

UCSC Music Department Graduation Speech

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I'm honored by the invitation to give this year's Music Department commencement speech, and want to thank my chair and friend Dard Neumann for this opportunity. It's not the kind of thing that I do often, and it's a bit daunting. But it's also a rare occasion to talk to young musicians about things that — given the daily workings of our lives as faculty, students, and colleagues — we seldom get the chance to talk about.

Importantly, I want to express my personal appreciation to you — music students. You are largely to be thanked — or maybe blamed — for my being at UCSC in the first place. Like most of you, I've just completed my fourth year here. As some of you know, I was guest faculty here in 2011–12. One of the things that excited me most, when offered the permanent position I now occupy, was the undergraduates that I'd met, taught, and become close to during my visiting year. I was invigorated by their curiosity, intelligence, musicianship, energy and love for music. I was also moved and heartened by the sense of community I observed here, as well as the humility, dedication and integrity that the students brought to music-making. You all helped and supported each other in so many ways: *everyone seemed everywhere*. It was and is a community worth joining, and it helped me make the tough decision to pack up a life of 23 years on the east coast — no easy task — and start over at UCSC.

I'm glad I did. I will tell you that your energy, love of music, and the nurturing, fertile, energetic, creative and hard-working musical world that you create here is an inspiration not only to old composers like me, but, I think, to all of us on the faculty. Your curiosity drives and challenges us, your love of music constantly rekindles our own.

But I'm not here to flatter you. I'm here to give you some advice. And a heads-up.

Piece of advice number 1. You know that lounge space downstairs where you all hang out, lie around on the floor, talk about your classes, eat smelly things and make people step over you when they're carrying amplifiers and guitars? I don't know what you all call it, but I think of it as an *agora*, an old Greek word and idea, that of a public meeting space, where ideas and goods are freely exchanged. Admittedly, it's a pretty small agora, maybe we should call it an *agorita*!

Here's the advice: cherish that space, don't ever forget it. You have something special here, something that will be become endangered as you travel on in life. So, for the rest of your lives as musicians, or heck, whatever you become, recreate and nurture this "space" however you can. I don't mean to say that you should spend the rest of your life lying around outside Susan's office. I mean that a *hangout*, a *hallway*, a *place* where you go to be with others who share your goals, ideas, dreams, and problems, is one of the most important things for a musician to have. Maybe for anyone to have.

I know I sound a bit like the "Cheers" theme song (in fact, I grew up with the composer of that song, and once gave him a guitar lesson), but I'm not talking about the corner bar. The *agorita* is a metaphor. Not just a place, it is a *way of being and living*, helping and being helped by others, being interested in and interesting others, being known by and knowing others. Sadly, in fact, physical agorae (agoritas?) are increasingly rare—you might find them more commonly as virtual communities of musical friends and colleagues. But wherever you go after UCSC, find that "place," those people, that *way*. If you have to, *make it yourself*.

We musicians do something odd. The composer James Tenney, who was my teacher here in the 1970s, said "every now and then humans get together for no apparent reason, to vibrate the air." We love doing that, and as musicians, we know why we do it. I often tell my students who stare at computers all day: "Music is made by people, and more importantly, with people." We need to *be* with, and *vibrate the air with* others.

Piece of advice number two. Know that music is cool, beautiful, fun, and somehow made sacred by the fact that there's no known human culture that doesn't do it. For many of you, as for me, it's far and away the coolest thing one could do with one's life. You may look around you and see others making lots of money, having steady jobs, and even doing all sorts of ultra-cool things of their own. But I would venture to say that many of them wish they were you, at least with regards to music. You know that guy who just solo climbed El Capitan without ropes? That is certainly one of the most amazing (not to mention stupidest) things a human could do (note to all of you: don't do that!). But I bet he wishes he could play guitar like Janet. And some Silicon Valley startup dude with umpteen-bazillion dollars? He probably dreams about playing vibes like Henry, or being able to sing like Madi, play the fiddle like Catherine and Ben, the horn like Camelia. Have *no* qualms about spending your life devoted to the fascinating thing called music, in whatever way you choose. It's not important how you do it, — you might become a performer, composer, historian, critic, circuit builder, programmer, luthier, piano tuner, teacher, or several of those. They are all musicians. The world may let you down variously and often, but music won't. If you let it, it will remain mysterious, difficult, intoxicating, frustrating, cathartic and transcendent as long as you live.

Now the “heads-up.” Your world, sometimes including those closest to you, may not make your path easy. They may not understand. Sometimes things for you will be an uphill slog. Your life might often seem to you like you're playing with a bass player who's way behind the beat, or for a conductor whose beat 1 looks exactly like their beats 2, 3, and 4. Or perhaps like listening to a music professor use too many dopey musical metaphors.

Be stubborn, stick with it, stamina means a lot. To my mind the definition of a successful musician is someone who's still a musician. An older composer, once asked by a student, “How do I know if I should become a composer?” answered: “Do you have a choice? If not, you should be a composer.” Many of you know in your hearts that you have no choice, as I did when asked *that* question by *that* composer. You may have known it, like I did, when you first put your hands on a guitar, held a bow, made your first non-flatulent

tone on a sax or trumpet, sang in harmony with someone, wrote your first tune, or made some circuit squeak awkwardly to sonic life. You may have discovered your passion here at UCSC, and if so, it means we're doing our job.

There's just one more thing I want to talk about. This is your "commencement." You're *starting* your lives. Maybe think about life like a jazz musician. Be creative: in your music try to *add something* to music, if even the tiniest bit. Listen to the rhythm section and make sure *they* know you're listening to them. Know how to both solo and accompany, keeping in mind that the most important thing a musician can do — or a person can do — is make those around them sound better.

More or less 40 years ago today, I was, like you, graduating from UCSC as a music student. It was the seventies, so things were a bit different. For example we didn't have a music graduation, students graduated with their colleges. I had a job in the Merrill College dining room as a dishwasher, and, because I needed the money or have a natural disinclination towards ceremony (probably both), I didn't attend my own graduation at Stevenson College. It's taken me a while, but I've finally made it to one, and I'm happy to be here.

40 years is a long time — who knows what the world has in store for any of us. 40 years from now, one of *you* might be telling a group of young excited graduates what you think you've learned over the course of your life. I hope that many of you, like me, will be able to be proud of the 40 years you will have spent dancing and battling with the crazy imps and gods of music.

Thank you, and good luck to you all.