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Lowell Speech

"Tuesdays with Carlos"

In my hometown of Buffalo, New York, there's a bar called Sportsmen's Tavern where the Joe Baudo Big Band plays every Tuesday at noon. If you love hearing jazz standards and don't mind snowbound upstate New York, it's the place to be.

Last year I was at home on a leave of absence from Harvard. During that time I spent countless Tuesday afternoons at Sportsmen's with my grandfather, Carlos. Now, to be honest, swinging big bands aren't my cup of tea. My instrument of choice is the guitar. I've been playing it since I was a kid, and *I'm* convinced there is no greater joy in life than rocking out through an amp cranked up to eleven. But my grandpa is a jazz drummer who has been playing big band for eighty years. He loves it—it's his passion. So I go along for the ride.

Inside Sportsmen's the walls are covered with photographs of the musical acts that have played there over the years. Everything from folk to rock and zydeco to jazz has been performed. Signed guitars adorn the walls. The front is occupied by a stage where the band plays. Alongside it is the bar.

As soon as Carlos and I walk into the bar a group of his friends mobs us; most of them are elderly musicians. The Tuesday lunchtime crowd is almost all retirees—I'm the youngest by far.

The big band sets up on the small stage in the corner of the bar. It's a standard group, featuring trumpets, trombones, saxophones and a full rhythm section. The musicians prepare their trusty, and often, rusty, instruments. Each has his beer of choice within reach.

My grandpa likes to sit in the front row. We are so close to the stage that I can shake the lead tenor's hand from my seat. As noon approaches, the first floor gets crowded. The audience is strangely anxious for the band to start. But the sad sacks on stage aren't anxious at all. The patrons lean forward in their seats while the musicians slouch. They are nonchalant even as their leader raises his hand to cue the opening note. Because there is no reason to believe the band is ready, the crowd is noisy and talkative. It seems as if the big band will be relegated to background music—that is until the bandleader's hand falls down and the first note is played.

Each musician hits his first note with such force and intent that the resulting chord and all of its wonderful extensions is incredibly loud. The big band and its big sound shake the small bar. As the band plays on, my grandpa introduces me to the players.

"See that trombone player on the far right? He was big in Vegas until he had a beef with Frank Sinatra and was kicked out of town."

"See the guy next to him? In the suit? He's a judge. He cancels court every Tuesday to be here."

"There's my man, Louie, the drummer. He reads charts better than anyone."

The stories continue for the rest of the gig. Even though I've heard them a thousand times, they never get old. What makes these Tuesdays so enjoyable is that

the band sounds amazing. The group is always together. No one overplays his solos. The band captures the essence of each song while adding the right amount of flair to keep it interesting. Swing still isn't my cup of tea—but hearing these old men give new and loud life to these old songs is incredible.

These Tuesdays with Carlos have taught me a lot about music. My standard musical inspirations, which include Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and Miles Davis, have always inspired me to experiment with new styles, sounds and techniques. But this unassuming big band can teach us that all music has the potential to be great. It shows us that enthusiasm for the music—really caring about it—is what creates the best sounds.

Since my year in Buffalo, I've made it my goal to take music more seriously—to become more thoughtful about what I play. I'm learning that songwriting and performing are less about rocking out and more about telling a story (of course, a story that rocks is a plus). Most guitarists want to sound heavy like Van Halen or smooth like Clapton. But I would rather surprise some kid and blow his mind...like the Tuesday big band did to me.