

Patrick shaped by father's absence

The Boston Globe

By Sally Jacobs, Globe Staff | March 25, 2007

It was supposed to be Deval Patrick's day of triumph.

He was 18 years old and his family was gathered in the crowded Milton Academy gymnasium on a rainy summer morning in 1974 to watch him graduate. Suddenly, his father, who had largely abandoned the family 15 years earlier and had seen his son rarely, showed up unexpectedly. Deval was not happy to see him.

Patrick's family -- his mother, grandparents, and sister -- sat though the ceremony rigid with tension, angrily eyeing Pat Patrick at the end of the row. And then as they all drove in his grandfather's Buick toward a restaurant to celebrate, his parents began to fight. They screamed at each other, and curses flew. Patrick senior, an emotional man who had opposed his son's attending the elite private school, broke into tears.

Through it all, Deval sat quietly in the front seat. When the car stopped at a light he got out, slammed the door, and stamped back to his dorm.

"It was a disaster," the governor recalled in an interview in his State House office. "I am thinking, this is supposed to be *my* day. . . . I just bailed."

Over the course of a career that would take him from Milton to the governor's office, Deval Patrick has said little about his father. Nor has he been asked much about him. It has been a very private corner of a most public life.

But in fact, he had a complex relationship with his father, one that would ebb and flow over the years, ultimately shaping in part the man Deval Patrick is today.

As a child, he knew his father largely by his eloquent absence. Laurdine "Pat" Patrick, a gifted baritone saxophone player who traveled the world with the legendary Sun Ra Arkestra and a host of jazz greats, was often on the road. As he grew into adulthood, Deval would confront and ultimately come to know the passionate, often mischievous man who was his father. By the time Pat Patrick died of leukemia in 1991, the two men had found a certain peace.

Deval's experience of his father, as he sees it, motivated him "to be a better man than in some ways I think my father was as a father and as a person in relationship to his wife." But some family members speak of something more than that: They believe it galvanized him and taught him to rely, from a very early age, on his own judgment and ability. And it all began, in a way, when he chose to attend Milton Academy despite his father's stern opposition to a school so identified, in his mind, with the white power structure.

"If anything about my father helped shape the man who Deval is now maybe it is that he was rebelling against his father in doing what he has done with his life," said Rhonda Sigh, the governor's older sister. "I think everything he has done since then has been a way of saying: 'I don't need your approval. I can do this on my own.'"

His parents' marriage ends, and the family struggles on

The end came with a phone call. It was 1959 on the South Side of Chicago and Emily Patrick, Deval's mother, answered the telephone. A woman on the other end was asking for her husband, Pat. Emily did not recognize the caller.

"He's not here," Emily said, as Deval recounts it. "Can I take a message?"

The message was this: "Tell him our baby needs shoes."

When Pat Patrick returned to his furious wife that evening, the marriage was over. Pat left home that night. He would not see Deval and Rhonda, then ages 4 and 5 respectively, for more than a year. Emily struggled to make it on her own, working at a dry cleaners and taking welfare for a while, before moving into a two-bedroom apartment with her parents. She and the children shared a set of bunk beds in one room. Not having a father around was hard for them all, but hardly unique in the neighborhood.

"There were a number of other families who were headed by women, like ours, so the model was not unfamiliar," recalled Deval.

Emily's anger at her husband simmered for years, but she went out of her way to cultivate a relationship between her children and their father. She encouraged them to write him letters. When he passed through town on a gig or to visit his mother once or twice a year, little Deval and Rhonda were dressed and ready for an outing. And every now and then, at Pat's urging, she dropped them off to play at the home of their half sister, La'Shon Anthony, who lived with her maternal grandparents in Chicago.

"I knew their mother knew about my mother," said Anthony, 47, a self-employed consultant in Chicago. "But whether the two of them ever saw each other face to face I don't know. It was not my place to ask."

Pat, meanwhile, moved to New York to pursue his passion. Music, he once told his sister is: "My life. My drug. My habit." The son of a trumpet player and a native of East Moline, Ill., Pat played not only the baritone and alto saxophone, but was also skilled at the flute and clarinet. Famous for the astonishingly deep resonance of his sax sound, he was also valued for his compositions. In the early 1950s he was much sought after on the burgeoning Chicago music scene, and he played with many of the big names, including Sammy Davis Jr. and Eartha Kitt. And in the mid-1950s, he signed on with an eclectic African-American group that came to be known as Sun Ra Arkestra.

At its helm was an eccentric pianist known as Sun Ra, who claimed he was a missionary from outer space come to save the human race. Their music evolved over the years from cosmic jazz arrangements to a radical, electrifying sound characterized by exotic instrumental combinations and pioneering musical technology.

Often the performances were accompanied by a spectacle that even the audiences of the 1960s found far out. There were Egyptian robes and headdresses, models of the solar system, fire eaters, and smoke. Often, the musicians would crawl through the audience chanting. Although he would come and go over the years, as the group became increasingly popular, Pat remained one of its principal players throughout his life.

"Here is someone who is definitely different," Pat said of Sun Ra in a 1987 interview with WKCR radio in New York. "He's beyond category in a lot of ways."

A slender man with an impish grin, Pat was known as much for his good nature as for his musicianship. He was, as John Corbett, a Chicago-based jazz writer, described him, "a spectacular baritone sax player . . . an invaluable soloist."

In the 1960s he played briefly with Duke Ellington and John Coltrane, and served as musical director for Mongo Santamaria, the legendary Cuban drummer. In the 1970s, he traveled with several Broadway shows around the country. An accomplished arranger, Pat wrote more than half a dozen songs, including a fast-paced bebop tune he coauthored called "Yeh, Yeh," which was released in 1963 on Santamaria's album *Watermelon Man* and became a huge hit. It was ultimately featured in commercials for such giants as Chrysler and AT&T.

"Pat could have had his own band. He was not shy, but he liked to stay in the background," said Danny Ray Thompson, who continues to play sax with the Arkestra. "Pat worked all the time. If you called Pat, Pat was on the job. You didn't have to worry about him coming in drunk."

In 1970, jazz pianist Thelonius Monk tapped Pat to fill in on tenor sax one night at the Village Vanguard. For Pat, who wound up playing with Monk for five months, it was one of the high points of his career. That first night, Terry Adams, one of the founders of the rock band NRBQ, with which Pat also played periodically in the 1980s, was in the audience.

"At one point Monk played something new, which completely threw everyone off," Adams recalled. "But Pat got it just like that. Didn't even have to turn the horn."

Pat was also a sports fanatic, recording baseball and football scores, as well as playing card debts and musical tidbits in a small book called "Pat's Stats." Once, while playing with the musical "Bubbling Brown Sugar" in 1976, he was admonished by the band's director who found his lead sax player in the pit listening through earplugs to a baseball game on television out of one ear and another on the radio in the other ear at the same time he was playing.

"Never missed a cue!" Deval said, recalling the story.

Sun Ra demanded an unwavering commitment from his musicians. Members of the Arkestra, which ranged from half a dozen to 30, were forbidden to do drugs and discouraged from drinking and even having girlfriends. In the 1960s, the main players, including Pat, lived in a house in the East Village known as the Sun Palace. In 1968, they moved to a tired Philadelphia row house where Sun Ra dished out directives along with steaming bowls of his vegetarian "Moon Stew." Rehearsals in the cramped living room were relentless and sometimes began before dawn. Pat greatly admired Sun Ra's discipline and cosmic Afrocentric philosophy.

"I just feel very fortunate to have been able to be around him, as tough as it's been," Pat said in the radio interview. "He has given me a knowledge and understanding of my roots and who I am."

Like Pat, several other band members had children back home whom they saw infrequently.

"All of us who stayed with Sun Ra had a long distance from our kids," explained Marshall Allen, 82, a sax player and director of the Arkestra since Sun Ra died in 1993. "It's a musician's life."

Gap widens as years pass and their ambitions grow

To young Deval and Rhonda, living in a tenement on the South Side of Chicago, their father was an ephemeral figure. The first vivid memory that either one of them have of the man they called Pat, is visiting him in the summer of 1964 when he performed at the World's Fair in New York. Each day, Deval and Rhonda, then 8 and 9 respectively, would wander the Africa Pavilion where the Arkestra was playing.

"We were in awe of the Watusi dancers," recalled Rhonda, 51, who is a hair stylist. "Over the summer we learned all of their dances. In the end they wanted to put us in grass skirts and put us in the show, but we were too shy."

Deval does not recall a great deal about his father before that summer. What he does remember is that Pat "was cooler than I. He was hip. Being a musician was a cool thing." And he remembers how awkward he felt when his father dropped by for a visit.

"I remember how much tension was created because my mother was still working all that out," said Deval. "It was enormously uncomfortable."

They saw him rarely: a brief visit when he was passing through town, a week or more in the summer. Once, when a snowstorm stranded the band in Chicago unexpectedly, Pat took his young son to meet Ernie Banks, the Chicago Cubs' first black player, who was Thompson's uncle. In the 1970s, he took Rhonda on tour in Europe with the band for the summer.

When he was flush, Pat would send the children some money. One month it was \$50. Another time it was \$100. Then a year would go by and there was nothing from Pat, who sometimes supplemented his income by chauffeuring a limousine.

Nor did the children hear their father perform much when they were little. Although they came to appreciate his huge talent, neither thought much of the Arkestra at the time.

"I was a Motown kid like everyone else," said Deval. "I never acquired a taste for Sun Ra, with all due respect."

Only 11 months apart, Rhonda and Deval had distinctly different relationships with their father. Of all three children, Rhonda was the closest to Pat. Rhonda describes herself as "more patient with my dad. I let him in more than my brother did. Deval had a much closer bond with our mother. . . . Deval was heavy burdened about the fact that our father was not there for us."

So, too, Rhonda has had a closer relationship with their half sister and still communicates with her regularly. The three siblings talk on holidays and exchange e-mails. But visits are rare. When Anthony went to a Patrick fund-raiser in Chicago last year, she had not seen her half brother in more than 15 years. She was invited to his inauguration but couldn't make it.

Deval acknowledges that he was angry about his father's absence. "But you save the place for a parent who is gone or who disappoints you," he explained. "You feel the absence, but you save the place. I think what you are doing is constantly re-evaluating or sorting that out, helping you to understand."

It is a process that some close to him feel continues to this day.

"I think Deval found it hard to understand his father's choices or to respect them," said his wife, Diane. "He felt his mom had been left to take care of the kids and worry about it on her own. . . . I am not sure he has gotten fully through that, frankly."

One way he did communicate with his father was by letter. Pat, a notorious packrat, kept the many letters they exchanged and they sit now in the attic of the governor's Milton home. He also has his father's saxophone, flute, and piccolo. The letters are a part of their relationship he wants to keep private, and he declined to let a reporter see them.

By the time he was 13, Deval was awarded a scholarship to Milton Academy. Pat was not happy about it. He refused to sign the application, according to Rhonda. "He thought [Deval] would lose his African-American identity," she said.

Pat took pride in the color of his skin and a layered lineage that included Native American and African-American blood. His paternal grandfather was a white Irishman, according to Pat's half sister, Sheila Miles-Love of Silvas, III. Asked whether he knew of this, the governor responded by e-mail: "No idea."

Even after Deval arrived at Milton Academy in 1970, his father continued to object.

"I would say, 'Gosh, I just met this person whose father is ambassador to Mali and they go in the summer to this other house they have.' To me, this is fascinating. They have this whole other world," the governor recalled. "But just in describing it to him, he was immediately full of value judgments. 'That's just the Man. You don't want to be part of the Man. Those people don't want you or like you, and you need to be conscious of that and protect yourself.'"

Pat visited his son at Milton a few times, but their different feelings about the school loomed large between them. Once, Deval went to Harlem to hear his father play, but he found the music painfully loud and said so.

"My father was so disappointed that he thought I was so disapproving," he recalled. "That was the stage we were in. I thought he was disapproving of me, he thought I was disapproving of him. Those were our Milton years."

By the time he was a senior, Deval had found other father figures. One was his maternal grandfather, a janitor in Chicago. Another was Guthrie Speers, a retired minister and the father of one of his closest friends at school. At the time he graduated, he had not seen his father in more than a year. He certainly did not expect him to show up.

"I would not say I wanted my father to be there," he said. "My mother and grandparents and sister are over the moon about my graduating and here he comes, and there is this pall that is put on the whole thing. So, sure, I think I blamed him."

Long road to reconciliation started in New York City

Deval went on to attend Harvard University and saw little of his father for several years. If it was difficult for Deval, it was also hard for Pat.

"My brother was very hurt about not having his children with him," Sheila Miles-Love said .

As his children grew older, Pat began to try to explain his long absences. Often he would cry.

"My father wept so much," Rhonda said . "Every time we got together it was like: 'I really wanted to be there for you. I really tried. And I am really just sorry.' As we got older we tried -- I know I tried -- to say: 'Let it go. It's alright. We have forgiven you.'"

For his son, forgiveness came harder. After he graduated from Harvard in 1978 -- Pat did not attend the ceremony -- Deval moved to New York for the summer to work in a bank training program. When the rooming situation he had arranged fell through, he moved in, somewhat apprehensively, with his father for the summer. It was the longest time they had spent together since Pat left home. They talked. A lot.

"We covered a lot of ground," said the governor, laughing hard. "We had a lot of unfinished conversations that summer, and not all of them in a civil tone of voice. But they were important conversations for us to have had. What the relationship was or wasn't between him and my mother. His issues about my being at Milton. All that stuff."

Although progress had been made, a silence yawned between the two men. As Deval was consumed by law school and a judicial clerkship in Los Angeles, his father was often on the road. At times, Deval had no idea where he was.

In 1983, Deval and his bride-to-be, Diane, moved to New York. One day, he saw in the newspaper that his father was playing at a small club in town. Although he had not seen his father for a long period, he suggested that they go. It was time, he said, for Diane to meet Pat. Diane agreed instantly, but she knew her fiancé was anxious.

"Deval was, frankly, worried whether his father wouldn't respect him," said Diane. "Did Deval turn into the person that his father feared he would turn into? He didn't. . . . But Deval's father wasn't around to know that."

That night, they slipped into the club where Pat was performing with two other musicians. Within minutes, Pat caught sight of them in the audience. He stopped dead in the middle of the piece. He laid down his instrument, strode into the audience, and threw his arms around his son. And then he put his arms around Diane. The couple stayed the rest of the night.

"Deval's relationship with his father changed right then and there," declared Diane. "We got him caught up in about fifteen minutes and we vowed to stay in touch."

They did. Pat helped them set up their new home in Brooklyn. When he wasn't traveling, he would sometimes stay with them. But the slowly blossoming relationship had its wrinkles.

In 1984, Diane and Deval were married in their home. Diane had planned on a reception with lots of dancing. She had a special dance tape made and cleared all the furniture out of the second floor. But just as the party was getting going, Pat arrived with a local band in tow and announced his surprise wedding gift: his music. The band began to play. Then Diane's father, John Bemus, took the microphone and began to belt out some Frank Sinatra tunes. Diane, her dance tape idle on the shelf, sighed.

"Our fathers became the entertainment so there was no dancing," said Diane.

"I was not very pleased. But Deval thought it was great."

One year later, the couple were expecting their first child. Pat was thrilled. Every day he called to check in. The one day he did not call, Sarah Patrick was born.

Deval called his father, who at the time was driving a limousine in the city, but could not reach him. Later that day, Deval hurried out of the hospital to get some food for his wife and a small rattle for his new daughter. As he was crossing Park Avenue, his arms filled with packages, he heard a loud honking. He looked up to see his father, a chauffeur's cap on his head, waving beside a gray stretch limousine. He told Pat the baby had been born.

"He said, 'Come on, come on,' the governor recalled. "And he drove me to the hospital and we pulled up in this long limousine. He told me to sit in the back. It was hilarious."

Pat had six more years to live. Although he spent his last year at his mother's home in Illinois, he came to know his children better. And he talked about his son to his friends.

Once when Adams, the NRBQ keyboard player, had some legal issues, Pat suggested he call Deval.

"He told me his son was a top lawyer," said Adams. "Then he said, 'You know, my son is going to be big one day, really big.'"

"He made a real point of it."

Pat Patrick died on the last day of December in 1991 at age 62. At his service in East Moline, all three of his children were present. Deval was one of the last people to speak.

'If my dad was here, I know he would be very proud of me'

Early in 2006, 15 years after Pat Patrick died, David Hirshland, the president of Bug Music, which collects the royalties to the song "Yeh, Yeh," realized that \$45,000 was owed to Patrick's estate. Who should it go to? He called Terry Adams who called Danny Ray Thompson. There was a boy, they recalled. A lawyer somewhere. But what was his name?

Thompson got on the computer and Googled lawyers named Patrick. And up popped a website for the gubernatorial candidate, Deval Patrick. "I said, 'WHOA!,' " exclaimed Thompson. "Pat's boy is running for *governor!*"

The day after Deval was elected, Thompson called and left a message congratulating him on behalf of the Sun Ra Arkestra. Deval he says, called him back and left a message. He said: "Thank you for keeping the memory of my father alive. If my dad was here I know he would be very proud of me."

Sally Jacobs can be reached at jacobs@globe.com. ■