



# A Pianist's Final Piece: DeWitt's Descent

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HE had marvelous hands, magical hands. DeWitt White grew up poor in a Bronx neighborhood where piano lessons, not to mention pianos, were in short supply. But at 12, he discovered classical music and a prodigious talent for playing it.

By 15, he had played in student performances at Carnegie Hall, Columbia University, the New York Botanical Garden, performed so beautifully that he silenced and shamed those who judged him by his baggy jeans, his wild hair, his dark skin. He was raw, but his playing had a power, a passion, that portended greatness.

In school, he lacked discipline; at the piano, he could sit for seven hours straight. Through music he escaped troubles at home, troubles at school; he made sense of a world that seemed profoundly unfair. He had been born into a hard life, and in his teens, when his mother sickened and died, it only got harder.

He had a spark that prompted teachers, friends and counselors to reach out to him. One teacher said he made her believe in God: how else to explain a wellspring of beauty from such barren terrain? His talent, they thought, would be enough to save him from the drugs, violence and hopelessness that suck young black males in like a black hole. He believed it too. Music, he said, would be his way out of the ghetto.

At some point, he stopped believing. Most of the plagues of New York City -- AIDS, homelessness, drugs, violence -- came to roost, like crows, in DeWitt's life. In the last year, he became an itinerant, bouncing from borough to borough like a pinball, like nobody's business, which is just what he was.

The Monday before Thanksgiving found DeWitt, at 17, selling drugs on a desolate Staten Island street. Before midnight, he was dead of a gunshot wound in the back, one of the city's 767 homicides last year, one of 15 in the 120th Precinct.

DeWitt White fell through the cracks. For a parentless child, being loved by everyone could not compensate for belonging to no one. The system could not substitute for family. From one perspective, if anyone should have made it, it was DeWitt. He did not take every opportunity offered; he made bad choices. But from another, he was selecting from a limited menu.

"In our community," said one of DeWitt's former teachers, Gordon Walker, who is black, "there is more opportunity to do damage to yourself and others than there is to do creative work." For DeWitt, rising was hard. Falling was easy.

He was born on Aug. 21, 1980. His father was not around, never would be. His mother, Denise, had a hard life, a stew of poverty, abuse, teen motherhood, aborted education, drugs, and eventually AIDS.

The family -- Denise, DeWitt, and his sisters Shanequa and Kamitra -- lived in small Bronx apartments. They were poor and dogged by instability. At 15, DeWitt's older sister, Shanequa, moved out. DeWitt talked little about his home life, but his behavior told a story. By third grade, he was in special education classes at P.S. 86 in the Bronx. By sixth grade, he was frustrated, fighting and on the verge of expulsion.

A teacher named Robert Pape offered to take DeWitt in his regular sixth-grade class. Surrounded by bright, motivated students, DeWitt settled in and settled down. Time revealed two DeWitts: one frustrated, distracted, disruptive; the other focused, engaged, well behaved. Which one emerged seemed to depend on whether he felt loved and understood.

In Mr. Pape's class, he demonstrated precocious esthetic intelligence. He awed a Whitney Museum curator with his observations about art during a class field trip. When the class learned the basics of music, he elaborated on the simple tunes and became a regular at the class keyboard center.

Mr. Pape tried to have DeWitt decertified as a special education student; the Board of Education said no. DeWitt went on to Intermediate School 137, and back to the frustration and fights.

"I used to call his mother every day when he was acting up," said his teacher, Sellis Robertson. " 'Get over here before I kill him,' " he would say, and she would come.

His mother, by all accounts, tried, both in her own life and DeWitt's. She furthered her own education, taught him manners. When he heard a boy play the piano and it struck a chord, she got him a Casio keyboard.

He taught himself to play classical music on the Casio, and he played incessantly. It sometimes drove Denise White crazy.

"Get yourself some earplugs," a friend, Marjorie Joffe told her. "That music is going to save him."

### The Discovery Of a Prodigy

Mrs. Joffe took him to Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center in Williamsbridge, founded to give Bronx children artistic opportunities.

Walter Grandberry, a classical musical teacher, quickly discovered 13-year-old DeWitt -- taciturn, self-taught, on scholarship -- playing remarkable pieces by ear. Mr. Grandberry became his teacher, mentor, friend, and as close to a father as he would ever have. "It became apparent that he needed more than lessons," Mr. Grandberry said. "He needed guidance, positive influences."

He taught DeWitt, and took him to concerts and to films about music. They talked over the German composers whose biographies DeWitt had memorized.

DeWitt's absorption was total. He "borrowed" bags of music from the Lincoln Center library. He composed, imitating Beethoven and Bach; he would improvise on the piano, then write in pen, scratching out changes like Beethoven, whom he worshiped. He identified with the strength and defiance embodied in his music. He said he was Beethoven reincarnated.

He would play until the doors were locked at night. If he could not practice piano every day, he said, he did not want to practice at all. "He did not want to reveal himself to his public unless he was perfect," Mr. Grandberry said. DeWitt wore praise uncomfortably, resisted taking bows at concerts.

Other children aspired to his dry wit, his cool appearance -- endlessly varying hairstyles, the latest in hip-hop fashions -- and especially his talent. Yery Acosta, a shy Dominican immigrant, now 14, said he would sit outside the room where DeWitt was practicing and just listen to his playing.

During his three summers at Summerbridge, an academic enrichment program for disadvantaged middle schoolers on the grounds of Riverdale Country Day School, he carried sheet music around, telling teachers he had to "catch up."

"I'll fill the place with music," he wrote in an application to Summerbridge's ninth grade program. He taught music theory to younger students. They adored him.

"I think he was most happy when he was playing," said Loren Swan, a Summerbridge student. "That's when he came alive." You could see the stress leaving him, his sister Shanequa said.

DeWitt took a few lessons from Marya Sielska, a master piano teacher who had been Mr. Grandberry's teacher for decades. On one of the three pianos in her Upper West Side apartment, DeWitt practiced Beethoven's achingly lovely "Pathetique" Sonata. DeWitt, she said, "was electric."

When he played, he blotted out the world, but away from the piano, the blotting was trickier. He was clearly intelligent but at Summerbridge, as in public school, he was chronically disorganized, often disruptive, behind in writing and in study skills, in need of attention.

Home was chaotic, not least because Denise White had contracted HIV. "There were days you could tell so much was going on outside of class that the mere fact he showed up," after taking two trains and a bus, "was his accomplishment for the day," said Gordon Walker, who taught him at Summerbridge. He never seemed to know where he was going after class, recalled Michelle Harris, then Summerbridge's dean of faculty. To his mother's? His sister's? Nowhere?

DeWitt began attending Evander Childs High School, a large inner-city school in the Bronx. Despite reading and math scores above grade level, he was still in special education, classified as emotionally disturbed. He was placed in several mainstream classes but would not do the work.

His mother was dying in front of his eyes. When she accompanied her son to open school week at Evander in the fall of 1994, she looked ill, recalled Isabel Scherz, his guidance counselor. Most children were embarrassed of their parents; DeWitt was delighted his mother was with him.

In December, she died. DeWitt, 15, was at Mind-Builders when he heard. The normally stoic boy cried. Family members said that he had argued with his mother before she died, that he felt guilty. A light seemed to have gone out in him. "It was like he couldn't live anymore," said his aunt Laura. "He lost interest in everything."

Soon after her death, he auditioned at La Guardia High School for Music, Art, and the Performing Arts, where his idol, Mr. Grandberry, had gone to school. He was accepted musically, but not academically: his school record was littered with failures and absences. Letters were written -- by Mr. Grandberry and other teachers -- appealing for an exception. "We moved heaven and earth to get him in," Ms. Scherz said.

DeWitt was victimized by a society with too narrow a definition of intelligence, said Myron Weiss, who taught music history at Evander Childs and also appealed to La Guardia on DeWitt's behalf. "Imagine a Beethoven or Bach sonata all in your head and being able to sit down and reproduce it at concert tempo, at 15," Mr. Weiss said. "That requires a massive brain."

La Guardia said that unless he could bring his grades up, the answer was no. The school no longer has records on DeWitt, but Elliott Salow, the assistant principal for guidance, said the school's admissions guidelines, which mandate "satisfactory academic standing," are set by the state. Besides, he said, students have a full schedule of academics and studio work. "There is no time in the kids' program for remediation," he said.

Disappointment draped around DeWitt like a fog. He didn't understand why he couldn't go, when he knew he was talented. Academics were not going to save him, music was. Hadn't Beethoven left school at 11?

After DeWitt's mother's death, his little sister, Kamitra, went to live with their aunt Laura. Laura would not take DeWitt. "I've got four children of my own," she said. "There's not too much I could do."

That left DeWitt's older sister, Shanequa, then 22, a tall, beautiful girl who had seen her own share of hardship and was still struggling to find her own way, working job upon job and still barely making the rent. She took temporary custody of DeWitt.

The Marshals Come; A World Disintegrates

DeWitt continued playing, but his world was disintegrating. In school, his concentration diminished. Then, in summer 1996, he and Shanequa were evicted. In the process, the marshals took everything, including DeWitt's music and compositions. "I didn't even follow up to get it back," Shanequa said. "I just moved on."

They landed at a homeless shelter. Shanequa eventually went to stay with friends. DeWitt, with his knapsack, went to Mr. Grandberry and stayed in his elegant Harlem apartment, with a piano in one room, a small Buddhist shrine in the next. He then stayed with Mind-Builders' executive director, Camille Akeju, then with her neighbor. "He was a model guest," Mr. Grandberry said. "Kind, a gentleman, fun to be with."

Worried that DeWitt would end up in a group home for teen-agers, Mr. Grandberry found DeWitt a potential foster family connected to Mind-Builders. Shanequa rejected the offer, saying DeWitt didn't want to live with a stranger.

Shanequa found an apartment with room for DeWitt, but in their relationship, love and friction elbowed for space. She had told Camille Akeju once that she was a young woman with her own life to live, that it was unfair that she had to care for DeWitt.

They fought, a lifetime of small resentments providing kindling. "My mother treated him special, because he was the only boy," Shanequa said. "He got everything. We had to wait." He was spoiled, she said. "He didn't want to do anything, he didn't go to school. He just wanted to eat, sit on my couch all day, watch TV and make my house dirty."

DeWitt's teachers felt she had no interest in training him to be a classical musician. To Shanequa, other routes seemed more practical. "I could have gotten him a job" in the Harlem store where she worked, she said. "He knew that. He wouldn't listen to me."

But DeWitt loved his sister, wanted the relationship to work. "I couldn't say anything about his sister in front of him," Camille Akeju said. She's doing the best she can, he would say.

DeWitt, now 16, also seemed uncertain about the viability of a musical career. He was spending less time in school and more on the streets, where the role models were cash-flush drug dealers, not classical pianists. He was making dizzying shifts among worlds with different languages and survival skills.

Once, he got some money, bought a gold tooth and wore it to Mind-Builders, despite Camille Akeju's warning not to. He would ask her and Mr. Grandberry how much he could make as a pianist. "He was challenging us to show him why he should go one way instead of another," Ms. Akeju said.

DeWitt's life was less and less conducive to practice, let alone perfection. He was arriving late for school because no one had waked him up. He was eating badly, or not at all. The fighting at home escalated. The police were called; DeWitt was taken into custody.

In December, Shanequa decided she had had enough. "He was more than I could handle," she said.

DeWitt was briefly homeless again, riding the subways at night, reading at Barnes & Noble by day. With winter biting, he would try to get locked into Mind-Builders at night; a custodian found him in a closet. Finally he went temporarily to Covenant House, a youth shelter in Chelsea.

The foster opportunity Mr. Grandberry had proffered, which would have enabled DeWitt to stay in the Bronx and continue at Mind-Builders, was gone. In January 1997,

Shanequa voluntarily placed DeWitt in the foster care system. Too old for placement with a family, he would now go live in a group home.

"He was upset," Shanequa said. "He didn't understand why I was doing this." And after that, she said, "He went buck wild."

The city put DeWitt in the care of the Catholic Guardian Society. He began his foster career in a Bronx group home, was moved to Brooklyn, and then, in July, to a home in Staten Island. Each time, he was assigned a new social worker.

He was moved from the Bronx, said an Administration for Children's Services official who would not speak for attribution, because he was "not adjusting well to placement."

In Brooklyn, far from friends, relatives, music and support, his isolation deepened. He stopped going to Mind-Builders. Friends and teachers had a harder time getting messages to him. He told of fights with other kids, of having clothes stolen and his photos ripped up. He told counselors at the home he didn't want to be there.

He was not going to school. Instead, a boy craving family was spending more and more time on Staten Island, where his aunt Sheila lived. Her sons, his cousins, moved on the streets, where drugs were a livelihood and fights were waged with guns.

In June, DeWitt was arrested in the Bronx for carrying a 9-millimeter handgun and a bag of marijuana. He said a friend had asked him to carry the gun, and he was released on his own recognizance. Walter Grandberry went to his first court appearance; in each subsequent one, he was alone.

"There wasn't anyone who was taking an interest in him," said Japiel Filiaci, the Legal Aid lawyer who represented him. He struck her, she said, as someone who "might hang out with the wrong people just to be with people."

At the Staten Island group home, in Port Richmond, DeWitt began going absent without leave with a vengeance. He would disappear for days, sometimes weeks, materializing at Shanequa's or slipping in the window of Sheila's white clapboard house like a cat. She would find him curled up, sleeping with his eyes open. "By the time he came to us," said Keith Robinson, the supervisor at the home, "I don't know if he was reachable."

"The more you get to know the kids in the home, the more they take advantage of you," DeWitt told Meredith Urband, a former Summerbridge teacher, in August. So he would avoid meals there, fill empty time with long subway rides.

Music, Drugs and Violence On Staten Island



DeWitt had found a soulmate in his 19-year-old cousin Michael. Both were devotees of the Wu-Tang Clan, the hip-hop group that had exploded onto the music scene from the Park Hills housing projects, not far from Port Richmond. On weekends, they would hang out at Wu Wear, the group's Staten Island store. In Sheila's house, they would rap. Some of Wu-Tang's songs on their new album, "Wu-Tang Forever," are laced with violins. DeWitt's new dream was to be a rap star, but he wanted to rap over classical music that he would compose. Wu-Tang songs are powerful tales of selling drugs to survive, death from guns and AIDS, run-ins with cops, and the pressure for cash, gold, gear. It was a world DeWitt was coming to know well.

Early in the summer, Michael was sent to jail. DeWitt felt abandoned again, Sheila said. He started spending more time with her son Malik, a 25-year-old she describes as a bad influence. They spent their days, said Malik, rhyming, talking to girls, hanging. In July, the police said, DeWitt was arrested on a drug charge.

In August, he apparently stepped off a bus and into the middle of a fight involving Malik. Malik was shot and wounded; he left Staten Island and lay low. On Oct. 22, DeWitt was shot in the leg as he rode his bike in Port Richmond. The perpetrator, the police said, was the same person who had wounded Malik.

At the hospital, said Sgt. Brian Kennedy of the 120th Precinct, he had to convince a boy terrified of pain to take an injection. DeWitt said he was a pianist, had gone to school. "We didn't believe him," Sergeant Kennedy said. "But he was really vehement."

A week later, DeWitt was jailed briefly for missing an earlier court date on his gun charge. Around the same time, he disappeared from the group home. Walter Grandberry and other friends trying to reach him said they were given evasive answers, then finally told he was missing. He had gone back to Shanequa, reached an accommodation with her. Using the social security survivor benefits he had been getting since his mother's death, he would pay \$60 a week for a room upstairs from hers in Washington Heights.

At Mind-Builders in mid-November, Camille Akeju heard Bach's Prelude and Fugue in F minor being played in DeWitt's distinctive style. He was back, but he was different: thin, uncommunicative. He told Walter Grandberry he had hated his brief jail stay, hated being around violent criminals. "You're not a drug dealer," Mr. Grandberry said. "Don't try to be something you're not."

He began coming to Mind-Builders and playing for hours straight. He argued one day with Kimberly Johnson, another Mind-Builders student, about whether there was a God.



There was, she said. There was not, he insisted. Too many bad things had happened to him.

On a morning soon after, his aunt Sheila saw him standing on a Staten Island street corner. His eyes, always bright and clear, were bloodshot. He looked sad, she said, no longer young. A young black man on the streets, she thought. Was he trying to get himself killed? "I don't know," he answered.

Around that time, Shanequa said she asked him if he cared whether he died.

"No, I don't care," he said. "Because then I get to be with Mommy and I don't have to worry about rent."

Shanequa said she told DeWitt not to go back to Staten Island, that it was dangerous. But on Monday, Nov. 24, he went back. That night, the police say, he was selling drugs in Port Richmond with Hassan McGhie, 19, a friend who had once been a high school basketball star.

In August, DeWitt had sheepishly told Jermaine Caldwell, a former Summerbridge teacher, that he had left school for the streets. He was a young man, now, who wanted to be his own person, and needed his own money just to survive.

But the lure of the streets, said Sheila White, was more complicated than money. The excitement of cat-and-mouse games with other dealers and the cops, the antidote to boredom, the companionship. But DeWitt was in over his head, she said. He lacked street smarts. He lacked meanness.

That Monday night, he and Hassan McGhie made the mistake of dealing under a Park Avenue railroad trestle that had long been Andrew Valentine's turf, according to the police. Mr. Valentine pulled a gun, the police said, and fired, hitting Hassan McGhie in the buttocks and DeWitt, running, in the back.

He was pronounced dead at the scene at 11:40 P.M. Police found several small bags of crack and \$6 on his body. Mr. Valentine, 22, was arrested three days later. He is being held without bail on charges of second degree murder and attempted murder. He told the police that the pair had previously robbed him at gunpoint and he feared they would do the same again. His family has retained a private lawyer, Alison Aplin, for him. She describes her client as "a big teddy bear, a very gentle soul."

Epilogue: The Lessons Of a Young Life

DeWitt, who had always hated wearing suits, wore a Polo ski cap and Wu Wear sweatshirt at his funeral on Staten Island. Walter Grandberry and DeWitt's aunt Laura, both Buddhists, helped lead an hour of chanting for universal happiness.

DeWitt's younger sister, Kamitra, already fatherless and motherless at age 12, said goodbye to her brother. His cousin Malik, tall and tough, sobbed. Then the mask was back up: he was cool again, smoking cigarettes, bantering with friends. DeWitt was a good kid, he said. He had told him to be careful.

"I worked so hard on this boy to try to get him to straighten out his life," Shanequa said during the service, then offered an implicit apology. "I know I wasn't the best, too. I got a little frustrated, too. I couldn't help it."

Nathaniel Hill, DeWitt's friend from the Bronx group home, said DeWitt had encouraged him to cherish his family, to take life more seriously. He has left the group home; this year, he will join the Job Corps in Arkansas.

DeWitt's death, Walter Grandberry said, has moved him to recommitt his life to young people. Mind-Builders is setting up a DeWitt White Memorial Scholarship Fund to help talented underprivileged children.

"The measure of DeWitt's life will continue to unfold for many, many decades to come," Mr. Grandberry said at the funeral as incense floated in the air. "We have no idea of the impact of his life."

Mr. Grandberry says he feels as if he lost a son.

Group Homes: Could More Have Been Done?

THE group homes where DeWitt White spent most of his last year are a near-last resort for any child, and usually unwelcome. Children who have been abused, neglected or orphaned, as DeWitt was, and are considered too old or too difficult to be placed with a foster family, as DeWitt also was, are expected to live happily under one roof. It is a lot to expect.

"We are artificial in these kids' eyes," said Keith Robinson, the supervisor at the last home DeWitt went to. "We are not their mother and father."

Institutions cannot mimic familial bonds. Parents usually don't work in shifts. But cases like DeWitt White's raise the question of whether they can do a better job of trying.

One group home administrator who spoke on condition of anonymity described group homes as a "dumping ground." Most homes, he said, have not figured out how to give children a sense of belonging. "These kids don't trust us," he said.

Group homes are considered "least restrictive settings," which means in many ways their hands are tied. They cannot enforce curfews. They have no way to make sure children go to school after they leave the home in the morning. If a child goes absent without leave, they can try to find him -- and different group homes make different degrees of effort to do so -- but otherwise they cannot do much.

It was unclear what responsibility the Catholic Guardian Society, the agency with which DeWitt had been placed, had for him when he was killed on Nov. 24. A counselor at his last group home, on Staten Island, said DeWitt's sister had discharged him sometime in November. That would have required the home to begin monitor his new home situation for six months. But an Administration of Children's Services official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said he had never been discharged, that he just went AWOL.

DeWitt was transferred to three Catholic Guardian Society homes. Moving from placement to placement, said Edith Holzer, the director of public information at the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, is "more traumatic for a kid than anything else." But John Frein, the executive director of the society, which runs 14 group homes in the city, said such moves were often necessary to protect a child or others in the home.

"It is not done for the convenience of the agency," he said. "Having to get someone settled in a new home creates problems for us, too."

The Children's Services official said DeWitt had been transferred from the Bronx to Brooklyn because he was not adjusting well to placement. "He had a destructive pattern of behavior," the official said.

Most city group homes are run by nonprofit agencies granted contracts by the Administration for Children's Services.

The city monitors procedures and accounting, but has little contact with the children being served, something Commissioner Nicholas Scopetta has said he wants to address.

In DeWitt's case, there was no court oversight except for an extension of placement granted by Family Court in August. At that point, DeWitt had already had a pattern of going AWOL and had been arrested on a both gun and drug charges.

"I had hoped his arrest would be enough to warrant a more restrictive setting," said Mr. Robinson, the supervisor of the Staten Island home.

Mr. Frein said he was satisfied the homes had done everything they could for DeWitt. "This was one of those tragic cases we were not capable of preventing," he said.

#### In His Own Words

In his sixth grade application to a summer program, he wrote of his Bronx neighborhood's "crack spot":

"Around my block there is a drug probom. About 10 people die every year because of drugs. If you pass the crack spot you'll see hundreds of crack viles on the floor and they even try and offer you a job to deliver for them. I always say no! But sometimes they try to force me, but then I run and try to avoid the 'crack spot'. But, they are all over. I guess around my block you can't run away from drugs unless you MOVE!"