

Chapter One

HEAR THE SILENCE

There they stood waving goodbye to me. My dad, step mom, step-sisters, brother and my dog Blicky. This was a feeling I never knew. I was excited, I was scared, I was overjoyed, I was sad. I was leaving for my first day at Berklee College of Music in Boston Massachusetts.

I was a lucky guy. My parents took my brother and I to Miami, Florida many times to avoid the New York Weather in January. I had traveled to England, Paris, and Amsterdam at the age of 16 on a school exchange program. I had done a little traveling around in bands, even though I was underage. I had been to Rhode Island, also because of a school exchange program. Yes I had been more places than many of my peers by this age of 18.

I had never gone anywhere where I would make the decisions, buy the furniture, find new friends, and make a living. I had never driven my own car to a place as far away as Boston, a 4 ½ hour ride. I had never been to a place I was going to call home without having my father, brother and dog by my side. The first year of Berklee you either had to live on Campus or live with family locally. Fortunately my aunt Elsie and Uncle Harry had invited me to live with them in their home in Brockton, Massachusetts, about 45 minutes from Boston and school.

I could see my father crying but he had already talked to me about this trip. He told me that it was my time to fly, and though he didn't like it, he was proud of me. He took the time to tell me that he would be just a phone call away, and then he warned me about the dangers of being a musician in 1977. You know the drugs, the girls etc. Of course I already knew about all of that, but I

listened with respect. God, was I gonna miss him. He was an amazing friend, partner (we wrote music together) and father. And for the first time I'd be without my best friend, my brother, Randy.

I turned the key in my new Dodge Colt that I purchased for what seems to be nothing compared to today's prices. And with a last wave, a kiss from dad, I was off for the adventure of my life.

Everything was amazing to me. The radio in my car suddenly changed from the New York stations I was so used to Connecticut radio. The license plates changed. Even the air changed. With every turn I saw something I had never seen. My mind was racing with colors, sounds, and dreams. Would I meet some cool musicians in Boston? Would I become famous, or more like, when would I become famous?

What would it be like without my dog? How would I get along with my uncle and aunt whom I only knew from special holidays like weddings? Would I like Boston? The question wasn't what was I gonna do today or tomorrow, but what would I do the next second or even millisecond. The world was mine, all mine, and nobody would be there to tell me what to do. I was free. Free to find myself, my future, my likes and dislikes.

This experience influenced me so much that to this very day, when I am taking a trip, or going to work in another state or country my excitement is hard to explain. It is an amazing, joyful, stimulant. Just making reservations on the Internet for travel, makes me smile. As the day of departure approaches, it's as if the clock is a bother. I want it to be the day of my trip. I want it to be the 2 hours I need to be at the airport before a flight that is going to take me to my new adventure.

The trip to Boston is incredible. I even enjoy talking to the dozen or so toll booth operators on the 95 going through Connecticut. I drive through Providence, Rhode Island, surprised how quickly I get through the city limits. A mere two hours later I am sitting at dinner at my relative's house.

If they had known how much I ate before moving, I wonder if they would have taken me in. It got to the point that on Thanksgiving they ordered an extra turkey just for me. The apothecary jars filled with M and M's and cookies suddenly had to be filled daily. They joked about it with me constantly. It's only now that I realize I was like a human garbage can. I ate these people out of house and home.

The day after I arrived it was orientation day at Berklee. I got directions to the city, and I began my journey to my future.

Upon arriving on Boylston Street in Boston I saw the Berklee sign, which I had only seen in the catalog. This was the best music school in the world. This was the coolest school in the world. They taught how to arrange, produce, compose, play and make a living, and their focus was Jazz and Rock, not the stuffy training I could have gotten at Julliard or Manhattan School of Music, or Boston Conservatory.

All around me were hundreds of long haired guys carrying guitars and basses. It looked like a parade. There were pretty girls everywhere also carrying instruments. I was amazed to see so many musicians, and I was home. I was with people that completely understood me. I was with people that had the same dream. I was with people that cared about music, not their bills or their job. I looked up to the sky and on my

way out of my car I screamed, "WOW! Thank you GOD!!!!"

I walked into the main Berklee building and was told that I was to play guitar for my intake on the guitar floor, which was floor no 5. I walked into a room greeted by a pretty young guy behind a desk that was holding a guitar. This was a teacher? A guy with an electric guitar plugged into a Fender Amp. This was total heaven!!!

The recently graduated teacher put some music in front of me and asked me to read the melody. I was a real good music reader so with my cocky attitude I began to read and play the song at twice the tempo that was written on the sheet music. I was very proud of myself. That was until the teacher pointed out that I had played the entire song in the wrong key. I had forgotten the f sharp that is always in the key of G. Boy did I feel like a moron.

He continued with me checking my chords, my technique etc. Then we jammed. Yes he called a song and we took turns playing the solos and the chords. I couldn't believe it, He was really stiff. His solos sounded like solos from my students back in Long Island. Could this be happening? Was this to be my college teacher? What could I say? Who could I turn to without sounding like the snob of the year?

I asked if there was a supervisor and was told the chairman of the guitar department was a man named William Leavitt. He was in room 5k and I would need an appointment after I got settled in my classes. In true Jamie style I didn't want to wait. I walked up to his door.

I really didn't have the nerve to knock though I wanted to. Suddenly the door to 5k opened and this guy with

hair down to his backside walks out. I look in and right before the door shut, I almost shout “Mr. Leavitt?”

The door opens and there he is Mr. Bill Leavitt, The man who would change my life forever. This man standing in front of me would guide me, and become a substitute for my father’s love.

Bill Leavitt, was a chain smoking middle aged man that had played with the original NBC orchestra, had played on all the major radio and TV jingles and a great composer and arranger. It’s because of him that I followed the path to a composition degree rather than a guitar performance degree. He was my influence, and my mentor. I wanted to be like him, I wanted to please him. I explained to Bill about my intake test and carefully told him I thought I could do better than the guy who called himself teacher. Bill sitting down, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth says, “O.K Jamie, play for me! Show me what you got!”

I am suddenly scared out of my wits but I get the guitar out and play some Jazz and a song I wrote with my dad. I even sing for Mr. Leavitt. I fully expect that Bill is going to pick up his 1952 D’angellico guitar and start correcting me, but he never plays a note. In fact in the 4 years following he only picked up his guitar 2 times to show me a position, he never played for me.

Bill smiles and asks, “Jamie, how would you like to study with *me*?” I almost couldn’t find the air to breathe...“Oh my god, Yes PLEASE MR Leavitt!”

My relationship with Bill Leavitt was one that is hard to put into words. But I will say if Guardian Angels are for real, he is the greatest of ‘em all. He protected me, taught me, guided me, and loved me. He and I shared something that is surprisingly rare among

musicians...WE LOVED MUSIC. We knew that music was a force, where each note was like a word, that each word created a sentence and that it all ended up being heard by GOD. We knew that people (even musicians) didn't understand the mystery of the blessing of music. We felt special and somewhat alone in the knowledge that music is GOD himself. And we both wanted so badly for others to understand what we knew; what I still know.

About 6 months into guitar lessons I began to play a progressive new kind of music. The music was called Fusion, or Jazz Fusion. It was a music that guitar players loved. Although at that time I credited YES, Genesis, ELP and others with this style I know now that it was Miles Davis and people like Chick Corea and Jean Luc Ponty who were pioneering the music I was getting into.

Bill suggested that as he was very conservative in his tastes, he wanted me to have an additional lesson with another teacher. He would not tell the Berklee administration that I would have an extra lesson each week, and I was not to tell either, as he could get fired.

I kinda didn't want another teacher but gave in. I was to have an additional lesson with some new progressive guy named John Damien. I started to hear stories about this guy. He was a little weird. He was very weird. He was a great player.

I walk around the corridor of the 5th floor trying to not slide on residual snow left in the hallways from people's shoes. Walking by young guys figuring out Hendrix riffs on their guitars, the hallway smelt like a combination of Lysol, cigarettes and marijuana. I get to this little corner room and knock on the door. This guy with long black

hair, a beard and a giant, (I mean *giant*) smile opens the door.

“Jamie?” He asks.

“Yes”, I respond “John?”

“Yes” he answers, “Come on in man!!”

What the heck was this guy about? He had posters of musicians I’ve never heard of on the wall. His desk had loose sheets of manuscript paper on it where he was obviously writing music or arrangements with a pencil. There was a guitar on a stand and an amp buzzing in the corner. I don’t even think he cared that the amp was making noise, I think it soothed him.

John says to me, I’m gonna turn the lights off now.

Did I just hear my teacher of 2 minutes say he was gonna turn off the lights? What was he a murderer or a rapist, some sort of weirdo?

Was this guy gay? (All that homosexual stuff was totally new to me). What the hell was about to happen? After he shuts off the amp, he does in fact turn off the lights and says Jamie please relax. Yeah right, I’m thinking, watching his hands. This is too weird!

“What do you hear?” he asks

I say, “I hear nothing!!”

John asks “What do you hear? Listen closely”

I say “John, it is quiet, there is no noise!”

Just then I hear a door slam in the background... “John, I heard a door slam!” I say.

“Good job, Jamie, relax what else do you hear?”

And suddenly it all became clear ...

“John, I hear a bus going by, there is a toilet flushing, someone just cursed in the hallway, isn’t that a guitar playing a country lick? I hear the sounds of the florescent lights, I hear you breathing John, and I hear my heart beating!

“Very good Jamie, very good”

“These are all sounds you said weren’t here a minute ago. Jamie they are *all* here. Life, love and music are made from rhythms and sounds that you find, create, and hear in the silence. Silence is one of the loudest sounds known to man.”

He continued telling me he would teach me to notice these sounds, to know how to find them, to use them musically and in my life.

It is because of this incredible lesson with Mr. John Damien that I am writing this book. I believe it is this lesson that has given me a life like few others. I believe this lesson has given me a career like few others. And most importantly it is this lesson that got me through my horrible, painful experience with Bi-Polar disorder.

My friends, open your ears. If it is happiness you are looking for it *is* out there. All the magic and beauty of life is there, waiting for you. If it is health you are looking for, it is there for the taking. If you are disabled, everything that is enabling is right at your fingertips. Every answer to every question is there. It’s always there! Use it, it’s there as a gift for you and me.

Learn to ‘Hear the Silence’ and you will learn one of the greatest secrets there are to enlighten and fulfill your life!!