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Darkest Places

BY BUTCH NORTON

Art Jarvinen was the first guy I saw perform at CalArts on my second day of school in 1980. I'll never forget seeing this stringy longhaired "Zappa" looking intellectual, thin build of a guy doing a concert, in the cafeteria, with a flamenco guitarist (Miroslav Tadic). I think he played a small kit and other percussion, but what I remember, vividly, was his mastery of the claves. Yes, the claves. The way he delicately cradled them and was able to get a myriad of sounds and tones was breathtaking. His time/groove/feel/dynamics were otherworldly. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. He went back to the kit, and all I could think was, "Dude, get back on those claves!" I was excited that I was excited about the claves. My world was rooted in the drum set, and the reason I came to CalArts was to open up new parts of my musical consciousness.

Over the next few years I would observe Mr. Jarvinen and pay special attention to his "left field" approach to music. It was inspiring.

Quickly it became apparent, to me, that my goals as a rock, pop, commercial musician were not the "norm." I understood this and maneuvered through the various obstacles all the while knowing that I was forging my own way. Many times I did not fit in because I didn't fit the mold. I would get

depressed because I was the opposite of Art Jarvinen.

Now, underneath the academia, we percussionists (a small group of 10 of us) all had our own ways of dealing with the stress. I enjoyed marijuana. Art was a lover of alcohol. We rarely socially mixed, but when we did, we all went f*ck*ng crazy with partying. It was epic. Like many stages of life, when it starts getting intense, our group of percussionists started to break off into cliques. The tabla players over there, the gamelan guys here, the new music dudes there, etc. As the guys became more segregated things became more amplified (depression, partying, awareness, competition, debauchery). The reason I paint this picture, and share, is because the circumstances became dire for me. I started to spiral out of control with drug use and wasn't living up to my potential. I started to doubt myself and became depressed.

Did I choose the right path?

Friends of mine back home who didn't go to school were getting record deals and going out on tour with major artists. Art Jarvinen was performing and composing amazing pieces that I could only fantasize about.

I felt like I didn't fit in, that I was alone in a cold dark cave with a hint of light lurking

around each corner, just out of reach, stumbling with each step to find my way out.

Luckily at this time I met my beautiful wife. That's another subject that I'll delve deeper into someday, but suffice it to say she was my "lifeline." I didn't know she was going to be my wife, in the beginning, but I trusted her and she listened to me.

The key point here is that: She listened to me, and I to her.

I curtailed my substance usage, not entirely, but enough to get back on track and keep "the ball rolling." At this crossroads I started working with a husband and wife duo called September. They were student friends of mine at CalArts who were making some cash on the side while at school. I knew the landscape of that scene and was asked to join them. It was a straight-up pop, rock, standards, funk, soul, jazz, wedding trio, and we worked six days a week, four and a half hours every night in The San Fernando Valley bar circuit (the demo reel of us from back in 1986 is priceless. I'll post it on my website after I transfer it from VHS. I'm in a string bolo tie with an awesome bowl mullet playing and singing lead on the song "Didn't Mean To Turn You On" by Robert Palmer). Mrs. Butch and I got married. I stayed on with September and dropped out of school. I was making some cash to pay our bills and I wanted to start getting out into the real world. I felt that I had soaked up enough of the percussive arts and it was time to get on with my career. Whatever that was going to be.

I dreamed of playing with popular recording artists, making records and going on tour (same fantasy I've had since I was six years old). I had no idea how to get there and my training didn't give me any clues in that direction. I was a hodge-podge of drum set and percussion. I just believed that if I stuck with it, kept searching and put it out into the universe, I would get there. Fortunately Mrs. Butch believed it too.

Art was getting grants and becoming a well-known "new music" experimental composer/percussionist. I was considered an abnormality (mostly in my own mind) with my peers from art school. I wasn't going to finish my degree and go into teaching or pursue the more avant-garde side of the percussive arts.

September was constantly working but I knew that this was not going to get me to my ultimate destination. Then, one night at the Holiday Inn Lounge in Burbank, Art Jarvinen and another college buddy of ours walk in. We start our first set as they proceed to pound drinks. We take our first break and I say hi then slip out to my van to self medicate, which was my usual routine, some pot, some coke, then a little more pot. We come back for the second set, and as we're hitting our

stride with Englebert Humperdinck's classic ballad "After The Loving," which I sang lead on, I hear giggles in the audience. Now there are 20 tables and maybe five booths in this lounge, and only five people in the place, ever. So I'm flabbergasted when I see Art and our friend laughing at us—no, I'm hurt. The aching humiliation starts in my chest and slowly it wells up to where I'm almost in tears. I know what we are doing is "not cool" and "hokey," but to laugh in our faces? They continued for the next hour and a half, mocking and snickering, as they were getting their "serious drink on." And then they vanished.

Last October, 2010, Arthur Jarvinen committed suicide.

Over the past 25 years, since the incident at the Holiday Inn, we bumped into each other a couple of times. We were always cordial. Word was that Art had continued his hard drinking ways, was depressed, and not satisfied with his life. I'll bet if I had brought up the event he would not have even remembered it. When I heard the news I immediately flashed back on that moment. I remembered the hurtful sensation, and then felt sadness for the loss of such an amazingly talented tortured soul who inspired me.

And now anger builds up in me so I decided to write this story and share my non-medical, non-licensed observations/personal experience.

Hey, I'm selfish and have thought about throwing the towel in, but I stopped or was stopped, and told to get my head out of my ass. We all are overwhelmed with the stress of life. You don't always know it, but somebody does care about you. Sometimes you have to search for people to listen. Whether it is a friend, parent, sibling, therapist, social worker, religious person, co-worker, someone at the gym, etc.

The human sounding board is crucial to getting through the dark times. It is the only way back to a "level playing field." You cannot do it alone. Trust me, I've tried, like many of you.

Where would life be without you and your uniqueness?

It's scary, for all of us, but if you don't go for it, you and the universe will never find out what you are capable of. That would be a waste.

Talking to someone, and being honest, is the first step.

No one is perfect. The person you're talking to will confirm that with an equally appalling sad story about their life.

When they do: Listen. The most important part about opening up and being honest is the listening part.

Remember, you're in need of help and someone is trying to help you. Shut up and listen. Not listening is usually what gets you into trouble.

Deep down we're all f*ck-ups burning to

share our tragedies to save someone we love or care about. I care about you, dear reader, because we share a love and passion for drumming. That same passion has saved me, and can save you. I still dream and believe, even when I'm on the edge.

Pot and me went to the non-social "bad place" where I never shared or even let on that I was using. It was destructive and life numbing. No matter what vice or habit you have, beware of when it turns into a solo endeavor. That is a red-flag moment.

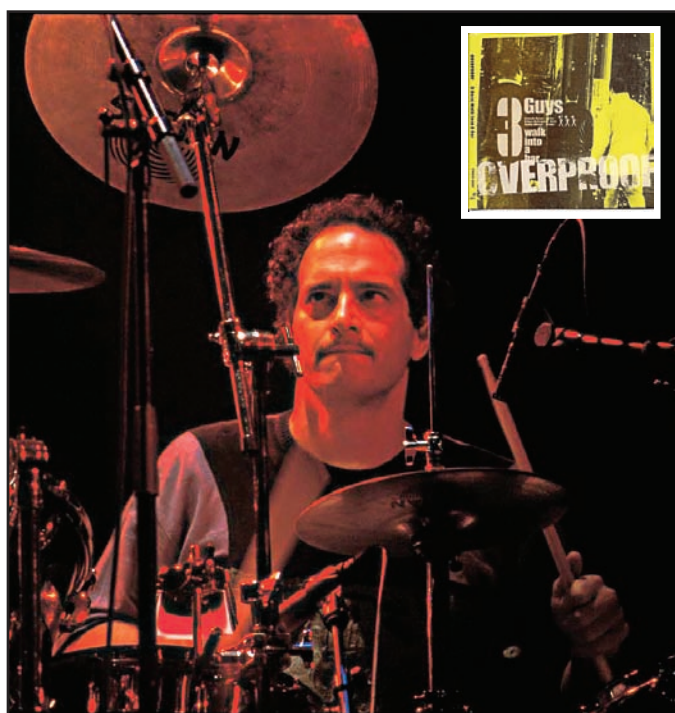
I've been clean for 13 years. I have sought out therapy, and was involved in a 12-step program for uber-potheads like ME. I had the ultimate support and love from my wife and family, who suffered and were not happy with my selfish ways. It took time to repair some of that, but that is what the reality is when you f*ck up. Own it.

I just wish Art had been able to work through his pain and suffering. I'll never forget the intense joy and "immersion in his element" that he exuded when he was performing. It was infectious and contagious.

WWW.ARTHURJARVINEN.COM

Please contact me anytime.

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Look for Robby Ameen's band Overproof's news record **Three Guys Walk Into a Bar** on EWE/Sonifolk, Also available at CDBaby.com/cd/overproofmusic. Robby is also co-author of the best selling cd/book and video "Funkifying the Clave: Afro-Cuban Grooves For Bass and Drums" with a upcoming DVD release for Alfred Music. Check out more at RobbyAmeen.com and myspace.com/robbyameen

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