



The View From Right Field

By Rick Ohler

A bi-weekly column in

The East Aurora Advertiser

No. 446 “Oh, Brother”

April 14, 2022/East Aurora, NY.

The word talent comes up for discussion now and again my writing classes. To a discouraged writer’s statement, “I guess I just don’t have any talent for writing,” I usually respond that it’s a matter of working hard and making the craft a priority rather than searching for a hidden well of undiscovered ability within your soul. Lord knows, I lay no claim to any talent in my work. I have been intoning the same mantra since the 1980s: “The more you write, the better your write; the more you read, the better you write.” It’s such good mantra that Stephen King stole it for his year 2000 book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. I’m not kidding; check out page 145 of the hardcover edition.

Likewise with other abilities. My sweetheart, artist Kateri Ewing, will tell you that anyone can draw or paint if they open their eyes to the possibility and then commit to including practice in their daily lives. She has written books with that message and shown thousands of others through her online classes.

It’s the same with music. Or is it?

I’m thinking about a transformational day in 1965 or maybe 1966. With the Beatles as the inspiration for me and for millions of us teenagers, I had petitioned—read, begged—my

parents for a guitar, which I then bought from Nyhart's Music on Main Street with their "borrowed" money and some I had saved from weed-pulling jobs. Since I would soon be raking in royalties as a rock and roller, repayment was all but assured. I took lessons from, first, kindly Mr. Nyhart and then Richard Stanley, a long-haired, hippie-ish classical lute player who lived, to the neighborhood's consternation—two doors away at the northeast corner of Oakwood and South Grove. With their help, I succeeded in fashioning three—occasionally four—chords in the proper order to play your basic rock and roll songs like "Twist and Shout," "Louie Louie" (with the scandalous lyrics), or the Ventures' slow dancer "Sleepwalk," with the seductive A minor chord joining the major standbys, C, F and G.

I joined a band, you'll recall from "View From Right Field" No. 315, with the misleading name of The Fanatics. We consisted of singer Dan Rapalje, bassist Kevin Kelsey, keyboardist Bruce Krysiak and drummer, the late Tony Graziano, RIP. They were all pretty good. Me, well, not so much. I practiced, and practiced and practiced, trying to unravel the mystery of those six strings so I might deserve the lofty title of lead guitarist. We had a (very) few gigs. Our first was a private pool party for which we were paid ten dollars—two bucks each—and, as a tip, the host's basset hound lifted his leg on my Sears Silvertone amp, frying one of the tubes. I'm not kidding; I should have seen it as a harbinger of things to come.

Meanwhile, my late—there's that cruel and rebarbative (RIP Snake) adjective "late" again—brother was in sixth or seventh grade. He'd formed a band, too, called the Nefarious Prodigies, a name conjured from two words in my tenth grade vocabulary lesson one week. He was the drummer behind Jamie Gregory, Mike Buccieri and, later, Kevin Kelsey. Those fellows could actually play their guitars and had many gigs in front of their peers at the Boys Club, the Minotaur, the South Wales Community Center. Their fans loved them, even fans of the girl variety, a level of success to which the Fanatics never rose.

What's the point of this, you ask? Well, one day brother Jason was in his room at 472 Oakwood playing on his practice drum pad to save our parents' drums—eardrums, that is—while I pretended to study in my room. He walked across the hall and asked if he could mess around on my guitar. Not 15 minutes later, without any instruction, the guitar revealed its secrets to him and he was playing at a level so far beyond me that I hollered to

him, “It’s yours.” Thus ended my career as a musician. He had musical talent; I had (have) none.

Maybe it wasn’t talent, but confidence. Perhaps, as the middle kid, he learned by watching me, and doing the opposite. As the oldest, I followed the rules, behaved pretty well and did as I was told. Our dad taught at Nichols School in Buffalo, so it was understood that we would attend there as well, enjoying a tuition-free ride, the meager wages they paid teachers barely covering basic living expenses let alone private school expenses. What an advantage, I was taught to say, during my six years there. Dutifully, Jason went off to Nichols in seventh grade. Half way through eighth grade, he asked a question that rivaled Oliver Twist’s, “Please, sir, can I have some more?” “Dad,” he asked, “can I go back to public school?” I had never known such a question was allowed. My compassionate mother interceded and he spent his high school years at East Aurora, playing drums and my guitar, studying music with John Hasselback, owning the hallways on both Main and Center Street, receiving the nod from his classmates to give the commencement address at graduation.

Whereas I chose the college prescribed for me by the headmaster at Nichols, Jason went outside the box and across the border to the University of Toronto. When our father died in 1972 at age 52, we came home to be with our wonderful mother and 11-year-old brother. I stuck around for the next 50 (so far) years; he boogied on outa here as soon as it seemed decent, returning only briefly before launching himself, in the ‘80s, into a field that was not only avant grade but had not even existed a few years before—distance education. Where once correspondence schools, which involved snail mail and occasional expensive long distance phone calls, reigned, he envisioned and developed instant communication between teacher and student across the frozen reaches of his adopted home, Alaska. Twelve years before the first Facebook user made the first post, he had the confidence to risk his doctoral degree by predicting the rise of such an online gathering place against the wisdom of his mentors.

You might think we found it challenging to forge a relationship with brothers of such divergent paths. After all, Jason was the global rock star, jetting around the world to teach digital citizenship and storytelling to ever-growing audiences. Mike, the youngest, has become a widely respected Vermont social worker, an unsung hero, unequivocal in his

determination to teach those who lack the means and the sophistication to advocate for themselves. And I am, well, happily local, spending a very busy quasi retirement at the world's best hometown newspaper and helping people write their stories. Our divergent paths, we realized, had common elements: teaching, like our dad, and compassion, like our mother, that allowed us to be better citizens and subsequently better brothers—to have deeper conversations, stronger connections, more fulfilling appreciation and love, especially as Jason's time to leave us approached. Talented, confident, enriched by all who knew you—we will miss you. Oh, brother, will we miss you.