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# Prelude

Do you long to do more with music? Is the idea nagging at you like a puppy nipping at your heels? Or is it a whisper you hear now and again, like something you've forgotten to do?

It's one thing to hear inspirational stories about people who've picked up an instrument or to read the ways music is good for your heart, mind, and spirit. But how can you take the next step toward making your own life more musical?

I've been down that road. After stumbling along a musical path over the past fifteen years, I've discovered a lot about playing music in the second half of life. Yet there's been no book to help others go down that road more smoothly. So I talked with dozens of musicians, read countless articles, dug down to find rare resources, and pulled it together into this book to make things easier for you. I'll show you how to choose an instrument, learn and practice with the latest methods, improve your musicianship, enjoy playing with others, and build a richer music community.

I returned to music in my forties. I was an amateur guitar player, mediocre singer, and rusty bass player. I had last performed as a teenage Sunday school music teacher, leading my kids in song to a captive and sympathetic audience. I knew very little about music and nothing about the music business.

Now I'm in my fifties, and my husband Gene and I have recorded three albums, two of them reaching the top ten on the radio folk charts. We've played at festivals and weddings, cafes and bars, listening rooms and house concerts—as we held down full-time jobs. In the process, we've strengthened old friendships and made new ones. Research suggests that I've

also improved my brain—its memory, processing ability, and health. Music has intensified my perceptions and emotions, bringing out the highs and bringing up the lows. I hear sounds differently and enjoy them more deeply. Music has transformed my days and my years.

As a youth, I never imagined such a future. I lived in the present, where songs were an emotional soundscape. I listened to them everywhere, in my car and in my room, when I went out dancing and when I met up with friends. I took guitar and bass lessons. I felt the world intensely, and music added another layer of richness. But as I built a career and a nest, that musical soundtrack receded. In my middle years, I noticed how much I missed music and how little attention I actually paid to it. Many people I know find themselves at a distance from the powerful relationship they had with music as teenagers and young adults.

Gene was a dedicated musician during his youth, though he spent less time on music in his middle years too. He started young, wrote his first good song at nineteen, and caught my eye while he was performing solo at twenty-one. We began dating, and I'd listen to him play two or three nights a week, never tiring of it. He paid for most of his college expenses by performing and teaching guitar. He practiced six hours a day instead of doing his schoolwork. But by his thirties, he chose a life in academia. With the pressures of studying, teaching, and publishing, he found music taking a back seat as well.

## Our Modern Musical World

And so it is for many of us. Raising children, building careers, and maintaining a household—these huge commitments demand our attention and energy. One study of amateur musicians found that over 90 percent interrupted their musical activity for twenty years (on average) before returning to it.[1]

But it's not merely busy lives that get in the way of making music. We no longer live in a culture where everyone is encouraged to play, because music is readily available—in stores and subway stations, through computer speakers and stereos, in movie theaters and restaurants. Then there's the music we choose with a swipe: earbuds and a cell phone are all we need to hear sounds from around the world whenever and wherever we want.

We can appreciate the wealth of music we've gained while regretting the personal engagement we've lost. Before recorded music, everyone was encouraged to learn, and communities created song together.[2] But just as we no longer need to make food from scratch in order to eat, we no longer need to make music in order to be entertained. It's something we decide to do. Now more people are making that choice—rediscovering the pleasure of cooking their own food and rediscovering the joy of making their own song.

Moreover, though technology has made us passive consumers of music, it also gives us new ways to actively learn, create, and share it. Smart phones have apps for tuning instruments, identifying songs, recording tunes, and keeping time. The internet offers limitless resources, from instructional videos and a lifetime of recordings to music blogs and jamming sites. Never before have so many tools existed to help people learn an instrument and sing, then find others to share it with. It's the perfect time to play.

## Getting the Most from *Making Music for Life*

This book aims to be a teacher and mentor you can consult whenever you need.

Anytime I get ready to piece together "some assembly required" furniture, I hesitate at the first lines: *Be sure to read all the instructions before beginning* and *follow each step in the correct order*. There's no need to do that with this book.

A musical journey has many on-ramps. So does this book, which starts with basic material and develops as it goes. Early chapters address those with little music experience, though more advanced musicians will discover new ideas too. Later chapters are intended for seasoned musicians but may also motivate those starting out. Every chapter assumes mature readers who bring wisdom to their pursuit. Although the book targets those in the second half of life, it can be used by anyone who wants to progress with music.

Most chapters end with "spotlights" on people who returned to music after age forty and have done inspiring—and achievable—things. Chapter sidebars present concise information for easy reference.

I've interviewed dozens of people for this book. When quoting, I describe them by their dominant musical instrument and most recent vocation. This necessarily oversimplifies the many musical and vocational hats they've worn. Accomplished professional musicians are referred to simply by their primary instrument and their role as teachers. Quotations from those few I didn't interview are footnoted.

I've added their observations and discoveries to my own to assemble a community of teachers and learners, singers and songwriters, newcomers and lifelong music lovers. Together they show a breadth of musical experience that I hope will inspire you on your own journey.

## Pursuing Your Passion

It's exciting to think about all the rewards of playing. It should be.

You'll face obstacles, though, no matter where you are musically. If you're starting out, you may question whether your goals are attainable. If you've had a long layoff, you may find it discouraging that your skills are rusty. If you've been playing

regularly, you may have hit a plateau. And if you've had a health setback, you may need a new approach. You're not alone.

Learning music requires persistence and effort. Playing is a thrill, but we all hit rough patches along the way. It's no wonder that it's tough: we're building calluses on our hands, rewiring our brains, fine-tuning our attention to others, and training our ears to hear things we didn't notice before. But is anything deeply enjoyed that isn't hard earned? *Voluptas e difficili data dulcissima est.* The pleasure from hard effort is the sweetest.

That pleasure stays with us. Playing music is one of life's great joyrides, one you can take with a warm community to help you along the way.

Join us on that ride.

The rewards will soon come. One day you'll pick up your instrument and realize it fits against your body like it's part of you. You'll play something that sounds like real music, and you won't believe you created that sound. One day your group will join voices in a song that lifts you up for that moment, suspended. Then you'll look at one another and laugh because it's so amazing you did that together.

That's what you're reaching for. That's the challenge.

If you—

- played as a kid but scaled back as an adult,
- want to learn a new instrument but are having trouble getting started,
- enjoy singing or playing alone but want to join others,
- have gigged or recorded but seek fresh ideas,
- notice wear and tear but want to keep playing,
- love making music but are looking for new ways to share it,

*Making Music* will help you take your next step. It can also be your guide for years to come.

Chapter 1

# Discover the Benefits

> Playing music reminds us to take time for ourselves and our friends and to forget about the stress that surrounds us in our daily lives. Music makes everything better.
>
> —*JoAnn Pinkerton, mandolin player and gynecologist*

Almost everyone knows the joy of listening to music, the way it can transport you to someplace glorious. Not everyone, though, tries to make music.

Maybe you were one of the lucky ones, and you caught the music bug as a kid. You loved performing during a recital or playing as a teen with your friends. The music was intense, and you could play for hours. Or you sang in a choir and joined your voice with others in an outpouring of song. But then adult life kicked in and crowded out music. You figured you could always come back to it. One day.

If not now, when?

There's never been a better time to play. Even as the population ages and awareness of the benefits of music spreads through popular media, musical organizations appealing to those in the second half of life have multiplied. Wherever you turn, you can find places to learn and play—whether you like classical, jazz, folk, bluegrass, swing, R&B, or rock.

Millions are making music for the sheer fun of it. It comes to shape their identities and dominate their thoughts and social lives. Online profile pictures reveal the latest festival they enjoyed, instrument they bought, jam they joined, or house concert they hosted or attended. Many devote hours (which turn to years) as their musical interests grow, volunteering as radio DJs, concert promoters, music teachers, or performers at hospitals and schools. They talk about the latest concert, band, or album they discovered. Their circle of friends seems to expand and deepen.

They are enjoying the wealth that music has to offer. After all, music is "probably the richest human emotional, sensorimotor, and cognitive experience" we have.[3]

## Music Deepens Emotions

> I think playing music stimulates endorphins. When I leave a jam, I feel high.
>
> *—Teresa Cruise, mandolin player and retired nurse*

Listening to or playing music turbocharges our emotions and our senses, serving as a great antidote to feeling uninspired or unchallenged. You can count on it to get rid of your blahs.

Some of my best memories come from powerful musical moments—when I heard Talking Heads play so intensely that I had to dance, when I cranked up "Stand By Me" so I could wallow in a broken heart, when I got into a groove jamming with guitar, dobro, and bass on a moonlit night in Tennessee, or when I performed with Gene at an outdoor amphitheater under towering oaks.

As I've learned how to play more musically and mesh with others, I've found a deep satisfaction. Maybe what I'm experiencing is flow.

Psychologists talk of flow as complete absorption in an activity—your energy is focused and you're completely immersed. Flow brings not only long-term satisfaction, but also improved health. One study of classical pianists considered how flow affected their bodies: as the musicians entered a flow state, their heart rates and blood pressure decreased and facial muscles relaxed.[4] When you're in flow with your group, you're concentrated on the task, you have a sense of control, you lose self-consciousness, and your sense of time is transformed.[5] Musicians also call it "being in the groove." Flow feels transformative, and people get hooked on it.

That may be the dopamine that's kicking in. According to neuroscientists, "music that people described as highly emotional engages the reward system deep in their brains."[6] What's more, music bumps up our dopamine levels not only during peak musical moments, but even when we merely anticipate those moments or imagine a tune. When we're moved by a piece of music, they conclude, "there's little that we value more." It's no wonder that people call music addictive.

In addition to firing up our neurotransmitters, music also affects our emotions through "entrainment." In musical terms, entrainment is the synchronization of external rhythm, such as a drumbeat or guitar strum, to an internal rhythm, such as tapping your foot, dancing in time to music, or even the beating of your own heart. Much of our musical joy and excitement comes from synchronizing while listening or playing with others. Researchers say that movement synchronized to music makes people feel connected to their partners, serving as "a kind of social glue."[7]

Spontaneous movement to a rhythmic beat is something we do naturally. We can see it even in infants and find it across cultures—it's critical to our musical enjoyment. But most of us don't connect tapping our feet at a concert with the intense emotions we feel or with our brains taking part in a complex neural dance. Yet tapping in time to music "involves a process

of meter extraction so complicated that most computers cannot do it."[8]

Though our deftness with rhythm continues through childhood and improves through midlife, it weakens with older age. But musical engagement improves our ability, which suggests that we can counteract natural rhythmic declines by expanding our musical experiences and maintaining our sense of rhythm through practice.[9]

I've always been a compulsive foot tapper when I listen to music. But after I learned that entraining to a beat boosts mood, I thought I'd try consciously using it. At five-foot-two, with five-inch wrists, I want to keep my bones and muscles fit so I can thump my bass. Yet I have trouble staying motivated to lift weights because I find the exercises tedious. So one day I put on my earbuds and tried tapping my feet on each beat while pressing and releasing the weight every fourth beat. I naturally synchronized to the music and got caught up in the exercise. Now I feel pumped up during my weight workouts—and I know I'm maintaining my sense of rhythm even as I'm developing my awe-inspiring triceps.

Music does more than make us feel better on a good day—it can also lift us up on a bad one. Listening to or playing music can reduce anxiety and depression while improving our relationships.[10] One study compared a group of seniors who took lessons playing the organ to a group who didn't and found a "marked decrease in anxiety, depression and loneliness" among the players.[11] Country star Reba McEntire says that "for me, singing sad songs often has a way of healing a situation. It gets the hurt out in the open into the light, out of the darkness."

While I was exploring emotions and music, I spoke with Iraq War veteran Eric Haynes, who has suffered from a traumatic brain injury and PTSD. He told me that a day of intensive music therapy at the Boulder Crest Retreat Center cured his stutter. "We used songs to talk about our experiences in the military.

These Special Forces guys—who'd been overseas rappelling down to save another person—were crying on my shoulder," says Eric. "The music opened up that hard part of our hearts to soften. In a matter of twelve hours, it transformed us."

How could listening to songs have had such a profound effect on these hardened warriors? Evolutionary theory offers one explanation. Belonging to a group once helped our species survive, while being excluded from the group meant you faced the lion alone and became his dinner. So the quest for belonging is a deep-rooted motivation that shapes much of what we do.[12] Being in a group not only helps us synchronize our actions with each other, but also leads us to experience strong feelings when we're synchronized.[13]

The joy we feel during the song, the game, or the battle is in our genes, our brains, our blood. The urge to unify courses through us and makes our hearts beat stronger— even beating in sync with our bandmates or choir. That desire to sing in unison, to confirm we belong to the group, is where much of our musical joy comes from. So when we're all singing the same song, playing the same game, fighting the same battle, we're stoked by that strong, life-affirming feeling that we belong.

## Music Strengthens Social Bonds

> I can sit out playing on my front porch and people walking by can actually come up and join me. Music has opened up a whole new world.
>
> *—Diana Brake, bass player and retired teacher*

The older I get, the more I've come to value other people. I like chatting with strangers in grocery store lines and in home improvement aisles. I like bonding with friends over coffee, joining relatives over laden tables, and sharing stories with other writers.

More than anything else, though, there's music. I've met scores of people who share my musical interests. We swap new songs, play at jams, meet up at camps, share a meal and music at each other's houses, laugh at musical jokes, attend concerts together, and support each other at gigs. I'm an introvert, and I need plenty of time to myself to recharge my batteries. But music has helped me appreciate the joy and value of connecting with other people, and it's expanded my world in ways I'd never imagined.

Others describe similar experiences—as they've aged, they've rediscovered how much it means to share their musical passion. "As I look at the large pool of friends I now have, they are all connected through music," says banjo player and copywriter Bob Meagher, whose zany picking style and good humor win over any crowd. "Without music, I would still be all alone in my room."

Psychologists say that being part of a group doesn't just *feel* good: it leads to better health and a longer, more satisfying life.[14]

Kelly Trojan, a truck driver who spends hours alone each day singing to CDs on the road, says that playing music with her band is about more than sharing dinners, conversations, jams, and camping. "I have somewhere to belong, a social group, and some focus other than the daily humdrum. Having friends and singing harmony with them is pretty special," she says. "Music has given me so much."

## Music Improves Memory and Thinking

> Music exercises your brain, like learning a new language—it keeps you alive and vibrant, it staves off dementia. If you sit on your ass and do nothing but watch TV, you'll go stagnant.
>
> *—John Simmons, clawhammer banjo player and retired attorney*

I used to love solving algebra problems. I actually enjoyed cramming for a history test, then writing from memory a ten-page essay that was chock-full of facts and analysis. I can still write an analytic piece—but filled with factual detail from memory? I can't recall exactly, but I think my brain used to work better.

I'm not alone—many people are concerned about losing memory and mental flexibility. But what to do about it? Most

## Nine Benefits of Making Music

Engaging with music can help us:

1. make friends, strengthen relationships, deepen connections, gain a sense of belonging;
2. stimulate our senses and engage our hands, ears, and mind;
3. discover a limitless playground and classroom to explore;
4. become stronger through tackling a hard task over time;
5. experience greater joy, excitement, and solace;
6. express ourselves creatively;
7. find new ways to spend time with others—as learners, teachers, mentors, and partners;
8. feel a spiritual connection and express it through song;
9. create a legacy through our performances, recordings, and moments shared.

mental workouts activate only a few areas of the brain at a time. Some activities that once seemed promising—like playing brain games—have been shown to have little effect.

Music is different. Playing an instrument is a rich and complex experience that engages the entire brain.[15] According to Daniel J. Levitin, author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*, "music listening, performance, and composition engage nearly every area of the brain that we have so far identified, and involve nearly every neural subsystem."[16] When you play, you're essentially taking your brain to the gym for a vigorous workout. Just as doing physical exercise improves physical health, playing music improves mental health—protecting your memory, verbal abilities, mental processing speed, attention, and more.

Music training truly helps your brain age better.[17] One of the most striking results comes from a recent study using MRI scans to compare the "brain ages" of non-musicians, amateur musicians, and professionals. Surprisingly, those with the youngest brain ages were the amateur musicians. Not only does playing an instrument have an "age-decelerating effect on the brain," but it has a stronger effect "when it is not performed as a main profession, but as a leisure or extracurricular activity."[18] Amateurs appear to get the benefits of brain training without some of the physical and mental stresses that full-time musicians deal with.

They're aware of these benefits too. I spoke with retired graphic designer David Bullen from the San Francisco Bay area, who took up bluegrass bass though he played rock in his younger days. Now he's jamming with some experienced players and enjoying the mental challenge. "When you're playing with people who are pretty darned good, it's kind of exciting to keep up with it," says David. "I've used every bit of mental energy that I have to do it." He's also found that he feels mentally sharper after his bass lessons, so one day he tried his own mental test. He was working on a crossword puzzle before

his lesson, and when he returned home, he went back to his puzzle. "I was cooking on the puzzle, doing a lot better after the lesson than before" he says. "It was like all the synapses had connected during the lesson."

Others see how music can cultivate the mind. Landscape architect Michael Thilgen found his intensive desire to learn in his professional career starting to flag in his fifties, about the time his interest in the guitar and banjo took off. "Music coming along when it did helped me stay active in the area of learning. If it hadn't happened, I might have started on that downward trend that people sometimes do as they age," says Michael, "where they're not learning new things, they're not developing new skills, and they're not meeting new people. We know where that trend can go. It's not a healthy place."

Researchers have studied that "healthy place," and the ways that musical experience helps the brain perform some of its most important tasks, including "executive function" (working memory, cognitive flexibility, attention, and more). Musicians perform better than non-musicians on several mental tasks, including executive functioning. Neuropsychologists Strong and Mast conclude that "learning a musical instrument is an extremely difficult task that 'exercises' many different brain regions simultaneously."[19]

The same 2018 study suggests that "musicians may build cognitive reserve over time as they process music in novel ways."[20] Cognitive reserve is your brain's ability to improvise and find alternate ways of getting a job done. As we find ourselves struggling to remember a name or to solve a problem, it helps to have alternatives. It's like knowing alternate routes to get home when there's a big sinkhole in your way.

People with greater cognitive reserve are also "better able to stave off the degenerative brain changes associated with dementia or other brain diseases."[21] One study showed that playing a musical instrument is "significantly associated" with

a lower risk of dementia and cognitive impairment.[22] Another concluded that "making music might be a potential protective factor for cognitive decline."[23] Life experiences can affect your cognitive reserve and, therefore, your ability to avoid dementia or memory loss.[24] Making music helps build that reserve, like money in a savings account, giving us another tool to help us age well.

What's even more encouraging? Results can happen quickly. One often-cited study, for example, showed that just three months of piano lessons (with a weekly lesson and three hours of weekly practice) helped participants aged sixty to eighty-five improve processing speed, verbal fluency, and memory.[25] A more recent study concludes that "musicians are increasing brain connectivity across musical experiences from the time they begin playing an instrument."[26]

I get a dopamine high both from riding my bike and from playing music. But during moments when I'm struggling to practice, it helps to know my brain will benefit from a music workout too.

## Music Engages and Strengthens the Senses

> When I go play at a jam, I come back refreshed, energized, and full of vigor.
>
> *—Dennis Matula, guitar player and retired engineer*

When we play an instrument, we know we're physically engaged—we feel it in our hands, ears, lips, and lungs. We may be less aware that playing over time enhances our senses.

Musicians are better able to integrate sensory information from hearing, touch, and sight; University of Montreal researcher Julie Roy explains why these findings matter: "The ability of the nervous system to integrate information from all senses—sight,

sound, touch, smell, self-motion, and taste—is critical to day-to-day life."[27]

Professional drummer Robert Jospé notes that the physicality of drumming is its own reward: "I know it makes me feel good to play. The incredible fun of the drum set is that everything is working together—your legs, feet, hands, arms, core, back, shoulders. Everything is moving." Robert says that "it's really like a dance on the drums. It's very physically satisfying to play."

Singing moves the body too. "Singing the high notes vibrates in my body and it releases endorphins," says Carol Mulligan, who sings in her church choir. "It's hard work, it makes my heart go faster, and it makes me happy."

Playing music can improve our ears as well. As we age, most of us notice it getting harder to understand conversation in noisy places or during rapid-fire movies. By age sixty, up to a third of us have moderate hearing loss, and by age eighty, almost two-thirds do.[28] Yet musicians generally have much better hearing for their age:* the average seventy-year-old musician can hear as well as a fifty-year-old non-musician.[29]

Why? The advantage is not in their ears. It's in their brains, which have learned to compensate by working more effectively at interpreting auditory signals. According to neurobiologist Nina Kraus, "music transforms sound processing in the brain."[30] The researchers at Northwestern hypothesize that musicians can better understand "speech in noise" environments because they've spent years listening carefully to specific sounds and discriminating between them on a regular basis.[31]

Hearing isn't the only bodily process that music affects: it changes heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, skin conductivity, skin temperature, muscle tension, and biochemical responses.[32] It can help us manage pain too, by reducing the "stress-responsive

* Note: These findings apply to musicians who play acoustically. Musicians who play amplified instruments show greater hearing loss from noise-induced damage.

systems" in the body; more daily sessions of listening to music lead to more pain reduction.[33] "I know there are times when I've been in physical pain, and you play music or you listen to music, and the pain is completely out of your mind," says guitar player Maureen Blumenthal.

## Music Boosts Creativity and Life Satisfaction

> Music is one of the most beautiful, mysterious, and exciting ways to connect back to oneself, to the essence of one's creativity. It's a direct connection to the soul.
>
> *—Judith-Kate Friedman, Director, Songwriting Works*

Making music offers us the chance to be creative. Consider what others have done with just twelve notes: Mozart, Guthrie, Lennon, Welch, Monroe, Jackson, Mitchell, Monk.

When we play, we're making choices about which notes to emphasize and which ways to approach a lyric. And as we become better musicians, we learn to create new musical arrangements, compose fresh songs, or reimagine existing work.

"Too many of us are blind to the power of creativity to transform our lives," says psychiatrist Gene Cohen. In *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, he describes four stages of creativity: the first (during midlife), when people seek to make work more gratifying; the second (in our sixties and seventies), when we translate "if not now, when?" into action; the third, when we become keepers of culture and look for ways to share; and the encore phase, when people seek to make a lasting contribution.[34]

Reggie Harris, a singer/songwriter who has helped people of all ages develop their creativity through songwriting and storytelling, sees the second half of life as a time when people may seek a more creative path: "This is a time in our lives when

we're reviewing things. We're also coming to grips with the things we haven't accomplished yet, that may have been in our hearts for a long time." Reggie, who is affiliated with the Kennedy Center's Partners in Education Program, says that "music and songwriting and the arts can help us explore a new vision for what we'd like to leave in the world."

This can be a liberating time. We feel less constrained to do things we don't want to do, to be the person that others expect us to be. We have more time to choose what to do and more awareness of the value of time. We're better able to express ourselves. We have more courage to tackle what's hard.

When folk musician Cathy Fink was talking with a fresh batch of guitar students, one of the men, who was about fifty, said "I watched my father in his old age have nothing to do and be bored and sad. And I decided that wasn't going to happen to me, so I'm starting guitar now."

People find satisfaction in many things. Music provides, uniquely, multiple ways to achieve that satisfaction.

Why else should we make music? Because above all—as Gene reminded me one sun-filled day—"making music is its own reward."