

*In this conversation, I talk with my grandmother, MG who was born in Colenso, South Africa in 1937. We discuss her first memories of dancing, the types of music she listened to and her relationship to playing the piano amongst other things. This conversation forms part of the ongoing artistic archival research project Tanz macht Glückliche.*

*To listen to this conversation, please go here:*

<https://soundcloud.com/nicola-van-straaten/tmg1-mg-im-still-dancing>

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"I'm still dancing"

M: Well, I know my first memories - I can't remember the first day I decided, but I know that as a little girl I wanted to dance. And I started taking dancing lessons. And then I said to my mom, "But I'd love to play music as well." So I started taking music lessons as well. And then my mom said to me - I have to choose. Either do the dancing or the music. And I just... I think, because the practical side of me said: with dancing I won't be able to get beyond a certain point, unless I'm really good. But music is something that I could do for the rest of my life. So for me, dancing and music have always been connected.

N: So you came into music through dance in a way?

M: Ja.

N: And this was... when you say you were a little girl...

M: Well, I was at school already. I must have been about eight, seven or eight. Round about '42, '43, 1943.

N: Okay. In Joburg?

M: Yes.

N: Okay. And when you said dancing lessons was that ballet lessons?

M: Ballet.

N: Okay. And then the instrument that you chose...

M: Piano and classical music. I took music lessons right through my [highschool].

N: And then tell me a bit about the... because I understand from that time there was a culture of social dances?

M: Oh, yes. Very much so. As a matter of fact, we didn't have... the only music that we had when we had parties, was live music, classical music. I mean, very few people had any kind of records that we could play.

But I was fortunate, I think, in that I couldn't play for parties because I didn't play jazz. I felt quite sorry for those who could play because they lost out, you know? They'd be sitting playing the piano the whole night and not really enjoying the party.

But when I started going to, when I started going to college, I decided that I was tired of classical music and I wanted to take what was then called syncopation, which is not quite jazz but it's rhythmic and all these modern songs, in those days, which I really loved. But I didn't continue with that very long either. And then unfortunately after I got married, somehow, I lost interest in playing the piano. So for a long time I didn't but I've always loved music.

N: Do you remember one or two titles of songs that were popular at the time when you were dancing?

M: Oh heavens, yes. There was jazz, which was just coming in. And of course with ballroom dancing, it was very much "in" - there was the samba, the rumba, the tango. Ja. So there was a good variety of music. Some of the melodies that I listen to now... 'Strangers in the Night', 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', 'Blue Moon' and even now when I listen to them, they are - it's still my favourite. Because I think it's romantic actually in that era.

N: When you listen to them now, what happens in your body?

M: There's definitely movement that goes with music. Definitely. And even though physically I can't do it anymore, in my mind I'm still dancing to music when I listen to it. Ja.

N: And so there was this period of taking a pause from...

M: Yes, becoming a wife and a mommy and so on. Yes.

N: And then did you re-enter into... did you re-find playing music again?

M: Well, then I was also virtually thrown in at the deep end with playing music in church, because the lady who used to play for the church, playing the piano, left and Christine [my daughter] wasn't there anymore. And actually, Christine was the one who influenced me and made me think about this, because I said to her - she said to me, 'Mom, you're going to have to start playing, because there's no one else to do it. And you can't sing in church if you haven't got a musical instrument.' So I said to her, 'Well, I am not going to play until I know every song that's sung.' So she gave a big sigh and she said, 'Well, then we're going to wait a long time for you.'

And then I one day saw an interesting plaque on a wall, which said: "God doesn't ask about your abilities. He asks about your availability." And I thought, I'm telling myself I am not able, but am I available? And I decided: Yes. And of course, then I started. And that love for music has just increased again, and I just love playing the piano. And of course, in our church, we don't play the traditional heavy, sad hymns.

N: So you were playing and there was a community of people singing with you?

M: Yes.

N: For me, it's like the instrument is carrying these voices.

M: Yes. Something else I'd like to say to you too, Nicky, is that as far as I'm concerned, I've never seen myself as a performer. I have never enjoyed sitting down and playing the piano and having people listen to me. I'd rather accompany. I used to love... if anybody... I had a friend who had a beautiful singing voice and whenever she performed I would love to accompany her. That was my passion, accompanying people.

N: So when you were a little girl, and you wanted to dance, it came from a desire to move.

M: Yes.

N: Not from a desire to perform.

M: Yes. I think if I had to be asked to do solo, I would have died. So even with ballet, it would be movement but with other people, never ever on my own.

N: The community, the social, the togetherness...

M: Yes. The social...

N: ...was an important part.

M: And I think that's what I loved as a teenager. In those days, you had nightclubs where it was solely music and ballroom dancing right through, and that was absolute fun. Because you'd go with your partner, but you would mix as well and dance with others.

N: And did you ever feel there was an element, maybe not of formal performance, but informal performance in the nightclubs? In terms of people seeing how you danced or...

M: No, never. I would be too self-conscious. If people stopped and started watching me then I would stop too. I would be too...

N: So help me understand these spaces, because it's just so different from my world. Everyone in the room was dancing and there was a band.

M: And there was a band.

N: So, no one was sitting on the sides watching.

M: You would occasionally... no, that was the exception. Only occasionally you'd find a couple perhaps who would feel too tired and they'd sit down, but when the music started, everyone got up to dance.

N: Okay. And then with the... when you started to accompany ballet classes?

M: Yes. I loved that too, because there was such a variety of classical music and every type of music you could think of. I mean, whatever the dance was, the music would have to fit it. The ballet teacher would choose the music and she would give me the music and I would practice it and then play it. And I really enjoyed that, as well.

I was focusing on the music, but I loved the fact that I was accompanying them while they were dancing. So to me, it's always been - music and movement have been together.

N: Could you feel when what you were playing was being interpreted?

M: Yes.

N: And how did that feel?

M: Um. I don't really know. I just know that with music, there's emotion in it. It's not just a physical thing you're doing; it's an emotional thing. And I believe that with dancing it's the same.

N: Could we say that there's a relationship between movement and your body and the emotions that you're experiencing?

M: Yes, especially when I'm listening to music. I would like to listen to music more than I actually do at the moment.

N: You feel it has a positive effect?

M: Oh, Absolutely. Yes. I saw a video clip once of elderly ladies, there weren't any men, old ladies in an old age home and they were dancing to music. Most of them had walkers, but that didn't hinder them. They'd twirl around with their walkers and I found it absolutely delightful. And I thought - I'd love to do that if I didn't have a sore knee, you know? But I think if I had to try and dance now I'd probably - if I stepped on my sore leg I'd fall over. But I'd love to do that.

But what we do, is we do exercises, as old ladies sitting in a chair, but they're good exercises and we do to music and that's what makes it enjoyable. We enjoy it, as old ladies, it's fun, we laugh at one another, and ja.

N: (Laughter)

C: Tell us about the ballroom dancing you and dad did.

M: Oh - we were taking ballroom lessons. And that was lovely. Because you felt that when you actually do go to a dance, it's somehow so satisfying to be able to really do a rumba to the music. You're not just trying, you know? Ja. It's... and again, I think it's the body movement is, you're actually interpreting the music that's how I've always seen it.

We used to go dancing a lot. They used to have big balls in Vryheid, you know, annually, there'd be events to try and raise funds. It was a means of fundraising, was that - because people love doing it. It was always full, you know? It was always popular. There was a big ball going on somewhere. There was always plenty of people there. It was really sociable. I think it was the main, the major part of my and dad's social life was that. I mean, even when you went out for house parties, you wouldn't just sit around and drink and chat like they do nowadays, you'd dance!

N: And you'd dance with someone.

M: Mh!

N: And you'd never danced alone?

M: No... no.

N: Do you miss it?

M: Yes. I think if I was still sturdy on my legs, I think I would, in my play - room dance. Because when you listen to music, even when I listen to music now, I can still, in my mind - I'm dancing. But music has always been more important to me than dancing. If I had to choose, I would still choose music.

N: It remains accessible to you.

M: Ja.

N: And you still play the piano now?

M: Ja.

N: Are you playing for the church services here?

M: Yes. And then I have been - lately, I haven't been doing it but I really am determined in my mind to get up in the afternoons and start playing some music, you know? But I play very softly because I think to myself - these poor people... There's always folk in the lounge in the afternoons, because they play cards. And I think to myself: It must be so boring for these people to hear me play a phrase over and over again while I'm practicing. And so I keep the soft pedal down and I try and play as softly as I can but every time I leave, somebody says. "Thank you!" You know? "We loved listening to that!" And sometimes I hear them humming along when I'm singing old songs, like 'Strangers in the Night' and so on. I can

hear them singing along with me so they're enjoying it. And I've decided I'm actually going to do it more because, I'm not bothering people. They're actually enjoying it. So.

One has to set goals for yourself, it doesn't matter how old you are. And I realized at the beginning of this year I need to set goals for myself again. That's the one and only one at the moment so far.

N: One is enough.

M: One is enough... (Laughter)