

The Lost Chord

A Mini Memoir

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It was my first time on stage. I was ten years old. My father, who was the minister of the First Congregational Church in Milford, New Hampshire, was also a professional magician. He would give magic shows, perhaps a couple of times a month, at various venues in southern New Hampshire—Grange Halls, church basements, school auditoriums. He would often take me with him, and I enjoyed watching the audience reaction to what I knew was coming.

One day my dad suggested that I perform an act as part of his magic show. I'm not sure where he got the idea, but when I got home from school one day, he put a 78-rpm record on a small portable record player he had and played for me a rendition of Jimmy Durante singing *I'm the Guy Who Found the Lost Chord*. He put a large, fake nose over my nose, held on by an elastic cord, and put a "Jimmy Durante" hat on my head.

"You're going to play Jimmy Durante in my magic show," he said. "I'll play this record just off stage, and you'll be in the center of the stage mouthing the words, pretending that you're singing them."

He had a big smile on his face. I thought he was crazy.

"I can't do that," I said. I was a shy kid, and the idea of standing in front of an audience didn't appeal to me at all.

"Sure you can. Just listen to the record over and over again and memorize the words. It will be fun."

So every day after school I would listen to the record until I had memorized the entire song, which lasted for about three minutes. Then I would stand in front of a mirror with my fake nose and hat on, mouthing the words on the record, pretending I was playing a piano.

Finally, the day of reckoning arrived. I don't recall where the magic show was held, except that it was a big room with a stage—probably a school auditorium. For the first half of the magic show, I sat offstage, out of sight of the audience. My dad was in great form that night, pulling the usual rabbit out of a hat, calling on young people from the audience to come up on stage and help with certain tricks. Just before intermission, he stepped to center stage.

"I have a special guest for you tonight, who is going to perform just for you. Here is ... Jimmy Durante!"

My dad started walking toward me, holding out his hand as I walked nervously onto the stage. The audience started to clap and laugh when they saw my large nose and oversized hat. I got to the center of the stage, turned and faced the audience, and forced a smile.

What am I doing here, I thought?

By this time my dad was just off-stage, placing the needle on the spinning 78-rpm record. The music started. I put

my hands in front of me as if playing a piano and started mouthing the words as Jimmy Durante's voice carried out over the audience.

Sittin' at my piano, the other day,
My mind was ill at ease –
They were comin' to take it away that afternoon.

Members of the audience were smiling and chuckling. Jimmy and I continued.

I was all by myself, in a mellow mood,
Improvisin' symphonies.

I was now feeling more comfortable and getting into the act, emphasizing my hand movements. Jimmy and I kept going.

My right hand was playing Mozart's minuet,
And at the same time my left hand was playing "have a
banana" from Carmen,
And at the same time my mouth was whistling a sextet
from Lucini,
And while all this was going on, what do you think my
foot was doing?
Well keeping time, it was cracking walnuts; you see I
had to eat too.

By now the audience was roaring with laughter. Jimmy and I were just getting to the main point.

Then in the midst of my soliloquy, a strange feeling
came over me,
My right hand stopped playing, my left hand stopped
playing,
My mouth stopped whistling, and my foot stopped
cracking walnuts.
Food became secondary, why?
Because ladies and gentlemen, I found it! I found it!
(chord plays) The Lost Chord. (chord plays) That's it,
the Lost Chord.

Jimmy and I kept going for a few more verses, and the audience was lapping it up. Finally, Jimmy and I were getting to the big finish.

Music lovers, do you realize what you're hearing?
I'll play it again.
(plays wrong chord) That's not the chord,
(plays wrong chord) Neither is that,
(plays wrong chord) Neither is that,
(plays wrong chord) Neither is that,
What happened to it? I've lost the chord, a catastro-stroke.

I looked to the back of the auditorium and continued.

Lock the doors; nobody leaves the place until I find it.
Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm gonna sit down on the key-
board of this piano until the chord is returned.

I turned around and pretended to sit on the piano keyboard.

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(chord plays) That's it, the Lost Chord.
I found it by sitting on the piano keyboard.
(chord plays) Very strange, I usually play by ear!

So let's celebrate I'm feeling great,
I'm the guy who found the Lost Chord.

My dad walked onstage, his arm pointing in my direction.
"Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy Durante!"

Applause filled the auditorium as the curtain fell for intermission.

I continued to perform my Jimmy Durante act for several more magic shows, even adding a second song. Then, two years later, my dad got sick with heart disease and died. I was twelve years old and in the seventh grade. I had lost my chord.

A musical chord is a collection of notes, coming together to form a beautiful whole. Also, a cord can be a thin rope used to hold things together. We all have chords, or cords, in our lives—things that hold us together, notes that work together to make us feel safe and strong and happy. For the first twelve years of my life, my family was a beautiful chord; a chord I knew was pretty good, but probably took for granted. Then when my dad died, my chord was broken; a note was missing; I had lost the chord, and I felt helpless.

Because my dad was a minister, we lived in the parsonage, a home provided by the church. When my dad died, we had to move out and into a small second-floor apartment up the street. My mother, who had been a junior-high-school teacher before she was married, had to go back to teaching to support me, my older sister, and my younger brother.

I needed to find more chords to help me get through high school. I took alto saxophone lessons, and with four friends, formed a dance band. We had five notes in that chord—a tenor sax player, a trombone player, a piano player, a player on the drums, and me.

I was also on the basketball team, starting at center in my senior year. We had a good team that year, getting to the semi-finals in the Class B tournament at the University of New Hampshire. The starting five on the basketball team that year was my favorite, most closely-knit chord in high school—a beautiful, tight five-note chord. It was a fun chord to play.

I had a steady girl friend my senior year in high school—a two-note chord that, when combined with the other two five-note chords, kept me interacting with other people. She was a junior—a year behind me—and a devout Roman Catholic, a fact that she let me know meant that this chord would be lost one day. Sure enough, I met my future wife when I was a junior at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the same year that she met her future husband at a college in Nova Scotia. Sometimes the first chord isn't the best chord.

But chord notes don't always have to be people; they can be activities. I enjoy working by myself, and in high

school, I had a darkroom in a closet off the living room in our apartment. I would spend hours in there alone, developing negatives, and making prints on an old enlarger that my uncle had given me for Christmas. Taking pictures with my Brownie Hawkeye camera and developing the film myself was a unique chord—a chord I continued to play in my fraternity in college, a fraternity that was itself my most important big chord in college.

It was at a fraternity party in October of my junior year that I was working in the dining room handing out desserts to the fraternity brothers and their dates, some of whom had brought other girls from the nursing school at the Albany Medical Center as guests. One of these girls was tall, slender, and cute, with a pixie haircut. Her name was Edie. I had not noticed her when she came through the line for the main course; but she noticed me. She was on the hunt for tall men—so she came back for dessert. This time I did notice her and decided that dessert time was over.

I spent the rest of the evening with her, then the rest of my junior year with her, then all of my senior year with her, then the first year of graduate school with her. Then we got married and moved into student housing at RPI. A year later, our son Jeff was born. A nice new three-note chord had formed. Graduate school was going great. Then, less than two weeks after Jeff was born, my mother died. Another lost chord. It seems as if every time one new, beautiful chord is found, another is lost.

Since then, I've had lots of new chords. A four-note chord was formed when Debbie was born in Massachusetts while I was in the Air Force, stationed at Hanscom Field, and this became a five-note chord when Kim was born five years later. Some of my favorites chords were made up of the students in the hundreds of classes I have taught over the forty-six years I was a professor of engineering at Oakland University in Michigan. But other chords have been lost. The musical chords played by our high school dance band have long since floated into the air. I've lost track of most of the other players in that dance band, except for the tenor sax player. I reconnected with him a few years ago and learned that he had spent his career as a professional musician and composer. A couple of years ago, I got to hear him play a special jazz concert of all his own music—lots of great chords.

But I have been saddened by the fact that my high school basketball chord—my very favorite—is now completely lost. Of the five notes of that chord—the starting five—I am the only note left. First Bobby Moulton died, then Jimmy Brown, then Jack Patton, and then most recently Johnny Ferguson. What a chord that was! A chord that's lost, but not forgotten.

We all have lost chords. What are yours? But lost chords can be found. Sometimes in the most unusual places, or by doing the most unusual thing—like sitting on a piano keyboard!

Note: Jimmy Durante singing *I'm the Guy Who Found the Lost Chord* can be heard on YouTube at the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXfpk8DnKIE>