

Richard Herring on the power of music

I was visiting a friend in hospital, a space-age building that might have been designed by Terry Gilliam: all glass and metal, with high walkways and strange, modern art. To be fair, it was much nicer than most old-fashioned hospitals and that's what made it feel wrong. It was clean, new and well-organised and seemed to treat its patients with respect. This is not the British way. This could only happen in a broken, dystopian future.

I was waiting in the café in the foyer when I became aware of a piano being played nearby. Famous songs from the 1950s echoed around this cathedral to illness. The juxtaposition of the old tunes and the futuristic building was rather poignant.

Who was playing? In the corner was an upright piano and the pianist was a white-haired man in an anorak. His walking stick rested on the corner of the keyboard. He was of professional standard but my guess was that he was not employed by the NHS. He was just a musician (possibly a patient) who had seen a piano and decided to play. In the solemnity of the hospital he had created this little island of melancholy joy. He was frail but unbroken.

He came to the end of one song and I wanted to clap but it seemed inappropriate, like shouting in a library or farting in church. And no one else applauded or even really seemed to notice.

Nevertheless, the pianist selected a different tune and played on. He didn't need applause. The music was his gift and his reward. Like a radiator emitting hope in a warehouse of broken dreams.

I am becoming more of the opinion that the best art lives and dies in the moment: a laugh, a tear, an orgasm, an old tune played by a man with a walking stick in an unexpected place. While some people might believe that a performer needs to top the charts or fill a stadium with screaming fans to receive validation, in some ways it's even more impressive to create something that is beautiful and anonymous and enjoyed by just a few. And certainly more memorable. A few years back, I drunkenly stumbled into a Spanish restaurant in central London in the early hours of the morning, on a quest for more alcohol. My friend and I were practically the only people there.

But on a small stage in the middle of the room a young woman was dancing flamenco. She wasn't put off by the lack of spectators, she held her head high and danced passionately and beautifully with total commitment. It was spell-binding.

She made me want to marry her, just so she could dance for me like this every night, until she was too old to dance and I was too old to watch. But not so old that I couldn't look into those dark eyes, unchanged by the years and remember our youth when we laughed in the face of our mortality by dancing and drinking and making love. But I didn't act on those desires. I just drank some beer and then went home alone and never saw her again.

However, she taught me a lesson. You need to play the room as if it's full, even when it's empty. And I will never forget that dance that only I saw or this pianist that only I noticed. I didn't have similarly romantic fantasies about the hospital pianist but he reminded me that it's not how many people you reach, it's what effect you have on the ones that encounter you.