Gerald Busby on mentorship

October 4, 2017 - Gerald Busby is a Texas-born American composer who has lived and worked in NYC's Hotel Chelsea since 1977. He is best known for his scores to Paul Taylor's dance piece, "Runes" and Robert Altman's film *3 Women*. At the age of 81, Busby continues to compose music daily, practice Reiki for two hours a day, and is currently at work on his memoir. When asked to describe the methodology behind his various projects, Busby stresses the importance of simply being present. "It's as though you're on a raft floating down the river and everything you can do and everything you are is on the raft with you," he says. "It's just a matter of focusing."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2529 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Focus, Inspiration, Beginnings, Process.

You played the piano in church as a child in Texas. Is that how you learned your instrument?

Most of my training was in church. I worked for a Southern Baptist evangelist when I was 15 and I travelled with him. That's where I learned show business, because the music has to keep the show going. The two things they want is for the people to give money and to walk the aisles and give their hearts to Jesus. The music has to propel them into that. That's where I learned to write music, even if I didn't know it at the time. I was kind of a brat, and the preacher knew that I wasn't really going to ever become a Jesus freak. I was doing it for the experience. My parents were rather poor, not super poor, but not much money, and staunch Southern Baptists. Our whole social life was the church. So I was playing seven or eight services a week, even when I was very young.

Had the idea of being a composer been on your mind from an early age?

Never. There were moments when I would kind of have this excited feeling, and I would almost secretively write something on a scrap of paper—some notes, like a choral response for the choir—and then slip it under the door of the Choir Director to find. That was my approach. I never thought of myself as a composer. I went to Yale as a pianist, and then I transferred from Yale Music School into Yale College and got a degree in Philosophy, actually.

Into my mid-30s I still had this urge to be a concert pianist. It really wasn't happening, and the truth was that I wasn't set out for that. New York is full of people like that, folks who graduate from places like Juilliard but don't quite make it. I graduated in 1960 from Yale, and then I moved to New York and I took a job as a typist in an advertising agency. Because I could play the piano, I was a good typist. I was still playing the piano. I had a good piano back in those days, a Steinway grand, and I would practice three or four hours a day. Then, after Kennedy was assassinated, that was a destruction of my innocence. I can really admit that now. I used that as an excuse to leave town and go through my Jack Kerouac period. I got rid of my record collection, all my books, and I sold my piano. I took a job as a college textbook traveling salesman.

So I took that job and went off. My first territory was the Rocky Mountain area, which was divine—West Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, and Colorado. About twice a year, during the school year, I would make that circuit. I'd visit each major school to try to get the Director of Freshman English to adopt our textbooks. All I really did was take them to lunch and be seductive. I wasn't terribly good. I never even read the books. I lasted eight years.

This is all kind of an answer to your question about why didn't I start writing music until I was 40 years old. I made my Town Hall debut as a pianist during that period. I played a recital there in 1966, and my bosses at the textbook company, who liked me, were still kind of suspicious. "What are you doing that for?" But I *had* to do it, even though it didn't really come to anything.

Fear was the thing that kept me from composing. Maybe this is how a writer feels, too, writing the first sentence in a novel. The audacity of taking charge and writing those first few words is hard. I couldn't get past that until I was about 38. I would visit a school, I'd do my rounds, and be done in two hours. Then, I would find a practice room in the music school with a piano and play for two or three hours. Then, I'd find a gym in town, if there was one, and then I'd find a gay bar, if there was one. That was my day. So in one of these practice rooms, it was in Fort Collins at Colorado State University, I had some manuscript paper, and I'd been improvising this same piece since I was 15, and I called it "Homage to Rachmaninoff" because he was sort of my hero, a pianist/composer. He's the quintessence of that, the best at both.

So I starting writing this piece of music down and when I completed it, I felt like the clouds had opened. It was kind of like an epiphany. Like, "Oh, this is it!" Like I've been walking and walking for years and finally arrive without even knowing where I was going. I just knew that was it. I was working for Oxford selling textbooks, but I had the summer off so I got a job cooking at a restaurant on 75th and Columbus called Ruskay's. I could barely handle it, I had no training.

I became friends with the composer Virgil Thomson after being asked to cook for him at a dinner party. Virgil was a kind of mentor. At first, I was still thinking like a student. I offered Virgil a manuscript of something I'd written, and he looked at it and says, "You're crowding your bar line and you can't use that kind of pencil." He turned into sort of a French nun, you know rapping your knuckles. Eventually I started having some success. To be Virgil's protégé you had to have a certain acuteness or charm that he liked, and you had to have a practical skill that he could use in his life. I could cook, so we hit it off like that. Eventually I realized that he was like a Zen master and he was not really going to teach me how to compose at all. It was about pushing me.

He knew all the fancy composers of that time. He wrote operas with Gertrude Stein, which really put him over the top. He was into something, which I now have kind of adopted as my mantra or the way I think or the way I choose to live, which is the reduction of everything into its most practical form. He used to say to me, "Slaves ask why. Masters ask how." He liked to make those kind of pronouncements. It had nothing to do with morality, per se, or even with being right, it had to do with how something worked psychologically, physically, emotionally, and professionally. How do you get what you want and be who you want to be in terms of the mechanics of it? He would say things to me back then, the meaning of which would only dawned on me 30 years later.

So did those ideas regarding practicality and usefulness bleed over into your professional life, into the kind of work you were making? Did you think about it in that way at the time?

I did not. That all came about after I had my bout with near death, during the AIDS years, when my partner died, and I went totally crazy and became a drug addict and was almost homeless. I was almost thrown out of my apartment at the Chelsea. I eventually got clean and started practicing Reiki, which I do for two hours a day now. Everything that had ever happened to me—being a traveling salesman, all the sex I'd had on the streets, in the trucks, at the docks—all of that suddenly gelled—like boom!—and then I realized in order to make this work, in order to get the most out of my talent, I needed to be not just focused, but I needed to be totally calm. My whole life became one mindfulness exercise from that period on. It put me in touch with the primary need to be totally at home with myself, in terms of how I work.

I have worked with several bona fide geniuses, but none more genius than Robert Altman. Every decision he made—how he came to do what he did—was governed by what his viscera told him, not by his head. A good example is how he hired me to be the composer for *3 Women*. I had a boyfriend who was a movie publicist. He was hired when movies opened to write press releases and arrange screenings. He knew Altman's publicist and sent them a tape of my music. I'd only written one piece. As a cook, I'd met this flute player who was in Juilliard. I'd written one piece for him and I sent that to Robert Altman. Altman liked it, but he also had two other examples that he liked. Back then he was making about three movies a year, and he was producing them for under $3 million, and he had his own crew. He'd use the same actors over, all that stuff. Shelley Duvall was a part of that.

He had this office complex in Westwood near UCLA, and he gathered all of his staff on Friday afternoons. They'd go into his office and smoke grass and drink scotch and get a little messed up. He wanted them to be high. He didn't want any kind of critical judgment going, he wanted a visceral response. So he got all these very talented young people of various kinds together—Peter Boyle was there, Lily Tomlin was there—and got them kind of drunk. Nobody wants to listen to music when they're drunk and chatting, and that's exactly what he wanted. He wanted to see what would penetrate, in other words.

So he said, "I want to play you some music. I've got three pieces," and they were short. He had his audio engineer put each tape on, and Altman had a stopwatch, which he used to time how much silence elapsed from the time the music started until someone spoke. If they spoke, it meant they'd stopped listening. My music had the longest period of silence and that was the reason he hired me.

He always said that the music had to be just the right thing. It couldn't be intrusive, but it had to become part of the emotional experience. A thing that Altman told me in that regard was that "When movie music really works, the audience sitting there in the dark, literally, confuses it with their own emotions." They think they're *feeling* it, not *hearing* it. Then, you've succeeded, and it kind of disappears.

Virgil and Altman are my two real mentors. They're the two people who come to mind when I'm trying to get my life to its most efficient. What it's all come to, what has taken me 81 years to find out, is that the most efficient I can be and the most creative I can be is to be present. It's all about being present. So, all the shit that ever happened to me came together to form the basis for that. If I wanted to live and not just become a street person and a crack addict, I had to be present. That was the price. So my lesson and my training for myself has been from that point, in 1993 when my partner died, until now has been creating new things that are somehow comprehensive of everything that I do.

This is something I realized recently—you really need to stop thinking about mental partitions. Now I'm doing this. Now I'm *not* doing this. It's really a matter of you're always doing everything. It's as though you're on a raft floating down the river and everything you can do and everything you are is on the raft with you, and it's just a matter of focusing.

I just started writing my memoirs. Again, this feels audacious like, "I don't know how to write!" but the energy I have from writing is incredible. I just wrote an opera about *3 Women* with Craig Lucas. The energy I got from that or from writing chamber music, which I do every day, actually becomes part of the energy of writing my memoir. So you're really always doing everything, but you just focus on certain things at certain times. The more you are willing to accept yourself as this multitude of things going on, with no separation, no evaluation in terms of that's good or that's bad, the more productive you will be. All these things are fuel for keeping the motor running and then when you want to point the hose at something, it's sharp and focused and intensive.

Have you had the opportunity to be a mentor to other people?

I have had protégés, and my trouble is that I'm very impatient with them. They're so bright and beautiful, and I kind of want to give it all to them somehow—all this knowledge, all at once—and it doesn't work that way. I don't think of myself as a teacher necessarily, but I love sharing the audacity of being present with someone and sharing information.

I taught Leonard Bernstein's daughter piano, so I got to know him and Paul Taylor and Martha Graham, I worked for her for a while, and of course Virgil and Robert Altman. Those were my five geniuses and they all, least of all Robert Altman and most of all Martha Graham, were sadists at some point. If they *really* liked you, they would find some way to get at you, tweak you, to see what you'd do. That was a sign that they liked you. So I find myself kind of doing that with my protégés. Getting upset or screaming, doing something wild and then immediately admitting, "Oh I'm sorry, that just something I'm doing. I'm trying to push you."

So is your ultimate creative advice to focus all your energies on doing as many things as possible at all times? Or is it just about focusing in general?

Well, I can say that I'm always writing music. The more I think about the neatness of it—getting it on the page *exactly*, so any musician could see exactly what I meant—the more my energies and thoughts and critical thought is engaged in *that*, almost exclusively, and the more my creativity just flows I need to take full responsibility for being the janitor, for taking care of myself, so that I'm in good shape, and for constantly making sure that it's all clear. No excuses ever, for anything, and no procrastination, ever. That is being present.

Five Things I love And Would Recommend To Others:

The choreography of Eryc Taylor

The art of Nickolaus Typaldos

The film *Bagdad Café*

The childhood poems of Frankie Krainz

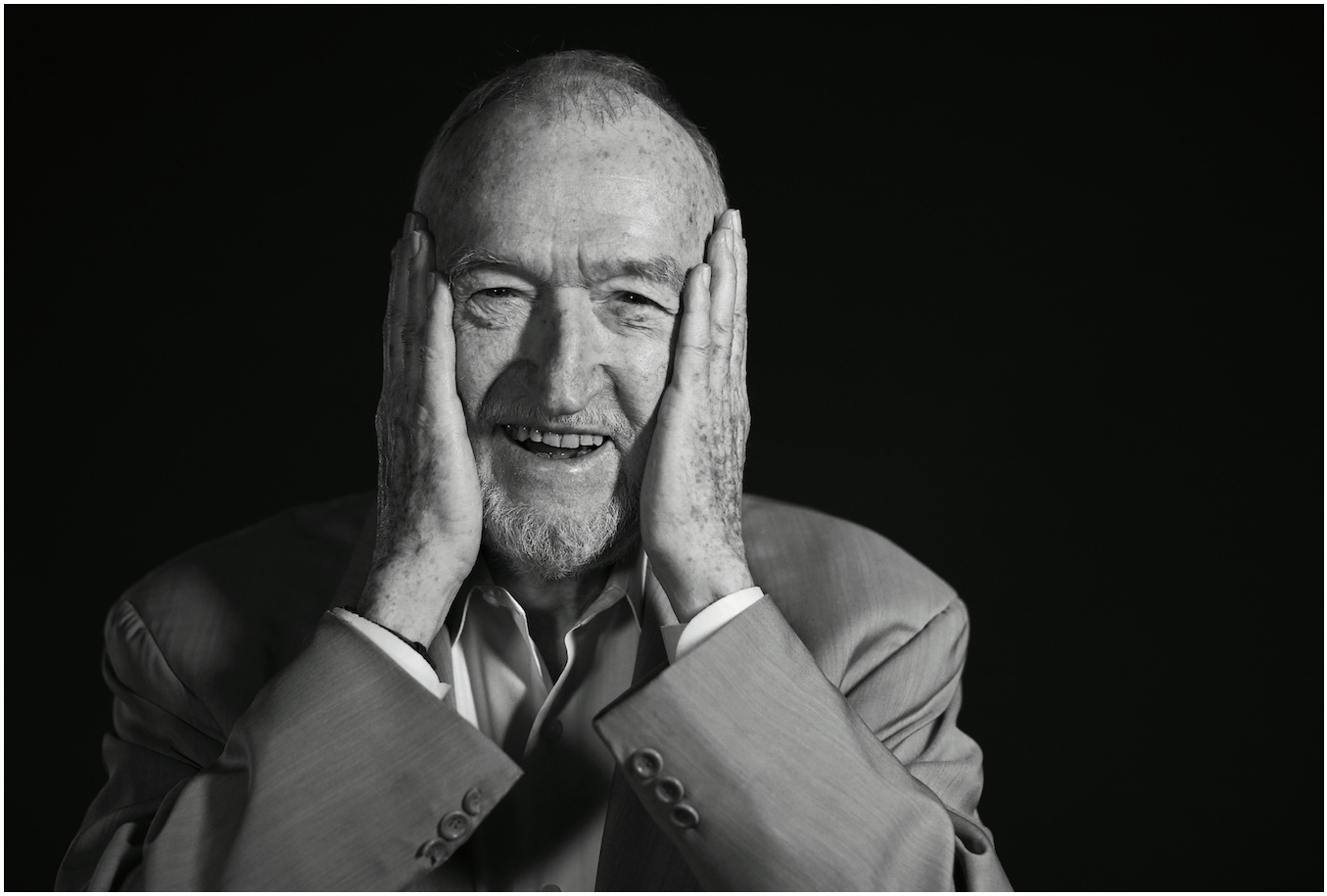
Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, K. 622

Name
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Vocation
composer

Fact

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Ivan Cordoba