

OKIE IN EXILE

Those who can do

There is a quote attributed to George Bernhard Shaw that goes: “Those who can do; those who can’t teach.” (Woodie Allen took it further by adding, “Those who can’t teach, teach gym.” That is a whole other can of worms. I am not going to go there.)

I will say this. I’ve been learning a lot about the art of teaching in my journey of learning how to make various musical instruments.

I’ve recently finished making a working alto recorder. I had to go back to the drawing board and redo some things, improve some techniques, and concentrate on the problem. I am now putting that project on the side with the intention of coming back at a later date in order to prove that making one working recorder wasn’t just an accident.

In the meantime, I’ve taken up a new project: the Cigar Box Guitar.

I’ve only been working on this project a short time, but in this short time I’ve learned a lot. I’ve learned a lot not so much about how to make a cigar box guitar, but about the art of teaching itself.

Regardless of what George Bernard Shaw said, there are a lot of those who can do, but who can’t teach. They can annoy, but they can’t teach.

I will mention neither the names of persons nor names of the specific Youtube channels. But I will tell you the pattern. First, these people are very enthusiastic.

Very enthusiastic. They smile; they are happy; they are proud. They are musicians who’ve tapped into their musical heritage and come upon the cigar box guitar, a musical instrument made by musicians who were too poor or too geographically challenged to buy a “real” guitar, so they made their own instead.

These enthusiastic folk talk a bit about building the guitar. They talk about the choice of the cigar box. The various types of cigar boxes. They might mention putting on the frets, but they won’t tell you how far apart to put the frets. There are some useful bits here and there, but those useful bits are separated from each other by the teacher breaking out into song.

It’s like being in a damned musical.

Let me be a bit more positive now. I think the problem with the people I am talking about is that they came to the point of building the musical instrument from being



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musicians. I’ve come to the point of building a musical instrument from the point of being a woodworker. We have different perspectives, different needs.

I’m interested in the process of building and learning that craft; they are interested in music in the instrument as a means for pursuing that craft.

I’ve pushed my annoyance to the side and have continued my search for the right teacher.

I think I’ve found him.

The name of the channel is ChickenboneJohn. (Gotta love the name!) He has a long series of detailed videos on how to make a cigar box guitar, and he does teach how to play one as well. However, he gives me the measurements I need, and his style of teaching gives me the big picture that I need. He keeps his music as music and his building as building.

And, while he does talk, he doesn’t talk too much.

But the point at which he won me over was when he gave me a way to calculate how far apart to place the individual frets and how to do this calculation in relation to the distance from the “nut” to the “bridge.”

Having disparaged the teachers I found before ChickenboneJohn, let me now apologize. There is a place for them. I imagine there are people who come upon their videos who don’t know anything about building, but see the enthusiasm coming from them. They see how happy they are; they see what they can do; they think that maybe, one day, I can do that.

Then they wander off, but the seed is planted.

These people are evangelists. They help convince the student to take a particular path.

They aren’t necessarily much help in getting them very far down that path. They can play a pivotal role. I know from my own experience as a teacher and as a student, that when the student becomes engaged, when the student decides that they want to learn, then the student either teaches or almost teaches himself.

That being said, there are those who have a talent for organizing a

SEE WINTERS, 7A

TRUE STORIES

Word of mouth

All 9th graders in Ann Wachter’s English class at Frontenac Jr. High were required to memorize “The Cremation of Sam McGee” and recite it before the class.

When I say required and mean required. I’ve heard stories about students struggling to recite it with Miss Wachter in the principal’s office the day of graduation, lest their diploma go unsigned.

This being National Poetry Month I thought it good to point that out ... and thank Miss Wachter for her dedication to ‘the word.’

I didn’t have much trouble with the requirement for several reasons: 1) I’d come over from Catholic grade school where I’d memorized assorted prayers and, as an altar boy, responses to the priest in Mass (in Latin no less); 2) I’d already memorized many poems in the form of songs, courtesy of WHB AM radio out of Kansas City; 3) I was something of a ham.

In high school, along came Marian Wood, just graduated from KSC. And with her, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and Emily Dickinson — all poets who took me into deeper meanings and questions about myself and life overall, as in



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this by Dickinson: “Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me / The Carriage held but just Ourselves / And Immortality.”

Then it was on to college and poet - professor, Michael Heffernan, who arrived in my sophomore year, wry and irreverent. He reeked of brilliance, seduction ... and danger. Whereas Marian Wood took me deeper, Heffernan took me inside, outside, left, right, and in circles. Many times I found myself being followed around by a certain line we had discussed in class.

Also, Heffernan was an accomplished and widely published poet who shared his work, discussed his process and brought well known poets, short story writers and novelists to campus to speak. Always capped off by receptions (parties) at his house after the readings that went well into the night.

I didn’t write much poetry myself until I was in my early 20s at the encouragement of

my poet brother, John. The first one I got published was about my grandma in an anthology in Chicago, where Linda and I were living in the 1970s.

It also got us an invitation to a party / poetry reading in the house where Hemingway was raised in nearby Oak Park. Oh man, was it something! Poetry mixed with live jazz done with dramatic shouts and riffs and laughter.

Not long after that party I discovered Jack Kerouac’s spoken word recordings. Collaborations of prose and poetry with jazz saxophonists Al Cohen and Zoot Sims and pianist Steve Allen. Kerouac did most of them in one take — and included give and take with the musicians and the recording engineer in the finished product.

Then came a deep dive into Walt Whitman, who said of the poet, “If he breathes into anything that was before thought small, it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe.”

A little poem by Jim Dooley says it this way: “It’s true that I’m a poet / though I’ve never written a word. / It’s the way I choose to look at things / not the way that they occurred.”

To be sure, poetry on the page can be mov-

ing and powerful but, like song, it takes on a certain magic when performed live by the person who wrote it.

These days, my favorite spoken word venue is the monthly open mic organized by George Weeks at T.J. Lelands; community members of a certain ilk performing poetry and song in a variety of genres and styles which, no matter its content and point of view, is incidental to the ‘word tingle’ in the room.

Thinking back to Miss Wachter and her requirement, I find myself feeling empathy for the students who struggled with it and resisted as they likely had about as much a liking for English class as I did for Algebra II.

Which is to say, poetry is not for everyone.

A couple of years back our Talking Heads group recited Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ together — passing the text around for a verse each. About halfway through, I heard a man there for the first time say into his phone, with a mixture of disappointment and indignance, “I’m leavin’.” They’re reciting poetry!”

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SURVEY

CONTINUED FROM 1A

in nearly every corner of the country, and other, as yet unforeseen developments lurking in the near future, the climate has changed.

To zone the entire county or leave it as it is currently, is a very big part of the new comprehensive plan that the commission is working on. Because the plan concerns the entire county, commissioners feel the entire county should have a say in whether the county is entirely zoned.

On the other hand, the commission also understands that any decision on countywide zoning, for or against, will have an immediate effect on those who live in that part of the county so they should have a more weighted say in the issue.

Another concern is who gets the survey? Property owners surely, but what if the land has multiple owners? Does each get a survey, or do they get one collectively? What if a person owns multiple properties? Is that one survey or one for each property?

Lastly, how to word the question? A simple “do you support countywide zoning, yes or no?” will elicit a very different response than an informative brochure that gives the advantages and disadvantages and the rights and responsibilities of living in a zoned area.

One approach may get a quick-fire and reflexive “No!” while the other requires some introspection, critical thinking, and weighing the pros and cons before answering — which often changes the automatic “No” response to at least a

“Yes, but what about . . .?”

Blair said this decision, either way, will impact people’s lives and is not going to be taken lightly by the commission.

For some county residents, the idea of living in a zoned area is unthinkable. For many who live in the zoned area, it’s not the personal restriction and government overreach it is feared to be but is actually a form of protection against unwanted or outside influences. Many may not notice either way.

The decision before

the commission is not an enviable one. Without zoning, residents are free to do what they want on their own land without government oversight telling them what they can and cannot do. With zoning, the county retains some control over what new industries can and cannot come in.

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