



## A conversation with Brent Campbell

with Graydon Cramer

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*Recently I had the pleasure of sitting down for coffee with one of my mentors, Brent Campbell, in his office at the Brandon School of Dance. Brent has recently retired from teaching band at Vincent Massey high school in Brandon where he taught for thirty years. He continues to keep himself busy directing the Brandon Jazz Festival, running his dance school, now working as well for Group Travel Planners, and in countless other ways simultaneously (anyone who knows Brent will know this is typical). Over the years he has been heavily involved with numerous organizations such as IAJE Canada and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Brent has had a tremendous impact on music and music education in Brandon, Manitoba, and beyond over the last few decades and I feel very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from him in my first years of teaching.*



### **Where and when were you born and where did you grow up?**

Edmonton, 1958. Then we moved to Winnipeg right away, and I lived in Winnipeg through first grade. Then I moved to Toronto, that's where I grew up until I went to University.

### **Where did you go to University?**

At Potsdam State in upstate New York, at the Crane School of Music where I took a bachelor of music education 4 year degree as a trombone major.

### **What first got you interested in music?**

Taking piano lessons as a little kid and I was always in the band program throughout high school and junior high and had lots of great experiences going to camps and playing in youth orchestras and different Jazz bands. I played with a military band in Toronto, the 48th Highlanders, and there was nothing else that I really wanted to do so I went into music.

### **Give a brief synopsis on how you became a music educator.**

I just always knew that I wanted to go to university and take music. When I was in university I had a chance to play one summer with the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, so I played with them and that really made me decide that I didn't want to do that as a living. Playing the same show twice a night, every night, where the guy that was singing with the band, Bob Eberle, he was good but it was the same lines, the same jokes so it got old really fast. It was fun for a summer, but then I went "no, I don't want to do that for a living".

### **Why did you choose to go to school at Potsdam?**

The music coordinator for our school division in Scarborough, Don Coakley, was a graduate from there and he knew a lot of the profs from Crane. He'd do a music camp for ten days in the summer and bring all of those guys up here. I would be working with Tony Maiello, Elliot Del Borgo, Arthur Frakenpohl, Robert Washburn, and all of these guys that we all know about and they always said come on down and check it out so I did. Potsdam is a small town, about ten thousand and there's two colleges so it's just a university town and so I went down there and it was great.

### **Who are/were important musical and educational inspirations for you?**

When I grew up in Toronto I was always going to listen to Jazz downtown so guys like Rob McConnell, Phil Nimmons, and the Jazz players that were in Toronto and also the educators like Elliot Del Borgo.

### **Where was your first teaching job?**

In Winnipeg. My first year I taught half time at Sturgeon Creek and half time at Ness Junior High and the following year both positions went full time and I got to choose which one I wanted to go to so I went to Sturgeon and I stayed there for two more years. The second and third summers I took summer courses at Brandon University towards my masters and then I took a year off to work on my masters full time and then I just stayed here and got a job at Vincent Massey. I was half time my first year working with Dave Schmidt and then the next year I went to full time so there were two full time positions at Massey which was grades 7-12. This was great because we would get the kids in grade seven and then have them all the way through grade twelve. After Dave moved to Crocus Plains I also taught with Wendy McCallum and Jacquie Dawson and Roger Mantie was there I believe when I took a year of deferred salary when my son was born.

### **Is your family also involved in music?**

My wife is an elementary music teacher and my kids all play. Emily played trumpet and French horn all the way through, Meredith played bassoon, and Duncan played clarinet all the way through grade 12. All of my kids also sing.

### **Who are some of the people that have made a significant impression on you over your years of teaching?**

I think watching Wendy McCallum starting in Neepawa, and then teaching with me, and just watching the path that she's taken, I'm inspired by her. Jacquie Dawson for sure, even though I only taught with her for one year. All the colleagues that have these fabulous programs and know how to relate to kids and build community. Dave Schmidt was a big inspiration to me, although I didn't realize it at the time, but the way he taught was great. Even some of the other teachers at Massey, not even music teachers, that had great respect from their students.

### **What advice do you have for younger directors and recent graduates?**

Keep doing it as long as you love it, and when you stop loving what you're doing, do something else because you have to love it or it will just consume you. The only people that put in as much time as music teachers would maybe be coaches in the phys-ed program and even then they do it for three months of the year or for one season, we do it all year long. Take advantages of all the opportunities that it offers you for travel and things like that. Don't be afraid to reach out to all your colleagues and peers for advice and support because you can be pretty lonely in the school when you're the only one doing what you're doing, so get involved that way. Make sure that especially when you start a family that you leave the job at work, it shouldn't be all consuming. A big part of your program and the success of your program and your retention is building that sense of community with your kids and showing them that you care about them.

### **What is a memorable teaching experience from your teaching career?**

Trips are a part of that. Going to Europe, to China, to Italy with kids and showing them more than just music, showing them the culture of the world. One of the most memorable was when we went to Italy and our choir got to sing five o'clock mass at St. Peters. That was spine tingling special. Also, providing any kid that wanted to the opportunity to go into music. I never pushed any student to go into music, but if they wanted to I would help them. I met my wife on a band trip, in University on a Jazz band trip to Thompson.

### **You always seem to have a lot of things on the go at the same time. What's drawn you to what you do outside of teaching?**

I guess I just like to be busy. I like administration and Jazz Festival work. I like running the dance studio and am now involved with *Group Travel Planners*. If I was going to go back to school I would love to take a masters in business administration and might take some business courses at BU in the future.

### **Why do you feel it is important for teachers to get involved in associations like the MBA?**

It can be lonely just being the only one at your school doing what you are doing and the MBA is super strong. I think most people in Manitoba realize it but if they don't, Manitoba is the envy of the country in terms of band programs here and how strong the musical scene is here. It's super important to be involved with the MBA for the networking and the supports and everything that you get from your peers here. It's truly unique. If you look at the quality of the bands here, there are a lot of exemplary programs.

### **Why do you think the band association here in Manitoba is so strong?**

The biggest factor was Ken Epp. I was here when this really got off the ground and started. Having Ken Epp at the helm being super organized and encouraging, he did everything in the nicest way possible. He was great for the association and that's one of the reasons why it's so strong here; his legacy.

### **What is the value of being able to participate in a school band program?**

As a teacher, it's different every day and usually your administration leaves you alone to do your job. It's allowed me to do a lot of things outside of the job such as be involved with IAJE and Jazz Canada and I worked with Jazz at Lincoln Center for a while and with other organizations. It was great to go to conferences all over North America and network with people. As a student, to be able to explore their creative side, to travel, to be part of likeminded community of people who want to make music.

### **How did the Brandon Jazz Festival come to be?**

Two guys started it: Wayne (Bowman) and Dave (Schmidt) and they invited twelve groups that first year (1983), two adjudicators, and then it just kept going every year and got bigger and bigger and bigger. The second year I brought a band because I was still teaching in Winnipeg, and then the third year I got involved because I was here working as a grad student. I took over running the festival a couple years later. The third year we had maybe something like 28 bands and then it grew to 56 and then something like 80 and then I thought, "oh man it can't get any bigger than this it's crazy". Then I took a couple of years off and Roger (Mantie) ran it and Sean McManus ran it and things kept developing from there. Now, we can host about 170 or 175 groups.

### **What advice would you offer educators who also seek a long and successful career?**

Never stop learning and knowing that there are always things you won't know; don't beat up on yourself. Make sure that you love what you're doing and when you stop, do something else, because if you don't . . . the kids are the ones who will suffer. Have fun at our job and don't let it be all consuming.

### **Anything else you'd like to share with the MBA?**

It's something unique that we have here in the province. It's been a great place to work and to have my career and I think that the future is strong here for band programs, the strongest across the country. If you're going to teach band this is a great place to do it!