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Medical Maracas

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Abstract

For ten years I was one of Edinburgh's few medical maraca players. I hope that's clear: I was a medical player of maracas, not a player of medical maracas. A maraca is a Latin-American musical instrument constructed originally, I suppose, out of a coconut with beans inside. Little natural aptitude is required to shake one in time to the music, but because they come in pairs, two hands are needed. Thus Latin-American orchestras have a limited number of openings for musical illiterates who own their own dinner-jackets, which is why your intrepid correspondent eventually ended up shaking bean-filled coconuts at the revellers at ten consecutive Medical Faculty Balls.

Our band, the Unbelievable Brass was born in the Physiology Library in 1968 in those days the library was equipped with high shelves, ladders and a variety of mini-skirted research workers, and we perspiring undergraduates were forced to sublimate by doing crosswords, writing songs and producing revues. To one such revue the class's own trumpet-player brought along half the brass section of the University Orchestra, and I found myself part of the ensemble, doubling as maraca-player and lady vocalist. My debut involved rushing out to the tiny toilet to change into wig, balloons and dress, and tottering back to reveal myself to an appalled and largely silent audience.

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In the natural scheme of things our career would have ended there, in that little hall which the creative genius of the University has since converted into a car park. However, as luck would

have it we also gusted that night at the Fourth Year Dance, where our mixture of trumpeters, trombones and transvestism was an unexpected triumph. Our colleagues came to jeer but remained to get stoned out of their minds, and when we told them next day that we had been a resounding success, none could remember enough to disagree. Our showbusiness career was under way.

The case-history outlined so far may be very familiar to you. Nowadays the stages of London's famous West End and Edinburgh's celebrated Festival swarm with medical undergraduates — and indeed registered practitioners — and an observer has the impression that showbiz features on the modern medical curriculum, somewhere between sex and sociology. But back in the pioneering days of the sixties the Edinburgh medical student was a creature of sombre dignity who looked askance at the musical stage. Bagpiping was acceptable; violin-playing was dangerously eccentric, and maracas were instruments of the devil. So at first the Unbelievable Brass bent over backwards to maintain a low profile (as "A Spokesman" might phrase it), but as we became older and acquired experience — not to mention degrees and cirrhosis of the liver — our confidence grew. What did not grow, however, was our repertoire. Although the personnel of the band changed during the decade and drummers came and went, we steadfastly retailed the same two or three dozen tunes whether at a barn dance, a Jewish wedding, on top of a horse-drawn carriage or on our home

territory, the George Street Assembly Rooms.

The Assembly Rooms were the natural home of balls, which were popular at the outset of our career. The Medical Faculty Ball was the highspot of the social year for doctors and medics, and the Charities Ball inspired other students to camp out all night to be sure of the opportunity of buying tickets – which at that time could be purchased without a mortgage and allowed the bearer to dance till dawn to the music of star performers. Watching from the wings, as it were, we noted that the *modus operandi* of big-name musicians varied: some arrived (in James Cameron's phrase) "tired as a newt" while others were reliable journeyman – and best value of all, if you're interested, were Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band. Well down the bill, the UBB (as we in the Unbelievable Brass now suavely called ourselves) acted as warm-up men and then joined the frolics.

This was the zenith of our career: around this time an apparently sober Kenny Ball was heard to remark that our performance was "not bad". Then an even more impressive accolade came our way: one night at a Union Palais I looked down from the bandstand to see two heavy teenagers dancing together near my feet, casting come-hither leers up at us through their mascara. I felt that life had little more to offer, though in fact the band was never organised enough to keep groupies – and the longsuffering girlfriends who came along to carry drums for us objected to being called "bandies". Still, I now have a lot of insight into the temptations strewn in the path of Daniel Barenboim or the Boomtown Rats.

I learned a few more of life's poignant lessons during our climb to fame. In particular, I learned what not to do. For example, intoxicated with my first audience during that memorable revue, I had cried out briskly, "One, two, three, four!" at the start of a number. I vaguely imagined that musicians did this to boost morale, rather like the late John Wayne hollering, "Let's go, fellas!" as the posse gallops out of the corral. I realised my error as the horrified musicians thundered *prestissimo* through a normally sedate tune, unable to apply the brakes. When the rendition ended (thirty seconds later, including choruses), the purple-faced trumpeters suggested politely that I might leave counting-in to them in future. I learned also that one would no more dream of

talking to a musician when he's working than one would chat to a cholecystectomist or a plumber struggling with a U-bend. Formerly I had thought that drummers must feel a bit lonely, sitting at the back with nobody to speak to. In fact, although drummers concentrate with their eyes open, they are in no less of a trance than their colleagues who shut their eyes and blow things. If you essay bright small-talk with a drummer, he can usually only manage two words in reply – and one-syllable words at that.

I learned a little of the delicate art of negotiation. When the UBB arrived at a hall to find the piano missing or unplayable we coped by giving the pianist some compensatory pocket-money and a stool at the bar – no-one could normally hear him anyway. But when Kenny Ball's road manager arrived to find the Assembly Rooms' stage pianoless, he decreed with a shrug that without a piano his boys could not perform. Immediately a dozen students manhandled the Corporation's priceless Steinway Grand from its hiding-place, with only mild or moderate damage to building, piano and students. Watching in admiration of the roadie's technique, I realised that when a thousand dinner-jacketed punters are already smoothing in through the front door, the show must go on.

We learned too that at the Medical Faculty Ball, the final spot – 2 a.m. to 3 a.m. – was the best one to play. By that time the weaker customers have gone to the wall, and the more robust couples remaining, having carried out the necessary duties of meeting old friends, complaining about the food and dancing the Dashing White Sergeant, are at last ready to enjoy themselves. During a Ball there is normally a lull just after midnight as people's normal diurnal rhythm struggles to assert itself, but after about 1.30 a.m. the superego gives up and the id surfaces. Professors fall over, their wives succumb to the primitive jungle beat, and invariably some idiot takes his clothes off. We gave up playing "The Stripper", ostensibly because the trumpeters lost the music, but in reality because the audience participation – regrettably invariably male – became more and more degenerate year by year. The last time we tried the tune a Vet (it was always a Vet) leaped on to a table, took off his jacket, swung it sensuously around his head and

let go. All very amusing, but unfortunately he had thoughtfully provided himself with a carry-out and his pockets were full of cans of McEwan's Export: the jacket, acting like a South American *bolos*, narrowly missed decapitating some Faculty members, and the band swiftly slid into "White Christmas".

The sun has now set on my maraca-playing career — and just as well, probably. At the extremes of medical life (as a student or as a professor) membership of a dance band is like a woman's preaching as defined by Dr Johnson — "the wonder is not that it is done well, but that it is done at all." As a senior registrar, however, a man is judged without indulgence, and with due allowance for natural modesty I feel that as a maraca-player I could have achieved competence but not greatness. I shall never follow the James Galways of the world to the position of First Maraca to the Berlin Philharmonic and tax-exile in Lucerne. Last time out with the UBB I had the uncomfortable new feeling that the old rapport with the student audience was fading, and that the oddly short-haired listeners were asking themselves why these members of assorted Royal Colleges were enjoying themselves so much on the bandstand. Students hadn't changed, of course — students never change — but we had. Or perhaps we were worrying that we might have changed. Or perhaps we hadn't had enough to drink.

It had been fun — albeit rather expensive fun. (Traditionally the UBB led a drunken debauch by

example as well as precept, and we usually paid more to the barman than we collected as a fee.) But the trumpeters enjoyed themselves, playing and watching the girls — even the most ascetic jazzman opens his eyes when a spectacular décolletage boogies past the stand — and the maraca-player, sensitive flower that he is, enjoyed himself most of all. Free of the worry of playing bum notes and with the drummer leading the tempo, the maraca-player can shimmy around the bandstand, participating as an Associate Member in the unique rapport that exists between musicians, but able also to watch the audience. Audiences are great entertainment. "Strange how potent cheap music is", wrote Coward, and at 3 a.m. our music (not cheap, but competitive) was as potent as any. Happy tunes had the floor bopping creatively, while smoochy numbers produced buttock-clutching embraces and dreamy expressions that might equally signify lust or exhaustion. Any national anthem except "God Save the Queen" would, at the drop of a hat, fill the appropriate ethnic group with solemnly homicidal fervour, but with "Auld Lang Syne" we were all buddies again, moist-eyed with ethanolic nostalgia for a great night. It was a privilege to hide behind a microphone and watch it all. Thank you, revellers one and all: and now, most sincerely on behalf of all the boys in the band, may I wish you goodnight, God Bless, and a safe journey home. Drive carefully, won't you.

