

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Physicians of Notes Share Their Love for Music

In 1964, when C. Wright Pinson, M.D., was just 11 years old, he bought his first set of Ludwig drums.

The price tag was \$300, "which was 100% of my net worth at the time," quipped Dr. Pinson, professor of surgery and chief medical officer at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, Tenn.

Dr. Pinson went on to play in garage bands as a teenager and through his college years.

After medical school, Dr. Pinson played the drums "from time to time," but not on a regular basis. That changed in the summer of 1998, when Vanderbilt University Medical Center CEO Norman B. Urmey, a guitarist, invited him to a jam session with other university colleagues. The effort led to the formation of a band that initially called itself "Five Middle-Aged Guys and a Chick."

The nine-piece band renamed itself Soul Incision, and this year released its second CD, "Wide Open," a collection of rock 'n' roll staples you'd expect to hear at a wedding reception, including "We Are Family," "I Will Survive," and "Dancing in the Street" (www.soulincision.com).

The band plays several gigs a year from coast to coast, including fundraisers, weddings, and medical conferences, and has even shared the stage with notable names such as Charlie Daniels, Billy Dean, Vince Gill, and Delbert McClinton.

"Everybody in this band is a type A personality," said Dr. Pinson, who uses the set of Ludwig drums he purchased as an 11-year-old when the band performs live. "Everybody really works at their part and tries to get good at it."

He considers his involvement a crucial outlet for creativity and stress.

"There's no question that our medical lives are pretty stressful," Dr. Pinson remarked. "A lot of our professional behaviors are very tightly proscribed, compared with other businesses. In the medical profession, you're pretty regimented. ... It's pretty tight in terms of pressure. So, then you go over to the studio or you go out on a gig, you change clothes, you change appearances, and you gotta start going with the flow. You gotta get into the groove. The rigidity has to go away, and the creativity has to start coming out."

Stephen Moshman, M.D., can identify with that. In 1982, he founded the Albert Einstein Symphony Orchestra in Bronx, N.Y., because "it was a part of my life that was missing."

A former violinist, Dr. Moshman had turned his musical attention to composing and conducting when he informally asked his musically adept colleagues about their interest in putting together a small ensemble. That led to the formation of a 45-member orchestra comprising faculty, students, and community members, which he now conducts.

"A lot of physicians are very skilled musicians and really use music as an outlet," explained Dr. Moshman, who prac-

tices internal medicine at the New York Medical College/Westchester Medical Center and also teaches at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "I think that was the initial appeal of the group. I had no trouble getting people because they had put their violin away. They thought it was in mothballs for life and they said, 'At last! I have an outlet.' They really came to this. It was quite something."



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The orchestra conducts rehearsals and stages four concerts per year in a large lecture hall provided by the medical school.

"Every other year we do a complete concert performance of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera," he said. "Then we have singers and soloists as well, so we swell to 65 people or so on a small stage. It's tight."

Dr. Moshman has written about two dozen compositions and is completing a score to mark the orchestra's 25th anniversary next year.

Jeffrey K. Pearson, D.O., a guitarist and singer, is also an avid songwriter. One section of his Web site (www.medicine-in-motion.com) contains downloadable songs he's written for an eventual CD he plans to title "Dad's a Dork."

He creates the material at home in the corner of a spare bedroom where his guitars, amplifier, and a 16-track recorder are stored. The amount of time he devotes to playing and recording varies. "Lately, it's been 1-2 hours a night because I'm working on a song," said Dr. Pearson, who practices family, sports, and industrial medicine in San Marcos, Calif. "But I may skip a week, too. This is strictly for fun."

Still, by sharing his musical side, his potential and current patients "recognize I have a personality, that I'm a real person," he said. "They like that and they download the songs."

Earlier this year, William L. Shoemaker, M.D., spent more than \$8,000 to participate in the Los Angeles-based Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp 2005, a 5-day immer-

The Comfort of a Banjo on Thursdays

A recent survey asked the readers of a scientific trade magazine what they do for fun. More than half said that they play a musical instrument. I am among them, and I've been thinking about why the whole business is so gripping. I started playing the piano at age 6, took up the flute when I was about 10 years old, and landed on the clarinet when I was 12. I still play the clarinet and am a member of the 40-piece Rhode Island Wind Ensemble, which performs about seven concerts per year.

In the 1960s, it seemed that everyone I knew played folk guitar, and instruction was no farther than your camp bunk mate or college roommate. I still have the guitar I played then.

Now enter the banjo. What is it about the banjo that is so appealing to me? It has none of the nuances of other instruments. The banjo's timbre is monotonous; its uses are severely limited. And yet, just a few years ago when I started learning to play the banjo, I discovered—as I slowly let friends and acquaintances know what I was up to—that the desire to play the banjo lurks in many a soul, particularly it seems, the male soul. In fact, one of the new software millionaires profiled in a recent magazine article retired in his early 40s, moved into a beach house on the California coast, set up a charitable foundation, and now takes a banjo lesson every day. I can understand that.

Although I don't take a banjo lesson every day, I do practice daily. The kind of banjo music I'm trying to get my fingers around—the bluegrass three-finger picking style—requires regular repetitive practice. But I hardly know what keeps me at it. Part of it, I'm sure, is the pile-driving beat and infectious cheer, as well as the rowdy, melodic, raucous in-your-face sound. I wouldn't say that it's an addiction, but I do feel energized after a practice session, similar to the way I feel after an hour of exercise—minus the sweat. Are endorphins at play here?

But whether I'm playing the clarinet or banjo, or my colleagues are sawing

away at their violas or cellos, we are enchanted not only by the music, but by some trivial matters as well. For instance, there is the predictable relationship between effort and results. The more you practice, the better you get. Even the most difficult passages yield to slow repetition. Few of life's endeavors offer such a predictable reward for effort.

Success in science, for example, relies on serendipity, luck, and good guesses—at least as much as it does on hard work and long hours—which in themselves don't guarantee anything. Not so with the banjo. Play the two to five slide on the fourth string or an Earl Scruggs' lick enough times and you've got it. It's in your fingers.

Playing in a band or orchestra also brings rewards beyond the obvious allure of music. When I rehearse with the Rhode Island Wind Ensemble on Thursday nights, I'm transported back to my middle school days. My concerns as a parent, teacher, administrator, and investigator fade away. In place of those concerns, I suffer from the same embarrassment as I did in middle school (humiliation is now more like it) when I arrive 5 minutes late and have to weave through my already seated colleagues and their music stands to find my seat.

On Thursday nights, I don't worry about a grant renewal or whether the investigator in Pittsburgh will beat me to publication. I worry about whether I practiced enough. When the conductor scolds that we're out of tune, I worry that maybe he's talking about me. What's different about these worries now is that, tinted with nostalgia and filtered through decades of perspective, they come with the comfort of an old pillow. On Thursday nights, I'm not a boss or a mentor, I'm a peon. I'm not expected to know anything other than the music in front of me. It feels great.

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sion in instruction from several rock musicians, including the Who's frontman Roger Daltrey, Jane Wiedlin of the Go-Go's, and Simon Kirke of Bad Company.

Dr. Shoemaker had been playing guitar for only 3 years before he enrolled in the camp. Taking up the instrument was a chance to "find time" to revisit a passion for the guitar and for rock 'n' roll that made an impression on him in high school, he said.

Eventually, "you get to a point in life [where] you say to yourself: 'You know what? If I don't make time, there won't be time,'" said Dr. Shoemaker, an orthope-

dic surgeon who practices in San Diego.

The camp counselors divided the campers into 10 bands, and the week culminated with a "battle of the bands" performance at the House of Blues. "By the end of the week, you couldn't help but acknowledge these various artists and see their love of music, their passion," he said.

While the experience inspired him to continue playing guitar, it also made Dr. Shoemaker realize "that as much as I love playing, it doesn't compare to my original passion, which is treating patients." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau