

Time for Jazz

By ReadWorks



Lina had been at it for an entire hour. Her fingers were poised on the shiny white keys of her piano. Old and crinkled sheet music sat in front of her, the black notes blankly staring at her. She stared at them for so long, her vision started to blur. Lina had been working on this piece for the past week, trying to master the tricky rhythm and memorize the movements required by her long fingers. She loved the piano; she always had, ever since she started playing at the age of six. But something was beginning to bother her. She was growing tired of the pieces her teacher assigned her week after week. They were all classical music pieces, and even though Lina loved them, she was itching to try something new.

She decided to take a break. She got up from the piano bench and stretched her stiff limbs. She walked into the kitchen, grabbed some celery and peanut butter out of the fridge, and turned on the radio. The room was suddenly filled with the sound of blaring trumpets, beating drums, a singing saxophone, and trilling piano keys. She assumed her dad had been listening to this station earlier in the day—he had always been a big fan of jazz music. Lina had never really joined in on her father's passion for that type of music, but something about this particular song made her listen more carefully.

Lina's trance was broken by the sound of the back door opening.

"Hellooooo!" her dad called out.

“Hey dad, what’s the name of this song?” she asked him, eagerly.

He stopped in his tracks and listened for a few seconds.

“I think this one is called ‘Things Ain’t What They Used to Be’ by Duke Ellington and his big band,” he said. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Lina nodded her head in agreement. “I wish I could play the piano like that,” she told him.

“Why not?” he asked. “All your classical piano training will help a lot if you want to learn jazz piano.”

“All right, I’ll ask Mr. Wilson next week at class if we can start doing some jazz lessons!” she said excitedly.

Lina continued to listen to the jazz radio station for the rest of the evening. While she and her dad prepared dinner, they were serenaded by the sounds of crooning saxophones and beating cymbals. The two didn’t talk; they just swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the music while chopping vegetables and waiting for pasta to boil.

Just as they were setting the dinner table, Lina’s mom rushed through the door.

“Sorry I’m late!” she said. “I had to stay longer at work than I had planned.”

“You’re just in time for dinner!” Lina replied and pulled out a chair for her mom to sit down.

As she plopped down onto her seat, she caught the melody of the tune that was playing on the radio. “Ohhhh, I love this song. My father used to play this on our piano when I was little,” she said with a smile.

Lina asked if her mom listened to jazz while growing up.

“Oh, all the time!” she exclaimed. “My dad was a huge fan. He was a pianist himself. He learned how to play from his father—my grandfather—who was around when swing music was just becoming popular,” she explained.

“When was that?” Lina asked.

“Well, swing music—a type of jazz style with a strong beat that really makes you want to dance—was played for a long time by the African-American community before it really became popular. My grandfather and his father were playing swing long before it was heard on the radio. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, many Americans were out of jobs and money. So of course they needed something to cheer them up. When people heard swing music, they forgot about their problems. The music was just so uplifting. So big bands, like the one led by Duke Ellington, started to play at famous ballrooms and theaters all across the United States and even Europe,” her mom explained.

“And so that’s when your grandpa was around?” Lina asked. She was so excited to learn that she had a connection to this music.

“Yes, he loved to go dancing. He even saw Duke Ellington and his band play once! His favorite song was ‘It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got That Swing,’” her mother replied.

Mr. Wilson had played that song for Lina at one of her weekly classes. He had told her that it was a revolutionary piece of music and is still listened to by jazz audiences today all around the world. Lina loved the way music could be passed down through generations. She wished she could have seen Duke Ellington’s band play live.

“Well, it sounds like you’re interested in jazz history all of a sudden. What’s making you ask all these questions?” Lina’s mom asked.

Lina explained that she wanted to learn something new. She had learned enough classical music and wanted to move on to something else.

“Then start improvising!” Lina’s mom told her. “Jazz is all about improvising. So many solos you hear on these records are just musicians playing what their heart feels.”

Lina thought about improvising. She could hardly imagine just sitting down at the piano and playing anything that came to her mind, just piecing together notes in a way that would captivate her listeners. She remained silent for a while, concentrating hard on what she could possibly play off the top of her head.

Her mom noticed Lina’s brow furrow. “The only way you’re going to learn how to improvise is if you try,” she told her daughter. She walked over to the piano and pulled out the bench. She patted it and looked over to the dinner table at Lina.

“Let’s start now!” she said with excitement in her eyes.