room in Bloomington. A tie-dyed fabric print with the word "LOVE" hung above my bed.

Clarinet posters covered the rest of the walls. The sounds in my head had been getting louder and staying longer. The stress of making a decision about my future felt paralyzing. I'd mostly stopped playing, and couldn't go to school some days. I couldn't focus. It hurt my ears to process normal classroom conversation. And when someone spoke to me directly, it felt

Tinnitus isolates you. No-one can see what you're hearing, so it can feel like your family and friends don't believe you. And because the same sounds don't affect other people, it can feel like it's your fault.

One night I left my house without socks or shoes. I remember padding along the sidewalks of the city. I looked at the trees and the soft lights spilling out of windows. I considered my bare feet on the concrete, like a feral animal. I felt a strange wildness inside.

Another night I climbed the stairs in the music building at IU and crawled out through a window onto the roof. It was time to decide how to move forward. I stepped to the edge and looked down three or four stories to the pavement below, imagining what would happen if I dove headfirst.

There are so many things I didn't do. I didn't jump. But I didn't accept Campbell's offer either. I didn't lose my mind or too much of my hearing. But I didn't become the world class musician I could have been.

Years of therapy and confusion followed my decision. In addition to the challenges of living with a constant sound in my head, my sense of self, my identity, had largely fallen apart. I didn't know who I was if I wasn't a musician. Biofeedback became the first small step in a long journey to understand the interplay between my mind, body, and environment at a deeper level. The same psychiatrist who introduced me to biofeedback also taught me a basic form of Zen meditation. Within a year I read books on vegetarianism and yoga, and started new practices in those disciplines too. (Anything that calms the nervous system can help with tinnitus.) I later studied another form of meditation at length called Vipassana. And at several key moments, the Alexander Technique proved helpful. As did various psychotropic experiences and Jungian analysis.

It was not a straightforward path. For a few years in college I worked as a music librarian, happy to recommend albums and talk about music with whoever stopped by my desk. At other points I withdrew, monk-like, from the world. I buried myself in poetry and books. I remember retreating one night to my dorm room while my friends scouted a free booth in our campus coffee shop. Instead of joining their laughter, I stared at the white screen of my word processor. "I guess I'm happier here," I wrote.

But then I would rush out and overexpose myself, particularly the source of my pain, my ears. Many times I found myself beside massive

speakers in loud clubs and bars, trying to prove that I was okay, that I could still dance with the joy I had as a child. For a while in my twenties, I even played drums again in a rock band.

It took almost two decades to come to terms with the loss. Whenever people ask me these days about music, I might mention that I play a little cajon or ukulele around the campfire. I don't talk about it too much. Sometimes I ask myself if Campbell really meant what he said, or if it was something he told everyone with a bit of talent.

Now as I write this, I hear the traffic outside my window, the bathroom fan that my wife's left on, and a seething hiss that no one else can hear. Any moment, a loud tone from the inside might block out my hearing for a while. Instead of a clarinet, I carry earplugs each day.

I put a battery in a smoke detector about a month ago. For some reason, perhaps sleep deprived as a new parent, I forgot to cover my ears as I tested it. The loud beep from the device hit me like a punch. I heard a hum arise in my head and winced.

The noise and pain were still there the next morning. I cursed my stupidity, then told myself to relax, engaging the lessons I'd learned over the years. But after a few days without a change, I felt depressed. What if I wasn't able to hear my son's laughter anymore? It took a week before my ears returned to "normal."

Then, at a house party not long after, a friend told me about his own tinnitus. It was a new thing for him, possibly related to his work as an engineer. Another friend of ours had mentioned that he should talk to me. He shared his frustration and quiet shock as he described the tones and pressure in his head.

We were standing in the basement, which was partially unfinished. We'd gone down ostensibly to check on its progress. I looked at the drywall and the concrete floor. "I hear you," I said. "I hear you."