

Jazz Has Been My Salvation. What is Yours?

The other night, when I couldn't sleep, I gave up trying and went to my piano and played. In part, I was rehearsing for my group's upcoming performance at a local restaurant, making sure I remembered the chord changes of the songs we would play and, for example, that I could handle the tricky chromatic descent in "Autumn Leaves" in the key that our singer prefers.

In part, I was exploring the music I had rehearsed during the day with a young guitarist. His original music, our blended voices. I was looking for the soul of his music and for what would join us in playing it.

In part, I was hoping that the music would defeat whatever emotional distress was keeping me up and that I would finally be able to sleep.

And in part, I was searching for a moment that happens occasionally when I'm playing. **A moment in which the music articulates an inner, usually hidden, self and/or takes me beyond myself into a transcendent reality composed of the cultural history of music and jazz I have absorbed over the years.** Of memories of great players, and—when I'm not playing alone—of deep connection, a shared musical mind, with the musicians I play with and the audience that listens.

Jazz photography offers me much the same satisfaction as playing jazz (you can see some of my work [here](#) and [here](#)). Through a process of improvisation while I'm editing photographs that is not dissimilar from playing jazz, sometimes I create an image that captures the emotion and character of the players I photograph. I know I've succeeded when I feel what I call "aesthetic pleasure." This is a very powerful emotion like love or happiness. **It is a sudden sense that this**

is right and that the image I have created (or discovered) captures an essence that goes beyond the visual or aural surface.

I am a lucky old man to have jazz to work at and keep me busy, to have jazz to fight against the grief I feel so often since my wife's death a few months ago and to manage other powerful and difficult emotions. To, in Horace Silver's words, "blow the blues away." I am lucky to have a community of friends who also love jazz, to have jazz as a way of sometimes connecting at a very deep level with the people I play with. I am lucky to have jazz to connect me with a cultural history and to have it as a route to my inner self and to a transcendent dimension of reality. And I am also lucky to have jazz as the way I have redefined myself since retiring from social work. Who am I after nearly 60 years as a social worker? **I am a jazz photographer and a jazz musician.** Salvation for real for this 82 year old man who would otherwise have an identity only in the past.

Why does any of this matter for you?

Simple, despite the challenges of being very old—despite diminished physical and mental abilities, despite loss of people you cared about, despite a troubling world—if you too are a very old person who has left your career behind, you too can have a deeply satisfying life.

There's no great mystery about what makes this possible—financial security and a decent place to live; relationships with people you care about and who care about you; things to do that are engaging and meaningful; and, for many of us, having a sense of connection with a transcendent reality.

There are many paths to getting the most out of life in old age. Being a grandparent, civic and political activities, volunteer or paid work, religion, creative arts, playing golf or bridge—all these and more can be the basis of a deeply satisfying life.



One ^{very} Old Man

What you need are things to do that are engrossing and meaningful **to you**. You need connections with people, connections that go beyond the surface of things, a shared history and a shared sense of what matters. And if you are lucky, you will find a route to greater self-understanding and to a transcendent dimension of reality. And to a new sense of self, to a self not defined by who and what you used to be, but who you are now that you are old.

