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A place for Mr. Ayers to show off his gifts

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He called before I arrived, making sure we were still on.

I'm on my way, I told him. See you in a few minutes.

My first stop was at the new studio, where I wanted to make sure the piano was in place, along with the upright bass.

Nathaniel Anthony Ayers suspected that his Christmas present involved the long-awaited opening of the studio. But he didn't know the piano would be in it, donated by a nurse from Santa Monica, along with the bass I had just bought from a jazz musician in Venice.

Mr. Ayers had not played a bass since he became ill while at the Juilliard School in New York 35 years ago. He switched to violin and cello, because they're easier to load onto the shopping carts he lived out of in his hometown of Cleveland and later Los Angeles.

Ben Hong, assistant principal cellist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and an admirer of Mr. Ayers, brought along some strings and a biography of Franz Schubert. We set the gifts on the piano, along with a photo of Mr. Ayers alongside cellist Yo-Yo Ma, his former classmate at Juilliard. The photo was taken backstage at Disney Hall in October, just before Ma embraced Mr. Ayers and told him his love of music made them brothers.

When the studio was in order, Hong and I walked the two blocks from Lamp Village on Crocker Street to the Lamp drop-in center on San Julian Street, where Mr. Ayers spends his days. Lamp houses, treats and supports people with severe mental illness on downtown L.A.'s skid row.

Mr. Ayers, 55, lives in a Lamp-managed apartment and has settled into a routine in which he sweeps the floor at the drop-in center, takes out the garbage, and plays violin, cello and trumpet in the courtyard. In my nearly two years with him, I've seen him at his most charming and I've seen the schizophrenia take hold like a tornado, throwing him into fits of anger and unpleasantness.

The staff at Lamp had agreed with me that since music is such powerful medicine for him, a studio seemed the next logical step in advancing his recovery, and Mr. Ayers was on board. He figured his Christmas present would be the grand opening, so he couldn't stand waiting for it to happen. He spotted us from the courtyard and was halfway across the street as we approached.

"Ben Hong!" he said, a bit stunned, as always, at the thought of a world-class musician taking time out for him.

Mr. Ayers wore a rain poncho because of earlier showers and carried his trumpet, a backpack and, for no particular reason, a punching bag. His khaki hat bore an image of Che Guevara, and he'd written my name and "Donald Duck Concert Hall" on the cap, with white-framed shades propped over the bill. Mr. Ayers gabbed all the way to Lamp Village, eager as a 6-year-old on Christmas Day. He talked music with Hong and sports with me, his mood as

bright as the sun that had followed the morning storm.

It got only brighter when he set foot in the brand new studio.

"I can smell the paint," he said with a look of intoxication, feasting his eyes first on the piano and then the bass.

He checked the tuning on the piano and ran a few scales, then zipped open the bag for the bass and re-familiarized himself with an instrument that for 10 years was his life. He struggled with it at first and looked like a man trying to wrestle a bear. Hong told me the fingering system is different from the cello's and must be tough to adapt to. But all of a sudden, Mr. Ayers found his way.

"He's got the groove back," Hong said as Mr. Ayers' fingers danced and slid. "That's fantastic!"

Hong noted that the studio was roughly the size of the practice room on the fourth floor at Juilliard, where he spent many an hour as a student, as did Mr. Ayers, who at the time imagined a future so different from the one he landed in.

Anna McGuirk, who works in neonatal intensive care at Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center, arrived in time to watch Nathaniel play the Baldwin upright that was in her family for 40 years.

"An instrument has a soul," she said, and it needs nurturing. McGuirk — the daughter of a carpenter from Cleveland, where Mr. Ayers got his start in music — said she took lessons as a child from the nuns at St. Mark on Coeur d'Alene Avenue in Venice but was never very good at it. "Instruments need to get played, and now mine will. That means everything in the world to me."

There was just one problem:

Mr. Ayers (I began addressing him formally because he refuses to call me Steve) has claimed he doesn't know how to play piano. He took a few lessons as a kid, and a basic course was required of all students at Juilliard. He banged on my wife's piano one day at our house, but not long enough to prove much.

Here he was, though, seated at McGuirk's piano and running through scales, and he didn't sound like a novice to me. I looked at Hong, who was smiling the same smile I get from Peter Snyder, another L.A. Phil cellist who gives Mr. Ayers lessons and thinks he's a natural on any instrument.

In a sudden burst, Mr. Ayers brought full force down on the ivories. He was hunched over the keyboard like a virtuoso, putting his shoulders into it as he thunder-tested the walls and knocked dust off the roof.

"What is that?" I asked Hong, who practically had his hair blown back.

Franz Liszt, he said with a look of surprise. A Liszt piano concerto.

When Mr. Ayers came up for air, Hong invited him to be his guest, along with McGuirk and me, for a chamber music performance Wednesday at Disney Hall. Hong will be playing Schubert's Piano Trio in B-flat major with pianist Yefim Bronfman and violinist Bing Wang.

Casey Horan, Shannon Murray and Patricia Lopez, all from Lamp, joined in the dedication of the studio, along with LAPD Officer Deon Joseph, and Horan took pictures. Mr. Ayers will share the studio with other musicians at Lamp but take the title of artist in residence. He thanked Horan for building it, and she thanked him for inspiring it.

The studio is actually a temporary space. Lamp is in the middle of a remodeling project and plans to build a bigger room for Mr. Ayers and other musicians. Mr. Ayers has said his goal is to play, take lessons and perhaps teach. He wants to be what he calls a music therapist, helping others find the peace music brings him.

In the interest of full disclosure, my editors have asked me to report that I'm nearing completion of a book on my two years with Mr. Ayers and the impact we've had on each other's lives. The book and my newspaper columns have been optioned by a movie studio that has also bought rights from Mr. Ayers.

I've used some of my proceeds to pay his legal fees and other costs, and to make donations to Lamp. I get frequent queries from readers wanting to know how to contribute to Mr. Ayers' welfare, as well as to the new studio, and such questions can be answered at <http://www.lampcommunity.org>.

Those who know about my book occasionally ask how it will end. I'm not sure yet, but I do know that from Mr. Ayers — who for a solid year resisted attempts by me and Lamp to get him off the street — I've learned patience and trust. More than ever, I count the health of loved ones a blessing, and I have a better appreciation of music and the healing properties of art.

I think the way this year has ended might make a good ending for the book. As I left the studio, I looked back through the window and briefly watched Mr. Ayers in his sanctuary, spirit intact, a year of new possibilities before him.