

Time Keeps On Slippin' Into the Future

I was talking to a friend recently while we were listening to a live jazz combo. He's approaching his 65th birthday and said, "You know, one of my few regrets is that I never learned to play a musical instrument."

"You're not dead yet," I observed.

Most people overestimate the amount of time it takes to become comfortable playing basic tunes on any instrument. It doesn't help when Googling "time to become proficient at guitar" yields the answer "10,000 hours" which is about 20 hours per week for 10 years.

Few of us are angling to become the next Jimi Hendrix or Eric Clapton, so let's take that off the table. A more reasonable estimate of practice time is 15 to 20 minutes per day, three days per week for six months. After that amount of time you should be able to easily play any tune you'd normally encounter around a campfire.

I may not be able to strum a single chord on guitar, but most of my daylight hours (when I'm not pretending to be working) are currently consumed by music-related self-indulgences. My musical addiction began in the 5th grade at Iowa City Roosevelt Elementary; they needed trombone players, and only the taller students had the arm length necessary to reach 7th position on a trombone slide.

Decades later I developed a sort of musical Attention Deficit Disorder whereby no matter what instrument I was playing at the time I wanted to learn to play something else. Fortunately, I was a member of the (award-winning) Eastern Iowa Brass Band at the time which tolerated my frequent switching. Over the course of 15 years I performed in their concerts playing trombone, euphonium, baritone, Eb tenor horn, cornet and bass drum/suspended cymbal.

15 years ago, I decided I also wanted to start playing in a weekly bluegrass jam session but none of the above instruments were deemed appropriate. LuAnn bought me an upright bass one evening (literally from a guy in the alley behind the Mill, long story) and I learned how to play it just by showing up at jam sessions. I also learned a dozen tunes on the Irish tin whistle for when I didn't

want to schlep around the bass, and at one point I sang with the Iowa City Chamber Singers for 10 years.

LuAnn became a musical widow for a while when I was playing in six different active bands. I had rehearsals almost every weeknight and performances almost every weekend. I'm currently halfway through a 12-step musical addiction recovery program.

Not really, although I probably shouldn't rule it out. This summer I'll be attending three different band camps for adults; one in Michigan for folk/bluegrass, one in New Orleans for Dixieland and one in Louisville for jazz improvisation.

Returning to my original point, I know several people who have taken up new instruments late in their 50's and well beyond. Iowa City is fortunate to have the New Horizons Band, geared for adults aged 50 and up, which will help even the most tone-deaf fumble-fingered talent-free newbie learn to play whatever band instrument (s)he wants.

If you need additional incentive, a growing number of studies show that music lessons provide benefits as we age in the form of an added defense against memory loss, cognitive decline, and diminished ability to distinguish consonants and spoken words.

Time's a-wastin'! Someone my age (63) might be tempted to say, "If it takes me two years to get really good at this, I'll be 65 by then." A good question would be, "How old will you be in two years if you don't?"

Writers Group member Dave Parsons also owns a tuba that he is determined to learn to play some day.