*Thanks to Karen, Oliver, my co-panelists and the rest of you who’ve mounted PopCon in a cloud this year. I’m two weeks into my own remote public school teaching in Chicago and it has been an emotional, often brutal lift. The ideas on this panel are reminders of why teachers teach, gratefully.*

**High School, Musical**

School is not the paradisiacal, nurturing place it imagines itself to be. Even gritty depictions of schools as fraught urban hellholes imply they are only failed examples, fallen short of the noble ideal. But schools are in their essential nature scary, *designed* as sites of risk. We rub shoulders there with people from other demographics, cultures, belief systems. This is the only cultural institution (other than dance floors maybe) where encountering the other is inherent to the program. This is one reason schools are the sites with the most potential to foment democracy. And it is why they are risky as fuck.

Here are stories of three music teachers and their students, and a theory about the roles of both. The first teacher was my own, at Lincoln Park High School in Chicago in the 80s. Norman Malone: battered as a youth in an incident by his father, paralyzed, able to use only one hand, his concert pianist dream derailed, he had a fantastic career developing others’ potential as a music teacher in Chicago public high schools for over twenty years. At Lincoln Park, he championed inclusion intentionally by developing the most racially mixed choir in the city. Now, in retirement, he has returned to his first love, taking up classical recitals once more, playing pieces composed for one hand. His experiences as teacher and student offer lessons in surmounting childhood trauma.

Malone as student:

* Was assessed by the state after the accident for musical aptitude and was found to be only average so there was no readily available piano instruction available to him although he craved to continue. Walked up and down Michigan Avenue looking for a teacher to take him on.
* At Spaulding, the only CPS school for students with disabilities, bused in from all over, they would only let the cream of the crop take General Music, so he lobbied and advocated for himself for three years until finally Senior year he was allowed to take it. Felt he “had arrived.”
* Worked up a difficult, 20-page Bartok piece for audition at DePaul University and that’s what got him in.
* Took NINE YEARS to finish college b/c he had no financial aid/scholarship -- worked full time and took classes at night. Changed jobs within the company for a year, working in the mailroom at night so he could take the classes that were only offered in daytime.
* In one of his last classes, a music education class, the teacher pulled him aside and said, “What makes you think you can teach? How will you get around, walk up stairs? I didn’t know what to say, I just moved on.”

How do children learn in actively antagonistic academic settings?Malone did, and others can, by ripping the music curriculum and resources from off the pedestal, liberating it for themselves.

Of the theorists who’ve shaped my own teaching, two shed particular insight on these stories: Homi Bhaba (unspoken marginalizing classroom power dynamics). Jacques Rancière: Education need not be held by self-styled experts. Education can be a teach-in of peers, co-constructing knowledge for practical use in order to apply it to our lives. In his brilliant *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* he “recount[ed] the story of Joseph Jacotot, a schoolteacher [who developed] a method for showing illiterate parents how they themselves could teach their children to read,” and railed against French schools whose “working class students [are] excluded from the bourgeois system of favors and privileges.”

And another Chicago high school music teacher: Walter Dyett at (mostly African-American) DuSable, from 1935, where he taught Bo Diddley, Nat King Cole, Dinah Washington, Redd Foxx, Joseph Jarman from AACM, several guys in the Sun Ra Arkestra, etc!

From a Dyett obit by Richard Grossman in the Chicago Tribune:

*“Under Dyett's baton, DuSable became a mecca for teenage jazz lovers.*

*"Everybody in Chicago who had an instrument and wanted to play music back then tried their best to get into DuSable," tenor saxophonist Von Freeman recalled.*

*Once they realized the school was a treasure chest of talent, Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway regularly visited DuSable, looking for sidemen for their bands.*

*Dyett's annual announcement to freshmen was like that of an Army drill sergeant addressing a boot camp platoon. No one dared address him as anything but Capt. Dyett, his rank as director of the 8th Infantry Regiment Band of the Illinois National Guard.*

*"You won't remember your English teacher," he told students. "You won't remember your chemistry teacher. But you will remember me."*

*"He broke many a baton," said Von Freeman. "He had one glass eye, his left eye, and he would put that eye on you and occasionally bop you with that baton and it meant: Toughen up."*

*Breaking into the music business isn't easy, and Freeman recalled how right Dyett was to have hammered home that lesson. Dyett considered tough love the best way to inspire children to find an escape from poverty and prejudice. If a teenager initially went up a blind alley, moaning and groaning didn't help. Looking for another route could.*

Incidentally, Rancière doesn’t dismiss the value of the schoolmaster in the equation, raising the agency of the student and calling for a destratifying of the “master’s” role. Dyett was a drill sergeant, but also sympathetic to and an advocate for students in a way that distinguishes him from, say, Terence Fletcher, the drum teacher in the film *Whiplash.*

*Dyett had a motto about not letting other people dictate what you can or cannot do. A mantra that his students heard, day in and day out: "You are what you think you are."*

Another music teacher: Jimmy Hamilton taught band and music in Mpls public schools for 28 years. At Central High, Prince took the same Music Business class with instructor Hamilton three times in a row. Toure’s Prince book *I Would Die 4 U* says the class “covered contracts, copyrights, demo tapes and more, which Hamilton had learned working with Ray Charles.” There’s also a story that teachers would let him into the music room at lunchtime and lock the doors so he could stay and practice. Hamilton: “I tried to introduce music theory and the business of music,” he recalled. His advice: “find the inner urge to practice-practice-practice.”

This matches the findings of research professor Peter Gray: schools stifle, and the kids who lean in to other resources (including innate drive and passionate interest) succeed. This primacy of passionate interest for the self-directed educational project is echoed in Malone’s and Prince’s tenacity as well as Dyett’s and Hamilton’s beliefs. And in Jacotot’s discovery that Flemish students were willing to teach themselves French to comprehend a text he’d suggested, causing him to wonder, “Was wanting all that was necessary for doing?”