

THE SILENT SONG

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The following is a composite work of personal experience from students past and present at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts. To protect their identities it has been presented as my own experience. Though chopped and changed and twisted to fit the narrative, the real journeys of several music students in one of the Australia's most prestigious arts universities are represented here.

I was a student walking into a great, earthen-brick building. It was an uncharacteristically warm day in autumn. Summer's dying heat still clung onerously to the air, heating and drying the lush green grass, still wet-slick and rejuvenated by the recent rainfall.

The building was guarded by imposing glass doors, sliding open automatically as I approached. Inside was a large, open foyer, contrasting the outside greens with mute blue carpets, crushed and trampled from years of heavy traffic and white-washed walls. Long, leather couches bordered the space, alongside giant wooden slabs that acted as bar and reception during the evening plays.

It was too early in the day for this though. Instead, students gathered in awkward clusters, introducing themselves, either friendly or guarded. There were some, second or

third years, that hurried across the room carrying instrument cases or sheet music, often bedraggled and unshaven.

But I was a new student, and so took my place at the awkward circles. I didn't speak much, just smiled and said hello, waiting for our orientation to start. I had studied some music before, though I was older than the other students. I had been a chef for seven years beforehand. Long hours in the kitchen; white shirt and checker pants, knives sharpened to razors and Band-Aids scoring my fingers from cuts and scalds. It had been my parent's decision. A trade to fall back on, they had said. It was a trade I fell through; long hours of depression and loneliness, late nights and few friends. Music was my chance to escape.

Eventually we were shepherded into the performance auditorium. In that room, shining, steel bars supporting black plastic chairs that ran along in rows. Close-together, we brushed elbows and stumbled to get in and out of chairs, repositioning next to friends. I would spend the next two years with the people around me. There was a silent acknowledgement in the air. A sense we had made it. We were WAAPA students now, and whether that meant other musicians looked at us in admiration or scorn, we were different. We had earned our place.

The faculty, already seated and waiting, or standing and organising, quieted us as a man took to the stage; a thick-set frame with broad shoulders, his short-cropped, bleach-blonde hair juxtaposed his muted dress; navy blue sports jacket over a black sweater and jeans. Even from a distance I felt him tower over me. He looked more like a football player than a jazz musician. Two years from now he would be much-reduced, face aged considerably and burly figure withered by malignant cancer. But that day, welcoming us to WAAPA, he was in his prime.

He warned us of what study life as an arts student at the university would be like. He warned us of what would be expected of us now that we had made it, that the arts was a competitive field and required us to become wholly devoted to mastering our talents; he warned us that the people sitting next to and around us would be both our competition and our friends and that we would all feel overwhelmed at points. As he does each year, he quoted Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* that success would require 10,000 hours of practice in our given field. Finally, he told us that counsellors and staff were on campus for us to talk to when feeling overwhelmed. Something I got to know very well later on.

The first few weeks of classes were a frenzied attempt at balancing my practice and my studies. History papers about Monteverde and the key changes of Coltrane's *Giant Steps* during the afternoon led to patient hours, evening bleeding into night, rehearsing scale lines and chord progressions.

Lunchtime, between classes and then after band practice, I made friends, though most of the class was standoffish towards each other and cliques quickly developed. There was a low-level antipathy between some people that I didn't understand, a desire to isolate and to guard. It seemed to be an inherent part of WAAPA. That great, red brick building stands separate from the rest of the Edith Cowan University, a separate institution on the far west side of campus.

The different arts disciplines would inhabit different wings at different times of the day, rarely intermingling. Dancers in form-fitting gear, hair tied in tight buns and makeup would stretch their powerful, toned legs and arms in graceful yoga movements upon the park lawn in the early morning. Midday would see contemporary music students practice or chat idly in the halls, while actors rehearsed plays outside the café. The evening saw jazz students – me included – play in our bands or alone in the practice rooms.

The friendships forged in my band were slow-forming but strong. We would steal into vacant practice rooms, jam melodies and rework songs we were learning in ridiculous and amazing ways. They were the moments in between that we worked so hard to keep. One day, between classes, I spoke to my friends about being accepted. I had been dwelling on it over the past few days, set off by a failed test. We were walking along the brick path between the WAAPA building and computer library, lined with thick hedges and the visual arts buildings that displayed student pieces in their windows; misshapen clay sculptures, bare-fleshed self-portraits and erratic combinations of wood and metal and paint.

“You know, I keep expecting any minute to be told there’s been some kind of administrative error and I’m actually not supposed to be here.” I said, half-joking.

“I know what you mean,” said one of my friends. “I keep thinking any minute the WAAPA police are going to show up and confiscate my instrument.”

We spoke about it for a while, slowing our pace towards the library. It made me feel better that someone else was feeling this way.

My first year was not the most difficult, but it was the loneliest. It took months for our small class to become friendly towards one another, and months before I felt comfortable with that friendship. I was never a particularly social person, and outside the small group of friends in my band, I found it difficult to talk to people.

The first year had a few drop outs. I had already been diagnosed for some time with anxiety and depression – before I had even begun WAAPA. I hadn’t seen it manifest itself seriously for me while studying, but I had seen it in others. One time, we were in aural class for an exam. It was downstairs in the WAAPA building, a white-walled computer room with

a red wooden door, the eastern side of the room was a wall of glass overlooking the pathway by the café. We were played different chords and melodies, and asked to transcribe them. It was a vital test for completing the unit and the year and one of my band members hadn't shown up.

We asked around for him before class started, none of us seemed to know where he was. He had been seen less and less as the semester had advanced, missing band practices and lessons. Now we rarely saw him more than once a week. Finally, somebody came out with his number and tried to ring him as we filed into the class. The first call was missed but after another attempt we managed to reach him. Our lecturer, another broad-shouldered, blonde-haired jazz musician waited impatiently for us to get off the phone, becoming visibly more annoyed with each passing moment. I watched the singer of my band as she rang him, asking questions.

“Hey where are you?”

Silence as she listened.

“We have a test now in aural, are you coming in?”

More silence.

“Okay then.”

She hung up.

She told our lecturer he was sick and we went on with the test. “He really needs to get his shit together.” Someone said. He stopped showing up completely after that day and we never really talked about him afterwards. There was something almost forbidden about his

failure, a symbol of the possibility that lurked above all of us, if we weren't committed and talented enough. A black hole that expanded below the precipice we walked as students.

The second year was when it all started to hit me. I hadn't come from a musical background – my mother worked in health and my father was a blue-collar labourer – but others in my class had. I'd also started music in late high school, much later than many. As a second year I was expected to audition for the ensembles that publically represented WAAPA at performances and recitals. It was our first real instance of competition between students. We had competed outside WAAPA before for gigs, but never as part of the curriculum.

We gathered within the jazz studio for our auditions, three at a time. On the raised stage, skirted by thick, black curtain we'd each take turns going through a series of songs to test our ability and versatility. On the far end of the room three lecturers sat as a panel. They had stripped themselves of any trace of informality and friendship for us for this formal audition. Stern-voiced they ordered us to play through each exercise, not commenting on our playing, faces illuminated by the blue light of their laptops as they wrote whether we had passed or failed.

One of the people I competed against in my class was a prodigy, with a family history in jazz and an education since childhood, he soloed Charlie Parker lines fluently and gracefully as I still stumbled with many basic concepts. It was burning jealousy that I felt towards him as he was accepted into the bop ensemble, while I was told to go to a remedial sight-reading class.

The workload was becoming more difficult to deal with and I began to feel others were talking behind my back, the same way they had before our band mate quit. I had taken to sleeping in the practice rooms during all-night practice sessions. During those late nights, automated hallway lights flickered on and off as I walked through the near-abandoned

corridors. Only the errant sounds of instrument practice from closed doors betrayed the building as still being occupied. At midnight, security guards would wake me by opening the door. They would find me curled up, using my bag as a pillow and my jacket as a blanket, in the small cubicles used for practice, my instrument at my feet.

I began to feel an intense sense of loneliness. I had no life outside my studies. Weekends were designated for gigs and whenever I wasn't practicing I was teaching to earn money to live off. I took to drinking each night, often staring at the ceiling at two or three in the morning, unable to sleep, exhausted, worrying that, despite my efforts, I was still falling behind.

It was particularly stormy on my final day at WAAPA. We were in the grips of winter and my jacket was still damp from being caught in the rain. In the practice room with my instrument teacher it was warm to the point of humidity. Jazz vinyls and songbooks littered his desk, while a mismatch of percussive and melodic instruments packed the small office so tightly it was difficult to move around. We had been working on my transcription of a Miles Davis bop solo. I had spent weeks rehearsing and I still wasn't able to play it. There was an awful moment of stillness after my final attempt. My teacher began to go through the solo yet again, step by step and I just burst into tears and left.

I spent the next hour sitting alone in the toilets, thinking about every choice that had taken me to this point, the smell of stale urine becoming so strong it was choking. Finally I went home and unenrolled. A few days later I was speaking to one of my band mates, another of the prodigy's that seemed to float by the course. He was one of the only people I explained my decision to, many of my friends didn't hear from me until weeks later.

We were sitting in the park that I had walked through each day to get to class. It was unseasonably warm again, only a week after I had left my studies. The grass and trees, matted with the heavy rains of the past few days, giving off their perfume in the midday sun. Across the road stood the WAAPA building but we had our backs turned against it, looking out towards the ducks prowling for food upon the greasy, black marble water of the nearby pond.

He spoke to me while keeping his eyes on the pond; his voice was unsure, as if making an admission to himself for the first time as much as me.

“You know, I always knew I was coming here. I was the jazz prodigy in my old high school and it was basically just expected of me. Now that I’m here though, I don’t know anymore. I still want to do music, but not like this.”

I don’t remember what I said in reply, I doubt he does either. He ended up changing to a different music course within WAAPA and becoming much happier, but I never came back to study.

Writing this is one of the first times I’ve attempted to deal with those two years of my life. My memories about that time are still conflicted and when people ask me about whether I loved or hated my time at WAAPA, even I’m not sure how I feel.

The struggle of depression and anxiety among university students is commonplace. In fact, contrary to my personal experience, there doesn’t seem to be any significant provable difference between anxiety and depression treatment in music schools compared to non-music schools. However, almost every study seems to indicate a culture that attempts to ignore these illnesses. Students are afraid to admit it, even to themselves, because of the highly competitive field. In researching this, the staff were hesitant to speak on the subject and the WAAPA counsellors flat-out refused. The only people who seemed to want to give

this topic a voice were the students – several of whom have now either graduated or left; some who have never picked up their instruments again.

I'm not sure what I hope to prove by writing about it like this. Mostly, I think I just hope to understand those two years in my own life. One of the students whose experiences contributed to this piece hoped that the students that came after her would benefit from these experiences being written. That just by acknowledging the existence of anxiety and depression in WAAPA, she could help change the culture surrounding it.

“I think a huge reason why people with mental illness give up on music is the social pressure to be disciplined and consistently get better at everything they do. It should be stressed that this isn't always possible, and there should be support and DISCUSSION about anxiety and pressure because it is pointless pretending it doesn't exist.”

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