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### **THE BEAT GOES ON—DAVID AND THE DRUM —H. David Vuckson**

From the age of five when I entered Kindergarten at Victoria School on Maple St., I had a fascination with the bass drum. When our morning class teacher Muriel Freedly (an across-the-street neighbour of mine on Ste. Marie St.) organized the Kindergarten “band”, I very much wanted the big drum. It wasn’t actually that big as we would consider a bass drum today, but it was big relative to the size of a five-year-old. I was disappointed when the drum was given to Bert Robinson and I had to be content with the two ribbed red sticks I was given to bang or scrape together (many of you will remember these sticks). The band was led by Mary Gibson (another across-and-down-the-street neighbour on my block) at the piano and while Mary played, the class banged sticks and rattles and generally made noise.

The annual “Parade Of School Children” each September as we marched to the Great Northern Exhibition (when it was held at Exhibition Park, now known as Central Park) was led by the Town Band. The Exhibition Parade was typically a school child’s first exposure to military music when, at the start of the school year just after Labour Day, we practised marching around the school yard while recordings of military marches by John Philip Sousa blared from a loud speaker on the school steps. On the opening day of the Great Northern Exhibition (a Friday in late September) we marched behind a live band to Exhibition Park where we were turned loose on the midway rides. My next exposure to a marching band was as a spectator during the annual parade of the C. C. I. Cadets when, each year in May

from 1954 onward, from the new C.C.I. at Cameron St. in the south end of town, they marched down Hurontario St. for their annual inspection. We lived on Ste. Marie St. at the corner of Victory Drive and not only could I hear the band coming but could also see them as they passed the corner of Victory Drive and Hurontario St. a block away. I remember being particularly enchanted with the glockenspiel at the time. My father asked if I wanted to be in that band when I got to high school and I said yes and that I would play my harmonica when I joined! Cadets had been part of the school curriculum for all boys since 1899, but by the time I got to C.C.I. in September 1961, participation was now optional and I didn't see myself practising shooting rifles so I never did participate. Evidently, I wasn't the only one who was not interested in the Cadets Corps, and the organization faded away a few years later. Not having to join Cadets was as much of a relief to me in Grade 9 as it was in Grade 13 when there were no Phys. Ed. Classes. I was much more interested in music than military training or gymnastics.

At the Hume St. location, between January 1926 and the spring of 1954, before the move to Cameron St., the C.C.I. Band and Orchestra rehearsed and performed on the vast level expanse of hardwood floor between the stage and the raked audience seats in the large Auditorium. Located as it was above the Gymnasium and insulated from nearby classrooms by hallways on the east, south and west sides and with the exterior wall on the north side, the exertions of the musicians in the Auditorium did not disturb academic work. When C.C.I. opened at its new location in 1954, the building had a *much* smaller footprint than it does now. Instead of a real Auditorium, the Gymnasium did double duty as a Gym and Auditorium insofar as the Girls' Gym had/has a stage. Trolleys of stacking chairs lived under the stage and were set up on the gym floor for concerts, assemblies, etc. This arrangement was functional, but not ideal. The 1954 main classroom wing running east and west had the Music Room on the ground floor in the north-east corner of that wing at the Hurontario St. end and it shared that ground floor of the building, east of the centre staircase, with the Wood Shop and Metal Shop and the two Home Economics classrooms.

While still in public school, I used to ride my bike up to C.C.I. and travel the network of paved sidewalks around the building in anticipation of being a student

there. I would stop and look through the windows of that cramped Music Room at the drums and tuba and imagine the fun that went on in there. This location for a Band Room directly under the second floor classrooms was very far from ideal and, as the school population grew, a single storey addition was built at the beginning of the 1960's—I expect at the insistence of Jim Knights, the new Music Director—onto the south end of the Gymnasium wing with an instrument storage room, a music room, and an additional classroom beside it. From here, instruments and music stands could be easily and quickly carried into the Gymnasium/Auditorium when needed, a great improvement from the former situation (1954-60) when the Music Room was at the far opposite end of the school building. In Gregg Arnason's time in the mid 1960's, he had the wall between the Music Room and the little-used adjacent classroom removed to create a much larger space as the music programme grew and expanded.

My first chance to drum came during my high school days in the 1960's—not in school, but in the Town Band. My friend David Towns played trombone in the Collingwood Civic Band led by J. S. “Jim” Knights, a brilliant, eccentric, amazingly energetic, larger-than-life trumpet-playing Englishman. Jim had learned to play trumpet in a Salvation Army band and was a graduate of Kneller Hall, the School of Music for the British Army. The Collingwood Civic Band's rehearsal hall at the time was above the Peoples Store at 55 Hurontario St. I went with my friend one Monday evening to listen to the practice and, as it turned out, no one showed up to play any of the drums. By default, I ended up being the drummer of the Civic Band for a number of years. I quickly figured out that I could play the bass drum with one hand and the snare drum with the other. A cymbal on top of the bass drum could be struck with the snare drum stick and I became a one-man drum section (while standing still, not when marching). In the band playing cornet was my Grade 5 teacher from Victoria School, David Brown. He was once my public school teacher, now we were band mates.

The bass drum in question was the typical “marching size” bass drum held on the chest with a strap. When there was an event like the Orange Parade on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, I carried this drum for quite a distance through town. For “Monster Parades” like this we started out the Hume St. gate of the Exhibition (now

“Central”) Park, proceeded west on Hume to Hurontario, north on Hurontario to First, west on First to Maple St., south on Maple to Sixth St., east on Sixth/Hamilton St. to Paterson St. and then through the Paterson St. gate of Exhibition Park back to our starting point by the curling club. During parades we had no snare drum, just the bass drum. The Orange Parade was a grand occasion when it was held in Collingwood with Orange Lodges and their fife and drum bands coming to town from far and wide. By tradition, the Collingwood Civic Band led the parade. One year when Jim Knights was the music teacher at the high school in Penetang, he beefed up the Collingwood band with about forty of his best students from Penetang, many, if not most of them, being Catholic. This was the irony of a parade celebrating the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in the year 1690 at which the Protestant forces of King William of Orange defeated the Catholic forces of King James II. The parade passed under a large banner strung across Maple St. proclaiming “ONE FAITH-ONE FLAG-ONE SCHOOL”.

On Sunday evenings in the summer months, following a long-standing tradition going back to the Victorian era, we played concerts at Sunset Point. We would load up chairs and music stands at the band hall into Wilf Johnston’s pickup truck, driven by my friend Rod Johnston, and set up the bandstand at Sunset Point. Art Bull would set up the sound system so that Jim Knights could address the audience and announce the music we were going to play. The program started off with hymn tunes and marches from the Salvation Army band books, continuing on with military marches, selections from grand opera, show tunes, virtuoso euphonium solos and so on. The audience sat in their cars and instead of applauding by hand, honked their car horns, a very distinctive cacophony which could be heard for blocks. These Sunday evenings were an idyllic echo of yesteryear when band concerts in the park were taken for granted as a part of life.

The Town Band played for the Remembrance Day Ceremony at the Cenotaph, standing on the sidewalk across from the monument. Once a year the band played for the Oddfellows Lodge “Decoration Day” Ceremony at their plot in the Presbyterian Cemetery where the Lodge symbol, the three chain links symbolizing Friendship, Love and Truth—F-L-T—was formed in cement painted white in the

grass. Years later, when the Lodge decided they didn't need the plot anymore, they sold it. My father and my mother's brother Howard Hewson, both of them members of the Lodge, purchased the space. My parents, uncle, aunt and one cousin are buried in that plot.

Jim Knights had been the Music Director at C.C.I. since 1960, following the tenure of Ken Hollier. During this time he also took on the direction of the Collingwood Civic Band. At C.C.I., in a severe clash of personalities, he ran afoul of the new Principal, J. C. McIntyre (1905-1996) who succeeded Jeffrey Peat in September 1961. Mr. McIntyre was not popular as stated below and the students referred to him as "Chromedome" because the glare of the stage spotlights off the top of his bald head in an assembly was blinding. Mr. McIntyre had great autocratic power as well as the backing of the Board of Education to do his bidding and by the end of the 1964-65 school year, Jim Knights' contract was not renewed. This was at a time when the School Board was still a locally-elected group, some years before the 1969 formation of the Simcoe County District School Board as it is now known. The C.C.I. history book *In Days of Yore* states on page 57, "*Mr. John McIntyre remembers that the thing he enjoyed about being Principal in the 1960's [September 1961-June 1969] was his ability to do whatever he wanted without interference from a bureaucracy...John took early retirement in 1969 just before the County Board took over as he felt the new organization would prevent him from acting in an autonomous manner that he was used to*". I was personally acquainted with one family in town that had issues with him and the lady told me that she hoped he was gone before her grandchildren started at C.C.I. She actually said something much stronger than that which I will leave to the readers' imagination.

After losing his position at C.C.I., Jim Knights subsequently became Music Director at the high school in Penetang, commuting daily from his home on Minnesota St. in Collingwood while still leading the Civic Band until his untimely death in the summer of 1969. He had also started a Junior Collingwood Civic Band with thirty-five boys and girls drawn from more than fifty applicants from Grades 5, 6 and 7 from the town's public schools. This was intended to be somewhat separate from the senior band but also to provide "new blood" as some of the older members of

the senior band retired. Jim also assumed leadership of the Meaford Town Band the year before his death. All this activity of burning the candle at both ends required a lot of travel. In the earlier 1960's Jim Knights drove an old battered car from the early 1950's and called it his "garbage can". By the time he was driving daily to Penetang and back he owned a brand new Volvo.

Meanwhile, in September 1965, Arni Gregg Arnason (1919-2006), came to Collingwood as the new Music Director at C.C.I. for the next ten years or so before moving on in 1977 to similar pursuits in Fort Nelson, B. C. where he was affectionately known as "Captain". One day, during my Grade 13 school year (1965-66) I happened to wander into the music room while the band was practising the march "Our Director". The girl playing the bass drum was striking it on the upbeat instead of the downbeat. I asked Mr. Arnason if I could take the bass drum and he agreed. I even gave the double-beat near the end to signify that the end of the music was coming—his face lit up and, by default, for the rest of my final year of high school, I became the bass drummer of the C.C.I. band. This adventure included a band trip to the high school in Owen Sound and at least one parade in Collingwood. In an assembly in 1966 Greg Arnason presented me with a crest/plaque for being the band's "spark plug". The inscription reads, "C.C.I. BAND AWARD ESPRIT DE CORPS DAVID VUCKSON 1966".

During that same Grade 13 school year, I also banged the bass drum as part of the Loyal Sons of Bognor Bass Drum and Bugle Band when we made a lot of noise on the sidelines at football games (see my April 2018 story *School Spirit At C.C.I.-- With Apologies To The Hamlet of Bognor*).

After graduation from C.C.I., I went off to York University for three years (see my October 2020 story *What Are You Going Through For, Boy?*) and every summer during those years I continued to drum in the Civic Band. One of those summers we went up to Meaford to give a joint band concert with the Meaford Band. While we were playing a Sousa march, my friend David Towns accidentally punched the rubber button on the end of his trombone slide into the skin of the bass drum, making a small puncture in that old brittle skin. That drum never sounded the same again. For the rest of my time in the band I used the big

concert-size bass drum that is shown in old photos of the band in its earlier days when it was known as the Kiltie Band. This drum, much larger and heavier than the damaged one, had the old-style cords and leather straps to tighten it. One summer Sunday evening at Sunset Point there was a rain storm and the extreme dampness introduced into the air immediately took the starch right out of that ancient drum and I could barely get a sound out of it (it recovered, of course, in drier air). When Pam and I visited Collingwood in March 1993 we went to the Museum and that same large bass drum that I used to play was on display in a glass case. I thought, "Someday they may put me in there with it!"

Our yearly summer band concerts in the park went on, continuing a tradition from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the tragic day of Saturday, June 21, 1969 when Jim Knights and his passenger Arthur Carloss, a postal clerk from Barrie, were killed when the single engine plane Jim was piloting crashed and burned in a field near Duntroon. They had flown out of the Collingwood Airport and circled over the house and farm of a friend, Mike Belcher just south of Duntroon. When Jim tried to gain altitude, the engine stalled and he could not restart it. The plane plunged nose first into a field and immediately burst into flames. The two men were killed instantly on impact and the bodies were burned beyond recognition. Jim's keys melted and, in the days following, the family safety deposit box at the bank had to be drilled open. Mike Belcher called the airport where the wives (Marie and Elaine) of the two men were waiting for them to return and then drove over to meet them. There was a strong connection between Jim Knights and the Belcher family. Mike's mother Alice and his brother Jim were next-door neighbours to Jim and Marie Knights on Minnesota St. To paraphrase a song, this was the day the music died.

I learned of the accident in a telephone call from Don Carscadden. A number of people, myself included, went over to the Knights home on Minnesota St. that evening to console Marie and her family. She was thankful that she had not gone up in the plane and that she was still there for her children who were ages 12, 10 and 7 at the time. Jim's elderly mother Hilda arrived from England shortly before the funeral service held at All Saints Anglican Church the following Tuesday. I was honoured to be one of the pall bearers.

The Civic Band limped along through the summer of 1969 with David Brown as interim leader and my friend Donald Kelly serving as the M.C. on Sunday evenings at Sunset Point. By the end of the summer I was just starting to play piano in the evenings in a hotel and would not be available for evening band practices. A new bandmaster named Howard Riome was hired and we did not “hit it off”, as they say. Because of this and my not being available for evening practices, I realized my time with the band was done and my drumming days were over. I turned in my key to the band room and moved on. From what I have learned, Howard Riome led the Town Band for several years, and was then followed by Ernest Berry.

I am still drumming in a way, whether on the desk with my fingers when working at the computer, on the dining table or on the resonant sides of the washing machine while waiting for it to finish spinning. When Pam and I are in the elevator in our building I often drum on the metal wall of the elevator, the fingers on one hand imitating the roll of a snare drum and the thumb (as well as one of my shoes) providing the beat of the bass drum while humming one of the marches we used to play over 50 years ago and Pam says, “Marching again!”. The beat goes on.

*David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.*