

Upon retiring from teaching elementary school, Vivian Jacobson of Portland, Oregon, found herself with extra time on her hands to enjoy her love of the piano. “When I was getting ready to retire, I thought, ‘I want to do more with music,’” she says.

Classically trained as a child, Jacobson learned to play the piano by playing scales and reading sheet music. She found the note reading daunting and stressful. Several years ago, Jacobson saw an advertisement in her local paper about a three-hour workshop focusing on easy piano playing.

On a whim, Jacobson attended a “Just For Fun Piano” workshop put on by piano consultant Donn Rochlin. What she found was an eclectic group of students, at all levels of learning, who simply wanted to enjoy playing the piano. “Some of us came with lots of background, and some people had never learned anything before. One woman had never even touched a piano,” recalls Jacobson.

By the end of the three hours, Jacobson had learned basic chords, along with tools that allowed her to sit down at the piano and play with confidence. “It just freed me from all those little notes,” she says.

Rochlin’s approach differs from that of a traditional piano teacher because he emphasizes improvisation rather than note playing.

learning THE KEYS WITH EASE

Article by Laura DeJoseph originally appearing in *Making Music* magazine



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“I give them permission to be creative,” he says.

At the beginning of his workshop, students sit down at the piano and just start playing. Many are apprehensive. With classical piano lessons, students are taught to play by reading notes rather than to play what they feel. “After years of lessons, the creativity is programmed out of them,” explains Rochlin.

Rochlin teaches mostly adults, many of whom played the piano previously and quit. “They didn’t see progress,” says Rochlin. “It was tedious, stressful, and boring. I tell them to sit down and make up ideas and see what they like. It’s okay to be creative. It builds their confidence up.”

Sharon Beale, also a classically trained pianist, enrolled in Rochlin’s Just For Fun Piano workshop to reconnect with the piano. After ten years of playing, she still felt that she couldn’t sit down and play a song. “I had played as a little girl, but it was always classical and reading music, and I got so tired of the structure of that.”

The idea of playing without music was difficult for Beale to grasp. “We went over a little mind over matter thing,” she says. Rochlin encouraged Beale to play from her heart. “He said, ‘Just play anything. I don’t care what it sounds like. Just do it.’ I sat down at the piano and played

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these funny little tunes, and he'd say, 'That's beautiful!' and I'd say, 'You're kidding.' Every tune sounds good."

After taking Rochlin's workshop, Beale learned the basics, but she wanted more. Rochlin became Beale's piano coach. The two met regularly, so Beale could learn more about different styles of music, like blues, jazz, and honky-tonk. "I can still read music, but I don't want to anymore," explains Beale.

Beale now plays on her own, rarely meeting with Rochlin. "If I want to play something by ear, this method works pretty well. I can play without getting the sheet music out," she says. "I've got enough knowledge and structure that I can sit down and play what I want."

Rochlin's "Just For Fun Piano" workshop began in 1993. At the sessions, people of all ages explore Rochlin's way of learning. "It is a low-stress, healthy approach to piano playing," he says. In his first workshop, participants learned the pillars of music. They are taught major and minor chords by feel so they do not have to watch their hands on the keys. There are typically about twelve people in each session, which Rochlin feels works to their advantage.

"It is much more enjoyable," he says of the group setting. "At the beginning, before I even tell them my name, I ask them to share with the others why they're there. It's like a support group."

Rochlin says many of his students suffer from what he refers

to as "improv-phobia." "I once held a workshop for teachers. I asked for a volunteer to come up and improvise, and not one teacher would get up," he says. "Most of them had never played anything not on the page."

Through the group setting and supportive environment, students begin to realize the possibility of learning Rochlin's way. "We all had to do a little song at the end and improvise," recalls Jacobson. "And everybody realized that the way they did it was just fine, and they felt so good. It's about expressing yourself—there's no right or wrong. You can make the music your own rather than stick to someone else's arrangement."

Rochlin teaches a class for those with a particular interest in learning



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rhythms called "How to Play Blues Piano." "They learn three chords and see all the fun that they can have with those three chords." Rochlin says a lot of Blues enthusiasts come hoping to translate that love into piano playing. "It turns into a jam session," he says.

For students wanting further coaching, Rochlin teaches individual sessions and tutors small groups. He also teaches a Chords for Kids workshop for children.

Regardless of age or interest, Rochlin encourages his students to enjoy the piano and not judge themselves. "It's about making music. Don't worry about the correctness of it all," he says. [AL]

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www.justforfunpiano.com