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It would be more thrilling to say that jazz and I met in the dimly-lit theater of an Ellington concert or the alluring darkness of a jazz club – but it is more truthful to say that we met casually through a high school course catalog only days before jazz band auditions. I was a nervous, bewildered freshman, still not completely sure what exactly I was auditioning for when I walked into that band room. Jazz was a completely foreign concept to me – as the jazz director spoke he threw out names like Bill Evans and Miles Davis, each regarded with a jolt of recognition from the rest of the musicians, sparking mumbles about the records their parents listened to, the jazz concerts they had attended months earlier. But those names did not mean anything to me. The only thing I was completely sure of was that I wanted more than anything to play the piano.

The jazz director began handing out music to be sight-read and I settled myself on the piano bench, lightly tapping my fingers on the glossy keys. From a distance I could see the scattered notes on the music of the saxophones; they leaned over their stands and fumbled with their clicking keys in silent rehearsal. As musicians were united with parts, a squabble of brassy runs and dissonant chords began to fill the room; eager to join, I reached for my music from the director.

I was expecting to see notes. But what I got instead was a nearly blank sheet of staff paper with unfamiliar chord names, scribbled above peculiar-looking hash marks, mixed in with an occasional cluster of notes. It was a foreign language. I felt my throat tighten as the jazz director began snapping a steady beat, softly humming an exotic melody, his foot tapping energetically. In that moment, the last ten years of my classical studies in piano suddenly meant nothing. When I leaned over to consult the guitarist, he was already immersed in the chords of *Witchcraft*, lightly strumming to an imaginary singer.

For nearly ten years I had grown accustomed to the security of predetermined notes that assembled classical music. I was used to being alone. Piano was always an instrument that I played by myself. But this was not the case with jazz. The instruments that I had always seen pushed to the back of the orchestra were now gathered in one room – the ones that my orchestra director had only ever acknowledged with a vertical finger to his lips. The brassy instruments were outspoken and rebellious in contrast to the thin strings of the violins and

cellos; I suddenly had to compete to be heard above the brilliant chords and thuds and crashes of the big band.

When I researched to see what those hash marks meant, I discovered one of the core elements of jazz – improvisation. It was all extemporized on the spot, guided by those unfamiliar chords that I had never seen before. I sat at my piano with the sheet of strange chords and my classical theory book, slowly copying down the chords as they were printed. Impressed with my work, I pulled up a recording of *Witchcraft* on my computer and began to play along with Frank Sinatra.

It sounded terrible.

I finally met Miles Davis on my first day of high school. He was the first man I saw when I opened the door to the jazz room, a bright face frozen in a glassy frame. The musicians I had known were lifeless painted portraits buried in thick classical anthologies – but Davis looked so alive. By the end of the day, I went home with ten times as many strange chords as I had started with. But as I began to listen to the recordings, the music sounded more alive than anything I had ever listened to – just as vibrant as the expression on Davis's face.

I began to do what my classical teacher had warned me never to do: play what I had heard on the recordings. On my next trip to Japan to visit family I met Daisuke Iwasaki, a local jazz pianist who studied at Berklee, who spent countless hours teaching me those strange chords. When I came home I carried those chords in my fingers everywhere – they sounded even more beautiful when I could claim what I played as my own.

My shift from classical to jazz piano was not a rapid one – slowly, I separated myself from notes written on the page and began my search for the notes that were not there. Playing those strange chords and once-nonexistent notes finally gave me a name and a face when I played the piano – the music no longer belonged to Schumann or Chopin; it now belonged to me.