

“Thank You For The Music”...A Personal Story

Taking the liberty of using the title of one of Abbas big musical hits, I am reflecting back about the impact that music can make in ones life. Nearly everyone as they are born are probably introduced to some form of musical interlude such as the tinkling of a music box or the chant of something similar to “Rock A Bye Baby” where the words of this nursery rhyme sung are reputed to reflect the observations of a young pilgrim boy in America who had seen native mothers suspend a birch bark cradle from the branches of a tree enabling the wind to rock the cradle and the child to sleep.

Not truly being an accomplished musician, and with the goal of not wanting to “blow my own horn” this essay is merely meant to be a reflection of my own thoughts of appreciation for the musical opportunities that have touched me in my travels through time.

I suppose my first exposure to some form of participation in music actually began when I was asked to strap on a large base drum in the third grade and told to beat it to an elementary arrangement of the Marine Hymn. I guess it was popular that all schools played a lot of patriotic music at the time because World War II was raging in Europe.

Not thinking much about playing an instrument in school , our family moved to a small town in the Lower Valley of El Paso, Texas called Clint, and one day a teacher there handed me a long metallic thing called a flute, and said try this one. Having a flute instruction book one would begin practicing whole notes on the F-A-C-E and E-G-B-D-F treble clef , finally graduating to half and quarter notes all the while gently blowing shaped lips in a form resembling a smirk which is called an embouchure. The only use of the unfamiliar bass clef came when singing in church choirs alternating between tenor and bass parts

Playing this type of instrument sometimes subjects one to some ridicule and kidding in spite of the sweet sound the flute makes but yours truly continued to practice reaching first chair in another high school band which was located several miles away.

One day, however, a beautiful golden haired angel transferred to my school and of course she had to be the most talented flautist anywhere... Moving down to second chair, I suddenly decided to change my instrument. Teaching myself to play saxophone in marching season and oboe in concert season was not too difficult because the finger keys on these horns are very similar.

Because most young people had not yet been exposed to rock and roll, the big bands were still playing their style of music featuring 5 Saxes, four trumpets and trombones, string bass, piano, and drums. Trying to copy that type of dance music a group of us decided to buy some standard stock charts and start a high school dance band called “The Swingsters’ The group performed stock arrangements for football dances, proms and various functions in the valley area where

some extra spending money was acquired. The fees became a small problem because the band had not joined the music union and were accused of taking money away from other bands in the area. Earning money also meant that students might be considered as professionals and could not be participants in interscholastic league competition. However, most fears were overblown because the details of our business ventures somehow appeared to be overlooked.

Next, being selected as a drum major of the high school band, it began to sink in that music was really going to be an important part of my life, and conducting a large contingent of folks making a lot of noise can give one a feeling of extreme satisfaction.

The first real chance to play really good big band music came while still in high school when the noted jazz director John Carrico at Texas Western College(Now UTEP) in El Paso asked this person to join the college jazz ensemble “Varsitonians” featuring a full complement of instrumentalists and even a vocalist. The money was better and the gigs were bigger playing swishy balls, receptions and even flatbed truck performances on air force and army bases. Trumpet player Rudy Tellez went on to become producer of the Johnny Carson show in Hollywood. Carson called him his “Merry Mexican”. Even though I was still in high school, Dr Carrico also asked me to participate in the Texas Western marching band because the college was short of players in those years.

After graduation next was a trip away from home across state to the University of Texas at Austin where geology was to be the major but the lure of music beckoned me again to formally join the Longhorn Band. Not having instruments in my possession at the time a purloined baritone sax from the instrument room served as my horn for a freshman year. Eventually the trusted Martin tenor sax and borrowed oboe made its way to Austin where it was put to good use. The Longhorn Band was not very good at the time but managed to squeak through with mediocre performances that in no way could compete with the Aggie band from Texas A&M.. However the band made every football trip and the camaraderie was good for those first years.

Near the end of the third year, several of us made an appointment with the Dean on campus that was to change the course of music at the University of Texas. Making a point that a school the size of the University of Texas should have a top rated band that could compete musically with the likes of the noted Aggie Band, we emphasized that we needed to hire a band director that could turn the organization around. The Dean looked us in the eyes and said “Boys, I will take care of It”. The rest was history because Vincent R. DiNino came on campus and built the band into an organization that eventually won the Sudler Trophy for being the best college band in the United States. Dinino’s first year began with a bang requiring all members to audition. He suggested to our group that we form a jazz ensemble, furnishing stands, lights and music. We formed with four saxes, three trombones and three trumpets, piano, drums and bass and began playing for campus dances. Because he could play any instrument, DiNino would “sit in” when a member was absent. The Longhorn Band Jazz Ensemble began to swing out.

Rock music began to rear its head in the mid fifties with the likes of Bill Haley and the Comets and others. Planning for a sorority gig one time, a call was received that the affair had been cancelled because a new entertainer was coming on the scene and the party's planners indicated the price was cheaper and had different music. That was definitely true because his name was Elvis and Col Tom Parker at the time was only charging \$600 for a performance to get him known around the college circuit.

It was time for graduation however and a Navy Commission waited so the music faded briefly but unknowingly was destined to return. Vince DiNino kept a uniform handy however for a young Naval officer stationed in Orange, Texas to use on football weekends so an unconventional Longhorn Band membership continued to flourish on Saturdays.

While this person was stationed in the Golden Triangle area of Texas, a young trumpet player by the name of Worley Hines working for an oil firm had found out that I had dance band experience and invited me to audition with the Lamar University Technicians. The band needed a second tenor sax and I happily joined the group that had superior talent. Worley had been a member of the One O'clock Band at North Texas and had played with a number of big well known organizations.

The Technicians played for a number of gigs in the area and also took a tour through the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Mexico. Of course it meant taking leave from the service but the opportunity of being in a "road band" was too good to turn down. The group made a 45 RPM record of tunes arranged by band members, the music of which survives over 50 years today on a CD. Nearly all of the Technicians went on to become famous not only in the music field but in other professions as well. Bill Rogers, our trombone player became a famous arranger charting tunes for Frank Sinatra, Steve and Edie Lawrence and other notables. Richard Burkart, the leader went on to Ohio State as a noted trumpet professor teaching many famous musicians.

Another respite from music lasted when I served additional years in the Sixth Fleet overseas, but upon release from active duty, post graduate work in geology at Texas gave me another opportunity to play with the Longhorn Band in the Spring of 1960 being in the pit band for the Campus Round Up Revue.

Through many years up to the present I have been fortunate to play in the Longhorn Alumni Band and recently wrote an article published in the University of Texas Alcalde magazine about the history of the alum group. It is my understanding it was sent to at least 100,000 Texas Exes.

For one that has never had one class of music theory or formal music training, I have been blessed to be able to have had the sound of music around my life all these long years, playing arrangements of some of the best classical, popular, and marching songs arranged by geniuses

the likes of Beethoven, Mozart, Stan Kenton, Glen Miller, John Phillips Sousa, and even friends Worley Hines and Bill Rogers of the Lamar Technicians.

Just recently I was fortunate to be in attendance at a reunion of a large group of ex Lamar musicians in Beaumont honoring Dr. Burkart to honor him for being such a positive figure in all their lives. Many brought their "axes" and a great jam session ensued after the dinner. One of Mr. Burkart's ex students is an accomplished tenor sax man who also participated and he just happens to be the standing president of Lamar University.

I hope the music will go on and on.....for it is one of life's great joys both to play and to listen to. The "goosebumps" will always be there. Most musicians will know what I mean.

Again."Thank you for the music"..I can't imagine a life without it.

Jim Richards

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