



## A conversation with Tom and Lori Neufeld

with Derek Klassen  
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I recently had the privilege of getting to know Tom and Lori Neufeld of Roland, MB. They are lifelong music-makers, enthusiastic community band members, and accomplished musical entertainers for all ages. Tom and Lori have been involved in the MBA's community band scene for many years – they've played in many ensembles and have organized the annual Roland Community Band Workshops for the past 23 years. They have also performed extensively as "Lulu and the TomCat" (or "Lulu et le Matou"), their bilingual children's music group. Included in their accomplishments are



a Juno nomination, two Western Canadian Music Awards (in addition to being nominated seven times), and three Parent's Choice Awards. They have represented Canada at the World Expo in Japan and performed at Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa-Gatineau. At the heart of all that Tom and Lori do is a desire to educate, inspire, and connect with people through music: "we want to help the younger generation understand how to become lifelong music-makers, community members, and contributing citizens."

### **Where did you grow up? When did you two first meet?**

Tom: I was born in Edmonton and grew up in Toronto/Montreal – that is, assuming that I've grown up at all!

Lori: Yes, and I grew up in Montreal. We met in Montreal, in high school music programs! Tom had a band and I wanted to be in it!

Tom: I played guitar in jazz band and also took flute, and Lori played flute in school and also viola outside of school.

### **What kind of experiences were important to you in your high school music programming?**

Lori: We had a great band teacher in Montreal – Doc Emmett – everyone called him Doc. The band program was in the basement of the auditorium, and he left that room open so people could go there and hangout, jam, and form their own music groups. All the equipment was always set up. That opportunity was really important, you know, because you could explore and just play. Even in the school, there were opportunities to play in the cafeteria –

Tom: Coffeehouses!

Lori: – and informal concerts. We did some trips with band, although that’s not what I necessarily remember the most. What I remember most is a really open feel to performing and Doc being really supportive of the groups. He wasn’t an overly critical teacher.

Tom: He was pretty laid back. We were also involved in a lot of other groups on the side – folk-rock bands, just jamming with other people, etc.

Lori: I also played in a community orchestra on viola. Later I played in community orchestras in Toronto when I lived there. I was an unusual child – I really liked playing along with adults! You learned a lot sitting beside a fantastic viola player, who would let me sit beside them even though at the time I sucked! It was very gentle, and I learned an awful lot. Same thing on flute in Toronto later – all the other flute players were way better than me, but just sitting there and listening to everybody while playing what I could. I learned much more that way than if I was in a group of kids my own age. This is a great function of community groups – almost like an apprenticeship.

**Can you describe your early experiences with music? Who first got you interested in music? Are your families also involved in music?**

Tom: My family was involved in music – my mother was a piano teacher and my father was a singer. He also played bass in the Mennonite Community Orchestra. He would tell the story of taking his double bass on the bus to get to the rehearsals! So, I was always encouraged in music. I started on piano with my mother. In grade three I believe I took up the guitar – bought my own guitar. When did I get into all the other instruments?!

Lori: When we were working together at Garden Valley Collegiate [Lori as a teacher and Tom as the librarian] you branched out to other instruments, including drums because we needed a drummer. We had a pick-up band with the teachers, which was called Crokinoles.

Tom: What we would do is accompany students at variety shows and other events. We had both students and staff in the band – it was like a “house band”.

Lori: We did accompaniment for the musicals and plays as well, and we always tried to get students to join in with us.

**What about you Lori, who got you interested in music to start with?**

Lori: I wanted to play flute because I wanted to sound like a bird [laughs]. I started playing in the States – my family moved around quite a bit. I took quite a few music lessons, but as a young child I was a bit too small for the flute, so I played crooked (they didn’t have the “starter” flutes they have now). My first teacher wasn’t the best teacher, and it was a fairly negative experience, and basically my parents were told I should quit playing the flute until I get older. I quit taking lessons but kept playing the flute. I was resilient and this experience didn’t affect me in the long run.

I had a fantastic music teacher in Junior High in Toronto – Bill Mair. He was mostly choir, but I played the flute, and he would incorporate it into the different songs. I played by ear in addition to reading notes, so he would have me play along in various ways. I also wanted to learn piano, but we didn't have a piano at home, so he left the music room open in the evening for me to come and “teach myself” piano. In those days they did leave the rooms open, so when there were sports games going on, I could get in and practice. So, he was super encouraging, and I did write him a letter as an adult a few years ago to thank him for all the encouragement and help he gave me musically.

In the States – I lived in Louisiana for a while – it was a bit of a stressful time with politics because there was busing going on. I was unusual because I was Canadian and had an accent, and so I was picked on seriously in gym class. I went to the counselor and asked if there was any way I could get out of gym class because I was getting bullied there. They said “well, can you play an instrument?” I said “yes, I play the flute!” Then I could be in the pep band that performed any time there were sporting events, and it counted for Phys. Ed. Those were my people – no one picked on me there!

### **What led you to Manitoba, and specifically to Roland?**

Lori: Tom had relatives here, and the teaching jobs in Montreal were not plentiful. We decided we would pick a spot where we knew somebody and make some applications. We were living downtown Montreal, which is very different than Winkler or Roland!

Tom: It's quiet and peaceful! It worked out well – it's a small town, a friendly town, and close to Winnipeg.

Lori: We don't regret moving. Education jobs were available here; at the time in Montreal they were laying off a lot of teachers, you could only get a job in a private school, which is where I was working.

### **Would you say that performing music has been a career for you? Or has it always been “on the side”?**

Tom: Typically, musicians are playing all over the place. It kind of morphed into a career because we got more and more jobs playing music, and then I left the library job because we were just so busy that we couldn't do everything. I went more into recording and developing educational materials that go along with our music, and basically managing our music career. Lori continued teaching and doing music on the side, and then finally a few years back she started to get out of teaching (she's still subbing and doing term positions).

Lori: I'm addicted to teaching [laughs]!

Tom: Still, this freed up the schedule so that we could do whatever we wanted with our music, including some tours that we didn't have time for before. During the school year we do a lot of school programs. We do a lot of fairs and festivals.

**Can you tell our readers more about your involvement in children’s music and your group “Lulu and the TomCat?” What led you to get into this genre?**

Tom: Well, all our lives we’ve done different types of music. We’ve come up not only in the band world, but also in the singer-songwriter/guitar world – we’ve worked with both sides of it. We’ve been involved in so many types of music – we entertain seniors, we entertain adults, we entertain kids. At one time we decided we didn’t want to be typecast into one thing, so we thought we would have a couple of different “titles” – we’ll do this gig as “Tom and Lori”, and this one as “Lulu and the TomCat”.

Lori: I also have a French background, so we also have a French name – “Lulu et le Matou” – and we do a lot of French shows with that too. In terms of children’s music, we try to approach it in a story-like perspective. We like to write a lot of stories into the music, and to ensure that kids will learn something from it.

Tom: Edu-tainment!

Lori: Songs with a purpose, at least most of the time. They usually have a physical aspect – we like a lot of activity, with participation and involvement in the music. I think that’s what the kids really like – we don’t just perform, but we also invite them to perform. Parents like to listen too – we’ve often had many parents thank us for the type of music we write, because it’s something with a purpose that’s a little less “generic”.

**You’ve performed all over the world with “Lulu and the TomCat”, and received many nominations and awards, including a Juno nomination! What are some of your highlights from these tours/performances/experiences?**

Tom: We represented Canada in Japan at the World Expo!

Lori: Japan was a great experience. I learned enough Japanese to write a few songs and do a lot of introductions in Japanese.

Tom: Because Lori was competent in Japanese, she even got interviewed on national radio. They heard about her, and the producer came and dragged us downtown to the radio station!

We went to Cuba; we performed at schools and community centres – we went down there with GigOne with a jazz band. We had arrangements done for us by Rick Bowden, from Winnipeg. He did arrangements of our Lulu and the TomCat stuff for a 15-piece jazz band. We played with GigOne, and then we would do Lulu and the TomCat accompanied by GigOne, which was an amazing experience.

We also played at the Canadian Embassy in Washington as “Tom and Lori”.

Lori: That was amazing, especially in that big room where you could see the U.S. Congress in the background.

Tom: We’ve been all across Canada and the States to do workshops with our music – we’ve been to Albuquerque, Las Vegas, as well as SAGE presentations here in Manitoba several times. These are educational workshops – using music to teach reading, to teach various things. To reach children who have difficult reading. Quite often we perform in schools where the teachers have been in a workshop.

**Has being a bilingual performing group allowed you to reach more people?**

Lori: Oh definitely. We did Canada Day too, in Ottawa-Gatineau – that was in both languages.

Tom: Oh yeah, I forgot about that! We're doing this concert on a huge stage – called the Colours of Canada – and we're doing it in both languages. We're in the middle of a song, and the Snowbirds come flying directly over top of us, and of course we're drowned out! We kept going, and as soon as the song was over, I said, "Just like we rehearsed it!" [both laugh]. I mean, you're performing a song about Canada and the Snowbirds fly over – it was just incredible.

Lori: That was an amazing experience, and so was Japan.

**You are also involved in the community band scene here in Manitoba – what does your involvement look like, and what inspired you to get involved in that area?**

Tom: We were already involved in other community groups – church orchestra, ...

Lori: Assiniboine Band, German Club Band, Folklorama bands.

Tom: One of the guys in our church was playing in Prairie Red Coats, and he kept bugging us, but I was directing a choir, and Lori was singing in it, and that was on the same night. One of the groups – I think the band – changed their schedule and then we could do both! We play lots of different instruments, so we play what's needed. Currently I'm on tenor sax and Lori's on trombone.

**Can you tell us more about the annual Roland Community Band Workshop?**

Tom: The Band Workshop brings together all these community bands from across the Province, and even from the States. It's also a great opportunity to bring high school students together with the community band members, so that they'll realize that there are community bands that they can fit into. How often do we discuss life after high school with our band students? Playing in a band doesn't have to stop after high school!

This year's workshop is March 14, 2020 at the Roland Church Hall. There is a variety of music – from easy-medium to advanced. We've started a scholarship program this year for keen high school students who would like an enrichment opportunity. \$40 registration cost includes refreshments, lunch, and supper.

Lori: There are door prizes from our supporters, a silent auction in support of the Prairie Red Coats, and an evening concert to highlight some of the things that went well throughout the day. We break at about 5:30 for supper and after supper at about 7:00 we do the concert. A silver collection goes to the church as well. Often, we have other guest groups join us for the concert as well.

Tom: This year we have a Baroque quartet, other times it's been a Dixieland band, one time the Royal Winnipeg Rifles Band came to join us.

Lori: We presented a band member award for 21 years – in memoriam of Bob Day who was an avid community band member, trumpet player, and dentist from the Winkler area who passed away in a tragic car accident on his way home from a band practice. Many deserving people over the years have received the award. Bob Day was very involved in the very first Band Workshop

we did – in fact he was sort of the inspiration behind it – and he passed away shortly after that. We've now decided to start the scholarship program in Bob's name instead of the band award.

**What do you believe is the value of being able to participate in a school band/music program?**

Tom: It's non-competitive, it gets people working together as a team, and it's a team that you can take with you through your whole life, until you're 90 and beyond.

Lori: And some people who are less physically able can play an instrument without difficulty, whereas they might not be able to play on a basketball team. A band can be as large as you can manage, whereas some sports have restrictions with how many people can play. In bands usually you don't have that restriction – if you want to play, you play.

Tom: Also, to develop well-balanced adult citizens, one must be schooled in all aspects, including the Arts, which is so important.

Lori: Music is about patterns. Patterns are terribly important in mathematics, sciences, and languages. It crosses over so many categories. I think that it really helps students with math, even though many people wouldn't necessarily connect the two. And it transcends language barriers. When we were in Cuba we could sit in with the Cuban National Band, and even though most of us couldn't speak Spanish, every single one of us could play together with them and play well together. A piece of music is pretty universal, other than different notations here and there. Very transferrable, which I think is incredible. Something that we should all encourage in schools. If you want to combat discrimination and stereotypes, put musicians together.

**Can you comment on the burnout that a lot of music educators and/or musicians experience? How can we avoid this?**

Lori: Musicians oftentimes are always teaching and working with other people. It's important to take part in events where you just play and don't have the responsibility of leading the group or leading the activity.

Tom: We try to be involved in some groups where we have no responsibility – we just play! In Prairie Red Coats we are both involved on the Executive and involved in planning and organizing all kinds of things, but man is it nice to sometimes go to a band where you just walk in and sit down and play.

Lori: I think for music teachers especially, they are passionate about music, but they can sometimes lose that passion because they spend all day working with other people to develop that passion. They forget that they have that passion themselves. I think in order to avoid burnout people should dedicate some time to their own personal music endeavours. Band teachers also have all the extra-curriculars that go with their program, plus it's an optional program, so they have to work so hard to "sell it". That's hard, it's a lot of pressure. If you have a supportive administration and supportive school it can make it a lot easier, because then you're not fighting the system.

**You've talked a little bit about self-care. Are there things outside of music that you've found helpful for yourselves?**

Lori: Physical activity – I like swimming. Some people run, and when they're running, they don't think of anything else. It's a good way to take all the stress out. Something non-competitive, purely for release and resetting. Humour is also a good one – watch some funny YouTube videos or whatever type of comedy acts you like. And talking to people about what you're experiencing. If you just keep trying and trying until you're all the way burned out, it's not going to help you.

**Is there anything specific you would like to share with the Manitoba band community?**

Lori: Southern Manitoba is a very supportive area for music programs, and we should all feel privileged because there are a lot of other areas where they don't have those kind of support systems. Here, parents will often support the programs and keep them going. The future is in musicians who can create and make music. In a world of lots of computer-generated content, people are going to crave interaction and personal connections, because we spend so much time staring at a screen.

Tom: Band teachers should be stressing life beyond high school, for the sake of the students plus for the sake of community bands. Students should know that there is life on their instrument beyond high school! We want to help the younger generation understand how to become lifelong music-makers, community members, and contributing citizens.