

Yes, the Doctor of Jazz is in

Physician melds medicine and music into funky, triumphant life

By Lorne Bell
Advocate staff

CHESTNUT HILL resident Dr. Stanley Sagov sees no irony in the abstract collage that is his life. To the stout, gray-bearded physician-musician, the boundary between medicine and music, science and soul, is necessarily fluid. It's as smooth as the jazz that drips from his piano.

"I don't think the two are dueling; they feed each other," said Sagov. "I have always needed to do both."

During the day, Sagov tends to patients at his private practice in Arlington. He also holds several teaching positions at hospitals throughout Boston, is a talented photographer and makes a mean South African curry. But at night, he takes the stage as a critically acclaimed jazzman, part of the Remembering the Future Jazz Band. The 64-year-old will perform next Wednesday evening at Cambridge's Regattabar (his curry will be on the menu at Henrietta's Table restaurant downstairs).

But for those who might think that Sagov's is a tale of amateur musicianship, think again. His evolution as a renowned musician stretches back six decades and across three continents. It is a story of physical hardship, deep moral and ethnic conflict and finally, triumph through the healing arts and music.

Sagov grew up in apartheid South Africa, the child of Jewish immigrants who fled the pogroms of the Russian revolution. It was there, amid fierce racial tensions and violence, that young Stanley came of age.

As a boy walking the streets of South Africa, Sagov might have been just any other privileged white kid, were it not for his own life's challenges. He was born with Gordon's Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that kept him bound in iron leg braces. By the time he was 13, he had undergone 16 surgeries to correct the deformities in his growing limbs (the operations took him to England, America and back). He also engaged in daily fistfights with his fellow classmates, who teased him incessantly.

"My leg irons went up to my thighs and I had these orthopedic boots – I was obviously very different looking than the other children," he recalled. "But I remember when I was nine or 10, walking up a hill

with my violin and I had this sudden realization that my deformity wasn't my fault. It had this lifting of a burden for me. It was the beginning of a liberation."

It was also the beginning of a deep moral quandary. Sagov was, of course, a different category of white South African – part of a family of immigrants that knew the weight of oppression. That fact, together with the discrimination and limitation he experienced because of his clubbed feet, churned deep empathy for his fellow black countrymen. His family's black servants, part of almost every white family's household reality, were no longer something he could tolerate.

"At Passover, as a teenager, I exasperated my family by pointing out that we had slaves serving us at the Seder," he said. "My grandfather acknowledged it, but he said, 'Where is he going to go at this age?'"

Sagov would eventually leave, but not before plotting a path to two distinct careers. His struggles with Gordon's Syndrome birthed a desire to help others afflicted by illness and disease, and he went on to earn a medical degree from the University of Capetown.

And despite coming from a family devoid of musicians, Sagov found sanctuary and friendship through music. A South African parliamentarian, whose bold anti-apartheid stance rubbed off on Sagov, stayed with his family and schooled him in ukulele.

Several month-long stints in hospital beds in England and America also contributed to his musical development. Already a novice violinist, he immersed himself in the songs of some of the era's blues giants – John Henry, Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy – and taught himself to play guitar. Each time he came back to South Africa, he shared his newfound talents with local jazz musicians.

Through his teenage years, he honed his talents on the piano and performed in clubs and bars as a full-fledged member of the South African beatnik jazz scene. There, he found the usual excesses of drugs, sex and music, along with an interracial harmony that was unheard of anywhere else in the deeply segregated nation.

"I never played in a jazz band in South Africa that wasn't integrated racially," he



Dr. Stanley Sagov in his home studio in Chestnut Hill.

said. "Jazz in South Africa was a hopeful expression that art doesn't change the world, but it does paint a picture of how the world could be."

But as Sagov reached his early 20s, he, like many of the country's reformists, fled to America.

"At the time I left, 16,000

'At Passover, as a teenager, I exasperated my family by pointing out that we had slaves serving us at the Seder.'

whites a year were leaving, including a lot of people like me who rejected apartheid and felt that if we stayed, we would be arrested or killed," he said. "There was no effective way to oppose the regime from inside the country. And as a Jew, I felt something deeply problematic about living in a country organized on Nazi principles of racial supremacy."

Sagov took his medical degree to New York City, where he worked as a hospital physi-

cian. At the same time, the beatnik scene unfolding in 1960s America encouraged him to continue playing music. His day job transitioned into nightlong jazz club sessions with legends such as Ornette Coleman, George Russell and Elvin Jones.

Sagov soon decided to seek the formal training he always lacked and he matriculated at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music, graduating in 1973. But by this time, his medical career and the desire for a stable life with his growing family could not compete with nightly stage appearances. Despite an offer to tour and record with his band, Sagov, the good doctor decided to stay put in Boston.

Thirty years later, Stanley Sagov, now a father and grandfather, is still practicing medicine and music. Decades of walking on fused ankle joints have resulted in chronic pain and severe arthritis. But at his office in Arlington, he counsels patients with the same empathy and idealism that came to him on that South African hilltop nearly 60 years ago.

"Hope is the only realism one can offer in the face of ill-

ness," he said.

At his home in Chestnut Hill, he spends hours in an intricate music studio composing tunes to practice with his band, which released two albums in October. Next week's show will feature music from the band's recently released albums, "More Memories of the Future" and "Layers of Jazz Memory." And though the music is new, Stanley Sagov's approach to jazz – and life – has never changed.

"Jazz is bitter sweet; it's never wholly happy or wholly sad, but it's about survivorship," he said. "It says, 'We're gonna make it even though there are tough things to contend with, and we're gonna make it by reaching across in collaboration with others.' If we listen to each other and respond to each other the way we do in a jazz band, nobody wins unless everybody wins."

Tickets to Stanley Sagov & The Remembering the Future Jazz Band can be purchased online at www.regattabar-jazz.com or by calling 617-395-7757.