

Opinion

By supporting UPAF, we're all in the arts together

By Al Jarreau
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I loved growing up in Milwaukee. Part of that big love was that I was surrounded by music from my earliest years and remembrances.

My father was a minister, and a great singer, and my mother was the church pianist. I was the fifth of six children, and my older brothers and sisters were all very musically inclined. They all sang, and three of them played musical instruments, too, but I didn't.

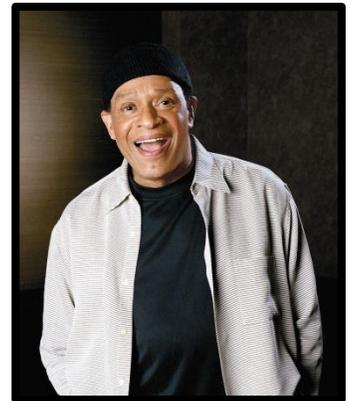
I first remember singing at age 4 or 5, in that church. I sang little nursery rhyme-ish kinds of songs that were sweet and simple. Even though my mother taught piano, I couldn't get the baseball glove off of my hand long enough to find middle C. But I sang at every opportunity (even at Parent Teacher Association meetings), often accompanied by my mother.

In junior and senior high school, we had a marching band, a concert band, an orchestra and an 80-voice a cappella choir that performed everything from "The Messiah" to songs from "South Pacific." And we had a football team, a basketball team and cheerleaders who sang and danced. Each year, there was a variety show called The Follies, which featured all of the above in a grand two-hour production. The audio/visual crew provided lighting and sound, and various setups.

During those days, exposure to the arts in school was as much a part of the curriculum as reading and writing and arithmetic, and participating in sports. It never came down to a choice of either/or. It was all about a well-planned, well-rounded education that included self-discovery, which comes from doing the above.

I would love to say that I was also a painter or a sculptor or a dancer or an actor. But I sure did a lot of music. And when I moved on to Ripon College, I continued to sing as often as I could. I was part of a singing group called The Indigos. Sometimes we even got paid when we sang at local restaurants and bars.

My major was in psychology and I then went on to graduate school to study rehabilitation counseling. This all led to my work as a counselor in San Francisco from 1965 to 1968.



I am very concerned that, today, children in my hometown of Milwaukee, and across our country, are not getting the same exposure to arts that I had. This is largely due to extreme cuts in funding for education, and the decision by our leaders that the fine arts are expendable.

While art programs have been slashed nationwide, schools with higher concentrations of impoverished or minority students have especially felt the brunt of these cuts. For instance, according to 2008 data from Americans for the Arts, African-American and Hispanic students were only half as likely to have access to art programs in school as their white peers.

Without a doubt, some special effort must be made to assure that these children get better served — better nourishment, better school rooms and facilities, clean and safe drinking water, and better communities.

Please consider this: For the sake of our own sane and healthy survival here on Earth, we must learn to understand each other better. And the arts are a common language for communicating toward this goal. Any piece of art is a translated and crystallized version of our human emotions. Joy, sadness, pain and even boredom.

Whether it is a poem, a painting, a sculpture, an opera, or a ballet, each of these is an observable, audible or touchable expression of our feelings. Participating in the arts, whether by creating or observing, is surely a kind of "sensitivity training" that opens our eyes and our minds to these portrayals of human emotions, and this makes us alert to the feelings and needs of others.

These were the understandings that led to the New Deal. These were the understandings that led to the establishment of vocational rehabilitation, especially for soldiers returning from war with amputations and shell shock and that led to the establishment of Social Security so that our elderly could live out their lives with basic needs and dignity, and aid to families with dependent children was thought to be essential.

What I'm saying is this: There are lots of people who look at the Mona Lisa, and think, "Home girl is bored! She needs a hug now!" And, when you listen to, or sing along to, Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," or Bill Withers' "Use me," or "Unbreak my Heart," you have felt for somebody, and felt their feelings. These understandings may help you learn how to react in ways that are helpful, healthy, sane and pro-survival.

The arts can save our families and our communities. A young person who has a trumpet or ballet slippers or some paint brushes in his bag is probably not also carrying a weapon.

As a community, working together, we must collaborate to bring arts and culture back into the schools.

And we must support efforts such as the United Performing Arts Fund, which raises needed dollars for this purpose. In 2015, UPAF's 15 member groups received a total of \$492,500 earmarked for arts education. The Milwaukee Youth Symphony, First Stage Children's Theater and the Milwaukee Ballet, to cite three UPAF-supported groups, reach thousands of students, and hundreds of schools, many in the most underserved communities of Milwaukee. Thank you, UPAF, for your brilliant work.

Music is my passion and my motivation. It is most important that we assure that future generations of Milwaukee children have the same opportunity that I had to participate in the performing arts. The work of UPAF, and that of each of its donors, are a force for positive change, and that is worthy of our support.

Al Jarreau is a Milwaukee native and a multiple Grammy award-winning music artist.