

Steve Almond
from *Superfan*

Chapter One: *The Superfan Starter Kit*

1. It helps considerably if your parents are musicians of some sort

Our mother, for instance, was an accomplished pianist who attended the High School of Music and Art, before settling into the far more glamorous (and related) fields of parenting and psychiatric work.

In addition to her assigned roles as doctor, household slave, and mother to three savage monkeyboys, she played throughout our childhoods, on a black upright Yamaha, which, owing to the size of our home, was located in what we savage monkey boys thought of as the Teevee Room. This naturally created a conflicting agenda, which in many ways crystallizes the essential generational dichotomy in our home: “Mozart’s Piano Concerto 24 in C-Minor” versus “The Facts of Life.”

It pains me to think of how often we deprived our mother of her piano, which was not merely a hobby, but her refuge from the demands and loud antagonisms which ruled the rest of the house. We barged in on her constantly, resentful of the attentions she lavished on the keys, and even more so the tranquility they seemed to grant her. Our father eventually affixed a latch to the door. Thus, the emblematic sound of our youth: ferocious pounding, a soft cascade of notes in the background, a distant sigh. Mom played beautifully.

Our father sang, starting in high school and later with the Harvard Glee Club, a distinction we looked upon with the derision to be expected of insecure male offspring. He performed *Lieder* mostly, accompanied by our mother. Our father with his head tilted

Steve Almond

slightly up, mournful German couplets trembling from his chest. His throat flushed and pulsing with imploration. Such vulnerability! We were mortified.

On car trips, he regaled us with tales of family singalongs from his own youth, at which we snorted, backseat homicide being much more our style back then.

Our folks were too stuffed full of intellectual ambition for a life in the arts. They were the descendants of European Jewry, cultured people who looked upon music as one of the elevating pleasures of our time on earth. They listened as much as they played, to folk and rock music, but most of all to classical, of which they both had (and have) an encyclopedic knowledge.

We boys wanted nothing to do with classical music, naturally, if you don't count the Bugs Bunny episode *The Rabbit of Seville*, the viewing of which was as close as we came to a sense of musical communion with our father, who later dragged us to the actual opera, a decision I expect he now regrets. Nonetheless, we could see that music soothed and transformed our parents. They were Superfans themselves, of the highbrow variety.

2. Display just enough musical talent to suffer lessons

I am flattering myself here, as is my wont. I did not have talent. What I had was a greater tolerance for parental influence. No idea how piano was settled upon, though I'm sure my own Oedipal longings played a central role. My teacher was one Rosanna Sosoyev, a diminutive Russian émigré with a carefully arranged omelette of ginger hair.

Steve Almond

Mrs. Sosoyev was what I'll call a "traditional" teacher. Before we could start, she would inspect my hands, then send me to wash them. (On occasion she led me to the bathroom and washed them for me.) She stressed scales.

Sosoyev: Now, we play the scale.

Me: [Playing the scale]

Sosoyev: Did you practice the scale this week?

Me: Yes?

Sosoyev: No. You must practice the scale, Steven. You cannot play the song without the scale. It is like the fish. The fish cannot swim no scale.

Our lessons were like this: small, poorly attended battles of will. The only spectator was her husband, a spectral figure who glided from one room to another in a vapor of camphor. (We came face to face only once. He appeared ready to spit on me.) I like to imagine that I cost Rosanna Sosoyev at least one small stroke, but I am probably flattering myself again. I know for a fact that I caused my mother considerable anguish. She was the one who had to listen to her youngest son mangle Haydn sonatas night after night. I smashed the keys with my fists. A lot.

At a certain point, probably five or six years in, Sosoyev allowed me to mangle a few of Joplin's signature compositions: *The Maple Leaf Rag*, *The Peacherine Rag*, *The Entertainer*. I attacked these pieces with grim determination and played them incessantly. My brother Mike referred to this as my *Maple Barf Rag* phase.

It was no use. I sucked. I knew I sucked. And if there was any confusion about my sucking (there wasn't) Sosoyev's annual recitals put them to rest. Here, I was provided incontrovertible evidence that I was making faint progress as a pianist compared to her

Steve Almond

other pupils, who regarded me with expressions of polite confusion and pity. There seemed to be some speculation that I was developmentally disabled.

What I lacked was the imagination that animates the learning process. I kept waiting for that mystical moment when the underlying grammar of music, the tonal relationships, would reveal themselves to me, or to my hands anyway, and I would suddenly just *know* what to play, without having to memorize which little piggy went where, and furthermore, every key I hit would sound brilliant and glittery, like Chico Marx. But this kept not happening and because I lacked the capacity to forgive myself for mistakes (i.e. patience). I grew humiliated and angry and things turned smashy.

The fish cannot swim with no scale.