

ARTS CORNER

Dermajazz

R Grimalt

Servicio de Dermatología, Hospital Clínic, Barcelona, Spain

Years ago, when I was still a boy, I remember running behind my 3 older brothers, attempting to escape the clutches of my mother who was forcing us to take boring piano lessons with Miss Mercedes. After all this time, I am still running around because of music, just like in the old days, but now, after consultations, I'm the one putting myself under pressure to get to the weekly rehearsal of our group, Jazz Ma Non Troppo (Figure 1).

I began taking piano lessons, with all its pros and cons, when I was 4 and took the intermediate level exams when I was 12. Although, like everyone else, I enjoyed the guitar a lot more, I still played the piano alongside more gifted friends on Saturday afternoons at our so-called family masses.

When I was 14, a group of friends and I formed our first band, NODO, a rock group, and played our own songs. We recorded a demo, played 4 or 5 gigs, and took part in a competition for young hopefuls. But our hopes proved empty.

At 16 I got hold of a second-hand treble shawm, a folk instrument with an incredibly shrill sound, which is perfect at carnivals, making the folks in fancy dress dance, the fantastic creatures whirl around, and vying with the painted dragons, breath for breath. I practiced it all the time and tried to play with different bands. I soon had a chance to fill in for someone and when the day came I was delighted. In good months there were 3 to 4 gigs a week.

I took up the clarinet when I was 17 and got my diploma while studying my third year of medicine. There was nothing for it but to take classes in medical pathology along with clarinet rehearsals, choir practice, and classes in harmony. During my fourth and fifth years of medicine I got the post of clarinet teacher at Matadepera Conservatory. At the same time I formed a chamber group: the Mahalta Trio. We played several concerts, the most important at the Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, appearing as finalists in a competition for young performers.

During my 5 years in Milan I went to a jazz school and took up the piano again, an instrument that I had never

really dropped, and I also returned to the clarinet and formed a trio playing music from Lombardy.

From 1995 to 2003, around the time my daughters were born, I restricted my musical activities to playing the piano for friends after supper and at parties.

After a brief, intense fling with the electric bass, I finally began studying the double bass. My Pacinian corpuscles sensed it as a low vibration, its hardwood molding itself into my skin like a new basal layer. My craze for plucking notes out of it has even led me to using 2 cars to get my family to our apartment in the Pyrenees so I can carry on enjoying it over the weekend.

My sense of emotional fulfillment is total on seeing the rapt attention on the listener's faces while the vibrating sound waves break over them, reflecting what my mouth and hands are expressing during a well-organized international dermatology conference. Some colleagues know exactly what I'm talking about and how hard it is to describe this sensation expressed in the meager language of those of us not used to paths other than dermatology. Well, a double bass solo in a jazz session is all this and much more, it's another dimension, a communion, both transcendental and universal.



Figure 1. The drummer-surgeon, singer-intensivist, pianist-pediatrician, guitarist-real estate agent, and dermatologist-double bassist who make up the group Jazz Ma Non Troppo.

Correspondence:

Ramón Grimalt Santacana
Servicio de Dermatología
Hospital Clínic
Villarroel, 170
08036 Barcelona, Spain
grimalt@ub.edu



Figure 2. The author embracing his instrument live in 2006.

The group I play with, Jazz Ma Non Troppo (Jazz, But Not Too Jazzy), as the name suggests, brings different styles together, some closer to jazz and others further away. The pianist-pediatrician, a Venezuelan, offers us the spirit of Latin jazz; the drummer-surgeon keeps us in rhythm with scalpel-like precision. Lola, our vocalist, is head of the emergency department at a well-known Catalan hospital. She unwinds from busy days of acute pyelonephritis and chronic bronchitis with her very bluesy wailing, perfectly matching our style. The only member not part of the world of health care is the guitarist, a real estate agent who, in addition to providing the group with a pure Gibson sound, does the accounts (really well!) and organizes the gigs.

In just a couple of years, my double bass and its group have already played in Spain in the Castillo de Montjuic in Barcelona, Arenys de Mar, and Sabadell. We have also played in the birthplace of Catalan jazz, the Jazz Cava in Terrassa, as well as in the Angel Blau jazz club in neighboring Andorra. In all these places the critics heaped praise on the group.

In addition to weekly rehearsals, a double bass class, and a combo class at the jazz school, on Tuesday nights I often play in a jam session, an improvised performance, which is an incredibly wild challenge: getting on the stage without knowing what you are going to play or who you are going to play with. Jamming seriously puts you on the line, a super-effort that defies description; maybe trying to get tenured professorship comes close. You deliberately take the risk of playing with musicians you don't know and songs you haven't played for a long time. The adrenaline surges, concentration is total, and the result is often hugely satisfying.

Thanks to these sessions I've got to know other musicians who have invited me to play freelance in different jazz concerts, something I do with enormous pleasure. I don't hesitate to cancel my appointments on days when the gig is a bit far from home, and swap alopecia, acne, and urticaria for half-diminished chords and augmented fifths.

Finally, and in contrast to my 2 brothers, both professional musicians, I think that I can freely and totally enjoy this passion without restraint only as an amateur musician (Figure 2). This is my homage to Dermajazz.

A Cloud of Nostalgia

Reading one of the recent books by Isabel Allende, *My invented country*, one realizes that life is cloaked in a great cloud of nostalgia. Whatever one's age, memories are our luggage that we have to share in order to move on.

Ramón Grimalt is a young man in the prime of life. I would even like to say that he is rather attractive. So, should he just be thinking about the future? I don't think so. When sensitivity to the spirit is so far-ranging, as in his case—sensitivity to music, literature, photography, to feelings and emotions—there is plenty of room for the past, the present, and the future.

Whenever he and his double bass embrace they look like impossible mutants, the fruit of a passion many people cannot understand. Dr Grimalt feels this passion for jazz and recreates it whenever he gives a conference presentation or a class. The audience becomes part of the story, like the reader of a novel.

Hence, in this fascinating *Memories of me and my music*, which is how we could re-title his words, our dermatologist has immersed himself in nostalgic memories of childhood and adolescence, as well as in the nostalgia of the transient present, always linking it to his beloved music and its endless facets. The way he embraces his instrument is a beautiful metaphor for the way he constantly embraces life.

It is as if he says, along with Neruda:

*How can I live so far
from what I loved, from what I love?
From the seasons wrapped
in steam and cold smoke?*

And I understand you very well, Ramón.
You are not alone.

Aurora Guerra