

# Write Your Life

## *A micro memoir writing project*

### Who first tried to teach you music?

#### We Made Beautiful Music

This was a world with no flats and sharps. Everything was natural. It was 1963.

I was in sixth grade. And I had volunteered to go out for band. “Go out for ...” was the lingo we would later use in high school when you “went out for” a sport. I’m going out for football. I’m going out for basketball. That. “Going out for” meant you might come back. You might not make the team. In band, if you went out, you stayed there. It was an open-door operation. There was, however, a gatekeeper stage before you got to band. That was sixth grade flutophone.

That’s what the band teacher Mr. Nemvalts called the little recorder instruments we purchased. They were black and white, made of sturdy plastic, with seven holes along the top and one on the underside. After school we were herded into a classroom, handed our flutophones, and the learning began. Also the noise. At first, a lot of it. You could blow into the white end, the mouthpiece of a flutophone, and produce the sound of a large angry drunk bird. As we assembled in Mrs. Kaufmann’s room, the cacophony rose, a whole flock of large angry drunk birds. Mr. Nemvalts would say, “Stop that tooting!” Once was not enough.

He demonstrated how to hold the instrument. He explained what to do with your mouth. Your tongue was important. You wrapped your lips around the mouthpiece, he explained, and said “two” into the instrument. *Two, two two, two, two two, two.* Just blowing tongue free with abandon produced angry drunk bird. *Two* gave you discreet notes. Next he demonstrated fingering and the diatonic scale, CDEFGABC. Eight notes. An octave. We played the scale low C to high C. We played the scale back down. Meeting once a week it probably took a month to get to that point, twenty hormonal sixth graders playing more or less together—mostly less—twoing the scale up and down.

He showed us these notes on the staff, explained measures and quarter notes and eighth notes, dotted quarter notes and tied notes. In this manner we learned to read music and began to play the classics, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “The Farmer in the Dell,” “Jingle Bells.”

In seventh grade, the outset of junior high, you chose an instrument. I chose trumpet. With the advent of the chromatic scale, the reading got more complicated. The staff had a “key signature,” showing flats and sharps. Around this time I started to play the guitar. I wanted to be a Beatle or

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a Rolling Stone or a Kink. I learned chords, major and minor, sixth and seventh, eventually the bluesy ninth. “I Saw Her Standing There” was in the key of E major. You could hear the major seventh.

Those two worlds, school band and garage band, never came together. When we reviewed the key signature of a piece of music in band class, noticing the flats and sharps in the key signature, I don’t recall him ever saying, “The Man of La Mancha Overture is in A Major.” Mr. Nemvalts had decided, I think, that there were limits to how much music theory he needed to cover. Every day he had to get through an hour of noise that he would have to interrupt (stop that tooting!) so a little music could break out. He was a saint.