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As Lovers of Music, 'We're brothers'

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ALL last week, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers wore a T-shirt with Yo-Yo Ma's name scrawled on it, along with the date and location of the concert: October 27, Disney Hall.

We had tickets for that concert, and he couldn't wait. Los Angeles Philharmonic publicist Adam Crane had put in a request for Ma, the world-renowned cellist, to meet with Ayers after the performance. No guarantees, but maybe.

Either way, just watching Ma play would make for a special night for Ayers. Thirty-five years ago, he and Ma were young talents whose paths crossed briefly, when neither could have imagined the life that awaited.

The story begins Feb. 4, 1970, when Ayers, a restless 19-year-old, filled out and sent an application to the Juilliard School. As a freshman, he was doing very well in the music program at Ohio University, but he wanted a stiffer challenge.

The application, which I recently pulled from the school's archives on a trip to New York, asked Ayers to list his father's address.

"Unknown," he answered in black pen. His father had been out of the picture for nearly a decade, and Ayers had been raised by his mother, who ran a Cleveland beauty salon.

Asked about his sources of financial support, he answered: "Small portion from the Cleveland Scholarship Program Inc."

"Please list below the music you plan to play at your entrance exam audition," the application instructed. Dragonetti Concerto in A, the young Mr. Ayers wrote, along with the first movement of the Eccles Bass Sonata, unaccompanied.

To his surprise, Juilliard called almost instantly, and he flew "student standby" to New York. There, he stood before three professors with his string bass, reached inside for all he had and nailed the audition.

Ayers was offered a full scholarship and was told to finish up his freshman year of college and then catch a plane to the Aspen Music Festival, a sort of summer school for music students.

Aspen was a success, but also a little intimidating. The talent started at great and went up from there. Still, Ayers proved he could play, and it was a confident young man who settled into New York in the autumn of 1970 to study under Homer Mensch, a longtime bassist with the New York Philharmonic.

"This was Homer's room right here," Joe Russo, a former classmate, told me as he led me on a tour of Juilliard. Russo and Ayers were both in awe of the rich sound Mensch could coax out of the bass and overwhelmed by the intense pressure and competition at Juilliard.

"You were constantly comparing yourself to other musicians," Russo, now a conductor and composer in Connecticut, told me as we walked past the dozens of practice rooms on the fourth floor.

I looked into one, a windowless space the size of a prison cell, a place to test your limits in airless solitude. Russo said that when students walked down the dim, stifling hall, they could faintly hear classmates practicing in the bunkers. If someone was better than you on the same instrument, it could be a motivator or it could break you.

Once, Russo said, he was walking to class on the third floor when he heard a bassist practicing in an audition room. That had to be Mr. Mensch, he thought. What a gorgeous sound.

"But when I opened the door, it was Nathaniel." Ayers wowed teachers, as well. "A very musical performance and a most promising talent," one jury member wrote of Ayers' final exam audition at the end of the first year at Juilliard, giving him an A+.

THE following year, Ayers often bumped into a fellow student with a strange name who was thought to be from another universe.

Yo-Yo Ma. For a brief time, they played in the same Juilliard orchestra, although Ayers didn't think of Ma as a peer. Ma, though four years younger, was way out there on his own, a jaw-dropping talent. He was even a notch above another superstar cellist: Ayers' roommate Eugene Moye.

Moye would go on to great success as a soloist and orchestral performer in New York. Ma would become an icon. And Ayers? Even before he left Juilliard, his future was disintegrating. Classmates began to notice increasingly hostile and strange behavior from him, and some grew tired of his tirades about racist white America. Russo thought it must be Ayers' way of dealing with the pressure, which he assumed was even greater for Nathaniel, as one of the only African American students at Juilliard.

In reality, it was the beginning of a breakdown. In his third year at Juilliard, just a few months after more raves from teachers at his year-end audition, Ayers began hearing voices and getting wildly confused, suspicious and frightened. One night, he started speaking incoherently and took off his clothes in the apartment of a classmate. The friend called the police, and Ayers was taken by ambulance to Bellevue Hospital. Soon after, he left Juilliard for good.

In the 33 years since then, many of them spent living on the streets of Cleveland and Los Angeles, Ayers has often wondered about his former classmates, holding onto a connection to them through the music he continued playing. When I met him early in 2005, he played with purpose and joy each day near the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square, even though his violin was missing two strings.

Those of you who read those early columns may recall that for many months he resisted my efforts to talk him indoors. Then, early this year, he finally agreed to take an apartment, and he's been there ever since.

On Easter, he came to my house for brunch and played the violin, cello and piano, recited Shakespeare and Herman Hesse, sang in Italian, spoke French and had a grand time. When we went to a Dodgers game over the summer, he was out of his seat cheering half the time, having abandoned his hometown Indians.

Other days a chemical change comes over him and the darkness never lifts. He can be verbally abusive and menacing, he doesn't care to see a doctor let alone consider medication, he objects to being called schizophrenic and it seems as though the roller coaster ride will never end.

OUR relationship is deeper than ever, more demanding, more exasperating and more rewarding. When it gets exhausting, I remind myself that he's come a long way from two violin strings and a shopping cart, thanks in great part to the staff at Lamp, the mental health agency that has made a life and a home for him.

On Friday, Mr. Ayers — we've agreed to call each other mister, since he refuses to call me by my first name — was playing "Joy to the World" on his new trumpet at Lamp Safe Haven, which is near his apartment. Not everyone at Lamp is thrilled that Mr. Ayers has taken up a brass instrument, especially since the bugling is not always quite on key.

"Joy to the World" didn't sound half bad, though. I waited for it to end before reminding Ayers that I'd be by in a few hours to pick him up for Disney Hall. I also told him the good news. Yo-Yo Ma had sent word that he'd gladly receive Mr. Ayers after the concert.

When I arrived, he had cleaned up well and was wearing a Rite Aid polo shirt on which he had written my name and "Mr. Ma" with a black pen. He wore a red and blue necktie and leather jacket, and his hair was parted in the middle.

Before going to Disney Hall, I drove him over to Lamp Village to check out something that's been in the works for months. Lamp is clearing space for a music studio, and the artist in residence will be Mr. Ayers. He's going to teach, take lessons, rhapsodize about the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square and, if I had to guess, recite Shakespeare there on occasion.

"This is really going to be something," Mr. Ayers said as he checked out the space and told me he couldn't wait to set up shop.

He talked about it all the way to Disney Hall, where we were greeted by Ben Hong, first assistant principal cellist with the L.A. Philharmonic and another former Juilliard student. Mr. Ayers had met Hong before, at one of several concerts he has now attended, so they spoke of music like old pals.

The concert featured just two musicians, Ma and pianist Emanuel Ax. "There he is," Ayers said when they took the stage to warm applause. "Mr. Yo-Yo Ma." The program was all Beethoven, except for a Mendelssohn encore, and Ayers followed along in a book of Beethoven compositions he had brought with him, running his finger over the notes. He also nudged me several times and whispered for me to take notice of Ma's bowing technique.

"Bravo," he called after each piece.

He laughed with delight at times, and by concert's end, he was of the opinion that it had all come off brilliantly.

HONG led us backstage, and as we waited for Ma, Mr. Ayers was nervous, giddy and chattering like a kid. But not for long.

Suddenly, Ma was in the room, grabbing Mr. Ayers' hand. "You're an amazing player," Mr. Ayers said bashfully.

"Did you like it?" Ma said. "I know you like Beethoven." Ma heard Ayers call him "Mr. Ma" and saw the name printed on the Rite Aid shirt. "First of all," he said, "I'm Yo-Yo. Not Mr. Ma." I could have told him to forget it, but I didn't want to intrude.

"I remember your hands from Juilliard," Ayers said, examining them again as if trying to decode the magic.

It wasn't clear whether Ma remembered his old classmate, but that wasn't important to Mr. Ayers. He told Ma of several specific Ma performances he recalled from their youth, and of bumping into him around school.

Ma reached around Mr. Ayers and pulled him close. "I just want to tell you," Ma said through a bear hug, "what it means to meet you. To meet somebody who really, really loves music. We're brothers."

In a rare moment, Mr. Ayers was practically speechless. Especially after Ma had one of his cellos brought in and told Mr. Ayers to go ahead and play it while he went off to greet some other fans.

Mr. Ayers held the cello in position but was frozen.

"This," he said, awed and bewildered, "is Yo-Yo Ma's cello." He stood there a few moments before fiddling just a bit and brightening at the deep and beautiful tone.

It was not easy to get him out of Disney Hall after that. He talked music with Hong, lingered in the hall, struck up a conversation with pianist Ax and admired photos of L.A. Philharmonic members, specifically the mug of his teacher, cellist Peter Snyder. He would have used his Beethoven sheet music as a pillow and slept on stage if I had let him.

Thinking back on his trajectory 35 years ago, before the fall, it's hard not to wonder what might have been for Mr. Ayers. But he has little time for self-pity or regret.

With several good instruments to play and a studio about to open, he's got work ahead of him. Whatever's been lost, and however isolating his long struggle has been, the music never left him.