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Practice, practice

Even with an award-winning medical career, Stanley Sagov always makes time for his music



As a jazz pianist, Stanley Sagov spends most of his time in his home studio; as a doctor, he meets with patients. (Josh Reynolds for the Boston Globe)

By Tom Haines

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Stanley Sagov, family doctor and jazz pianist, begins a beat on the kitchen table with his hand: Wham.

Over a dinner of homemade curry, Sagov has just turned talk toward the urgent interplay between rhythm and harmony in jazz.

"It's like what the rhythm says to the body is, 'Now! This is happening now!' " Sagov says.

Wham!

"You know?" Wham!

"Not another time." Wham!

"Right now." Wham!

Sagov, 64, who by day practices family medicine in Arlington and teaches students, residents, and fellows from four Massachusetts medical schools, is in the midst of his own compelling "right now" musical moment. After years of self-chosen rhythmic solitude, he has assembled a band of prominent musicians that includes, among others, drummer Bob Moses and flutist, saxophonist, and singer Stan Strickland. They have recorded two albums - dynamic, largely unrehearsed improvisations of classics, Sagov originals, and South African songs - and will perform Tuesday at Scullers Jazz Club.

For Sagov the jazz pianist, the collaboration is about the joy of jamming, to be sure, but also about expressing an optimism that transcends music.

"It's saying, 'Here's this representation of how it could be,' across cultures in the case of jazz," Sagov says, "where we listen to each other and we end up with something more powerful, more synergistic, more moving, more sexy, more intriguing, than anything that could have been done if we stayed in our little boxes."

On a recent weekday morning in Arlington, Sagov, the family doctor, leans against an examining table at Family Practice Group, which he founded more than 30 years ago, and he listens to a woman who has fought breast cancer and faces uncertain troubles from diabetes. They talk of past surgeries and current medication, and Sagov says, "The other thing is your mood. Chronic depression. The employment thing . . ."

She nods.

"I feel a little bit more energy," she tells Sagov. "I've been taking the dog to the park."

Then it is on to a young man who arrived with a violin case - he plays mostly fiddle music these days, he says - and explains that a rash has spread. Sagov examines him, then, hands clasped, looks the young man in the eyes and explains that even with ointment the rash will take time to clear. He turns to a computer and types in hunt-and-peck fashion what he has found, then gently asks about the breakup of the patient's parents, whom Sagov also knows.

"Do you want my two cents?" Sagov asks.

He encourages the young man to open a dialogue. The son does not need to accept what he hears, or even believe it. But such a conversation, Sagov says, could lead to deeper understanding of a difficult situation.

I'm very optimistic that truth creates possibilities," Sagov tells him.

Starting a musical, medical path

When Sagov talks, whether about medicine or music or life, his voice is soft and sure, often delivering evolving sentences that occasionally end in a slight gasp, as though he has given all. His gray-bearded face is welcoming of the world. Yet, seen in profile, it stares sharply into it. There is something in this - an openness to engage, and a confidence to challenge - that seems to define Sagov and his medical and musical passions that have spanned a lifetime, yet thrive in the moment.

It is like this over the dinner he cooked in his Chestnut Hill home, when conversation turns toward his native South Africa. Sagov was born in Cape Town to Jewish parents whose families had emigrated from Russia to the tip of a new continent. Though he suffered from Gordon syndrome, a skeletal condition that requires major surgeries through adolescence, as a teenager Sagov took up photography and began capturing vivid black-and-white portraits of joys and sorrows of life under apartheid: a black man holding a guitar on the side of an empty road; well-dressed whites passing before a palm tree; two barefoot children standing behind a chain-link gate, and two others hawking newspapers.

Sagov started playing violin at age 6 and later, during a year recovering from surgery in London, learned guitar, which he played in a popular Cape Town band covering Little Richard songs and more. When Sagov was 16, the band pianist got sick, and so he sat in to play hits by Jerry Lee Lewis. Like that he was off for years wandering from Cape Town cafes to clubs in Johannesburg and in the black townships, along the way playing with the likes of pianist Dollar Brand (now known as Abdullah Ibrahim), singer Miriam Makeba, saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, and many more.

It was an individual adventure.

"I'd wake up with broken glass under the piano and not sure how I got there, you know," Sagov says. "Drugs, sex, and jazz. It was wild."

And it was a chance to challenge cultural conventions.

Jazz "had this moral dimension to it, this political dimension to it, that was about integration," Sagov says. "It was about white and black coming together to do something that wasn't apartheid, that wasn't about oppression, that wasn't about pejorative distinctions between people on grounds of their color or anything else about them."

Sagov simultaneously studied in medical school at the University of Cape Town. Then, as thousands were leaving South Africa in protest, to avoid persecution, or to find a better scene, Sagov in 1967 followed his dueling beats to New York's hospitals and jazz clubs. "I used to go to lectures and type my notes, and if I was working in hospitals, do my shift," Sagov says, "and then I would hang out almost exclusively with musicians and philosophers and poets and street people, and I needed . . . that other part of the human expressive range that is different than science and service and a particular kind of formal discipline."

He moved to Boston, where he studied jazz piano and oboe at New England Conservatory, graduating in 1973. But a desire for family and a disdain for life on the road helped solidify a decision to join the emerging family practice program at Harvard Medical School. In the decades since, Sagov has treated families from across the state, including some who have moved away, yet return just for his care. In

2002 he was honored as Family Physician of the Year by the Massachusetts Academy of Family Physicians, and three years later was inducted into the academy's teaching hall of fame.

Staying busy in the home studio

On a Thursday evening, Sagov is home in Chestnut Hill after another day at the office and settled in a makeshift recording studio upstairs from the kitchen. It is cluttered and cramped. On the shelf are stacked manuals, including "Home Recording for Musicians." On one wall, a poster advertises a "Sagov" concert, in 1976, at the Boston Center for the Arts. On another wall, a copy of Cape Times Magazine, from 1966, features Sagov photographs: a woman brooding, boys eating sugar cane, people gathered for drinks at an outdoor bar.

During the past two decades, Sagov has played the occasional wedding or bar mitzvah, for friends, and the annual staff party of Mount Auburn Hospital. But Sagov has made most of his music in the home studio, using electronic keyboards and computer programs to play everything from penny whistle to piano on dozens of self-produced solo albums. One five-song collection, dated Jan. 1, 2000, is titled "One for the Millennium: Monk, Miles, McFarland, Mingus and Me." (His record label: Try This at Home.)

As Sagov turns to his computer, his wife, Elivia, and daughter, Sadye, settle in a room next door to watch political speeches.

Sagov searches iTunes and plays "Country Cooking," by South African pianist and composer Chris McGregor. He clicks again and goes back to the 1950s with "Kwela Claude," by Spokes Mashiyane, a South African penny whistle player and master of kwela, the street music that Sagov heard as a child.

The speakers pulse as notes trip and skip one upon another. Sagov's eyes squeeze shut, his head rocks, and his foot keeps a heavy beat. His cheeks crease and release, his lips purse then smile, and suddenly, on hearing a particular note, his eyes spring open and brows arch, as if to say, "cool, eh?"