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A Pianist's Final Piece: DeWitt's Descent

His Classical Touch Dazzled But He Roamed the Streets.

By AMY WALDMAN

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

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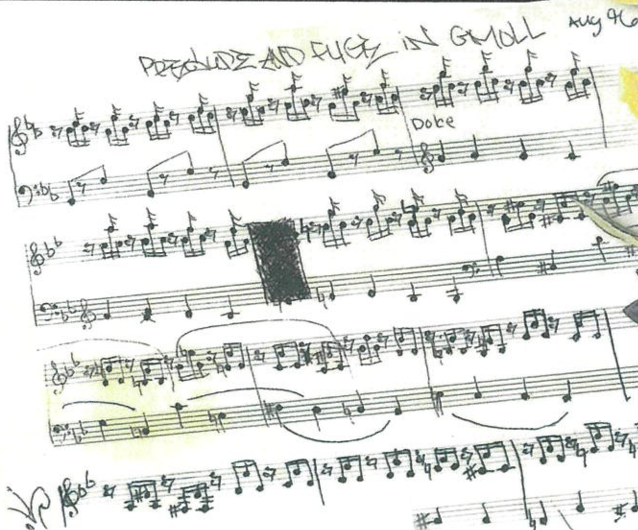

MEMORIAL SERVICE
for
DeWitt White
August 21, 1980 - November 24, 1997

Thursday, December 4, 1997
at
John Scalia Funeral Home

SHARDS OF A LIFE A piece of music composed by DeWitt White. The program from his memorial service. And DeWitt, at a concert performance. His talent was "electric."

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT

Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Suits, Cigars and Stones

In Buzz, the Rolling Stones play Madison Square Garden and the power set jockeys for position. And why did Donald Trump watch the concert standing up? With reports from the East Village, the Upper East Side, Upper Manhattan, Williamsburg, Flushing, Woodside and Throgs Neck.

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COPING/ROBERT LIPSYTE

Case Dismissed. But Not Resolved.

MELVA Max, cop fighter, was squirted out of the criminal-justice system last week. If it wasn't for all the anxiety, expense and the troubling ramifications of her case, it would be another amusing instant urban legend. A 41-year-old mother of two is arrested outside her Chelsea restaurant at midnight after complaining to a passing police sergeant about noisy motorcyclists annoying her customers. According to the official complaint, she hurled herself into the patrol car and grabbed his badge. She was handcuffed in the street and strip-searched at the precinct house. It wasn't until 4 A.M. that her husband, Jean-Francois Fraysse, who is the chef, was able to take her home.

So why didn't everyone feel better after the case was dismissed? Oh, they hugged in the dismal corridors of 100 Centre Street and made plans to meet later in the day for a victory meal at her restaurant, La Lunchonette, but you could tell they were let down, especially the lawyer, Joseph Tacopina. His juices were bubbling. In less than 12 hours he would be on television for his weekly appearance on Geraldo Rivera's legal show. This is a 34-year-old, camera-ready ex-jock with two major clients on his cellular phone's memory — a police officer involved in the Abner Louima assault and the reputed head of the Genovese crime family accused in a major Wall Street stock swindle. But Melva Max, so dark-haired, so pale, so willowy, so clean, gave a certain sense of completion to his calendar. A cop, a crook and a citizen, I told him.

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"None of them are crooks," Mr. Tacopina said firmly. "Rosario Gangi is a hard-working individual pigeonholed by the government. Thomas Wiese is a highly decorated police officer who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Melva Max. . . ."

His associate, Tama Beth Kudman, a 27-year-old out of Barnard and the Cardozo Law School, said: "I wish all our clients looked like Melva Max."

Last Wednesday morning in Room 400, Ms. Max, jaw set, heroic in a red jacket, faced Judge Eileen Rakower for the second week in a row. On Jan. 7, the case had been adjourned because the assigned assistant district attorney had not read the motion for dismissal. That was an edgy morning for Ms. Max and Mr. Fraysse in a building reeking of fear and failure. But last week, now seasoned defendants, they seemed more relaxed. Mr. Fraysse even raised his eyebrows with Gallic worldliness when a court officer in jeans and T-shirt began screaming at a young man with dreadlocks under a backward cap. That young man had stepped over the yellow chain between the spectator seats and the judge's bench rather than unhooking it. Lightning bolts of attitude flashed between the two until the young man stepped back over, removed his cap and unhooked the chain while mouthing "I'm sorry" without a hint of apology.

Anything could happen in this tense place. So why didn't Ms. Max just accept the D.A's offer of an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal, a routine plea bargain that would be wiped from her record after a few months? A trial could cost her thousands and end in jail. She whispered that she had been asked the same question by a fellow Mount Holyoke alumna, a woman she had never met, who recently called to offer support from the college's New York chapter.

Mark Matcho

"I told her that I had a responsibility, that if it could happen to me, just imagine what could happen to a black woman in Brooklyn," Ms. Max said. "There was a pause, then she told me she was a black woman in Brooklyn, and when their boys get to be 10 or so they start training them how to act when the police stop them for nothing at all."

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Then Ms. Max was called through the yellow chain. For the second week in a row, the assistant D.A. did not show up. Who could blame him? What a case, an anthill better left unpoked. Had cops perjured themselves? How far would the city go to defend a sergeant — one of the guardians of our night — when the complaint sounded so shaky? Who wants to address the mounting perception that police disrespect and brutality has spread from Mr. Louima's neighorhood to Ms. Max's?

According to Mr. Tacopina, when Judge Rakower dismissed the case she said the charge of "obstruction of government administration" was flawed: how could Ms. Max obstruct a police officer from doing something about the motorcyclists when he had refused to do anything at all? I do not blame Judge Rakower for refusing to discuss her decision with me; this legend is not over. A civil litigator, Joel Berger, has filed a suit for false arrest. Ms. Max wants the city to pay Mr. Tacopina's fee.

Outside the courtroom, Mr. Tacopina's cell phone was ringing and his pager was vibrating and he was moving on his exit line: "Okay, Ma Barker, now don't go jumping into any more police cars."

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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 Roberthson. " '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

> 'He did not want to reveal himself to his public unless he was perfect.'

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 "Pathétique" 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 H.I.V. "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 Solow, 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

At the Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center in Williamsbridge, DeWitt White would practice for hours at a time.

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!"

Mary DiBiase Blaich for The New York Times

There was Buddhist chanting at DeWitt's funeral on Staten Island, and sounds of grief from the people who loved him.