

HISTORY OF THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH BIG BAND

1970 - 1978

by John D. Birrell, M.D.

During the period between the winding down of the Musical Medics Big Band (late 1960s) and the birth of the future Hippocratic Oath Band (1970), your author's "star studded" career involved an association with the following groups:

Shrine Jazz Band
Dental Band - Holy Molars
Good Old Times Music Company - now Alberta Gold
Foothills Concert Band

Sometime in 1970 it came to my attention that there was a small Doctors band at the Foothills Hospital which played for hospital variety shows and other occasions, organized by Dr. Norman Soltice.

Norm was promptly contacted and I suggested that there were remnants of the Musical Medics Doctors Band available, including a fairly comprehensive library, and that if we amalgamated our two groups, we had the potential of developing another credible Medical Band. Norm was enthusiastically responsive to this suggestion and our first rehearsal together was arranged at the home of Dr. Hugh Morrish.

This historic rehearsal started off with great expectations with the following musicians in attendance:

Dr. Hugh Morrish
Dr. Norm Soltice
Dr. Cob. Johnson
Dr. Jim Nixon
Dr. John Birrell
Don McKeague

As the evening progressed it became obvious that there was no leadership potential among us, and our first experience was a total disaster.

At a post mortem we pondered the obvious conclusion that we were a conglomerate of relatively incompetent musicians, going nowhere without some quality leadership. As I had been playing in the percussion section of the Foothills Concert Band I suggested that their conductor, Dan Butala, be approached to at least get us started. He was contacted and graciously accepted our request not having any idea of the frustrating challenge ahead.

The next two or three months produced some semblance of hope, and realizing that Dan was contributing generously of his time, under rather frustrating conditions, and also realizing that we really "needed him", a financial pool was established so that we were able to pay him a token honorarium.

With our conductor-leader "hanging in there with us" and seeming to enjoy the challenge, it was now time to assess our progress and look to the future.

The original concept of a "Medical Dixieland Band" was discussed and it was obvious that with the talent at hand this was probably impossible. Dan suggested that with the addition of some lead talent, the potential for developing the Big Band sound was an achievable possibility in the future.

With this objective in mind he invited the following members of the Foothills Concert Band to join our rehearsals:

Bill Kuyt - Bass
Barry Butala - Sax
Cy Blackwell - Trombone
Julian de Cocq - Sax

An advertisement was placed in the Calgary Medical Society Bulletin in an effort to augment our medical members. This produced the following players:

Dr. Murray Caplan - Trumpet
Dr. Roy MacKenzie - Piano
Dr. Dennis Remington - Tenor Sax

Shortly thereafter the following players joined our group:

Dick Tregillis - Musical Medics - Trumpet
Dr. Leo Robotka - Musical Medics - Trumpet
Bill Rook - Musical Medics - Alto Sax
Dr. John Deacon - Guitar
Dr. George Findlay - Holy Molars - Trumpet
Ron Holt - Trumpet
Janice Butala - Vocalist

By the end of 1971 we were 15 - 17 strong with an enthusiastic and dedicated teacher / conductor and nothing but worlds to conquer.

During the early developmental stages of our now "Big Band", rehearsals were held in the homes of various members. It soon became obvious that with our expanding numbers, it was paramount that we establish a "same time same place" arrangement - in other words an "orchestra night". The Birrell's, being a jolly good couple, offered their rumpus room which came complete with piano and drums and their hospitality was enjoyed every Thursday night for the next eight years.

Stimulated by Dan's enthusiastic leadership, complemented by the great camaraderie and dedication of the band members, "no one but no one" missed a rehearsal. Everyone arrived early, or right on time, and no one left until the last note was blown - including Cy who flew out of

town on business almost every week. In the winter he would leave his trombone in the trunk of his car at the airport - on returning he would come directly to rehearsal, where it took at least 1/2 hour to complete the thawing out process before he could tune up. At the end of every rehearsal came the "piece de resistance" - Dorothy Birrell's delicious gourmet food enjoyed by everyone - especially Cy and Murray - the latter saying it was the only reason he came to rehearsals!

It should be mentioned that "Tone Improver" was curtailed, as liquid refreshments were strictly limited to soft drinks or beer.

We now can see ourselves down the road as Calgary's "other big band", but we must have a name. Following in the footsteps of the original doctor's big band (The Musical Medics Doctors Band), it seemed logical that the name of our new band should have some medical significance, especially as we still outnumbered our very important non-medical members. It was agreed that band members and spouses should contemplate this problem, and submit their suggestions. In spite of Roy's very thoughtfully conceived suggestion of "The Post Nasal Drips", Murray's suggestion of "The Hippocratic Oath" was unanimously supported - minus one.

It was also obvious that we could not appear in public without appropriate music stands. Again, in keeping with the general medical thrust of our band, the general design featuring the caduceus medical logo was readily accepted. Norm cut out the flatware and Bill cut out the logos four at a time on his jig-saw. Bill assembled and painted the first stand, and from this model the remaining 12 - 14 were cloned by various members in a great workshop experience. It was also realized that without lights on the stands, there was a risk of compromising our performance, so these were soon added. Only one problem remained - the constant unpredictable and unexplainable foul up in the wiring - which seemingly only Murray was able to solve. The Hippocratic Oath sign, complete with tripod, was the product of John Deacon and Roy's psychedelic minds, plus a friendly artist.

Again, looking to the future, having acquired very attractive, unique music stands complete with lights, it followed that we must present ourselves in equally attractive attire. Norm volunteered to work on this problem, and as a product of his aggressive research, he found a rack of purple shirts of various sizes, and recognizing a "great deal", bought the lot. By some miracle, his strategy worked out well and everyone had a shirt that fit - well more or less. The white ties were probably thrown in with the deal.

Our basic Musical Medics library was constantly being augmented by our traveling members (Bill, Roy, Norm etc.) who visited suppliers and brought back big band scores. A golden opportunity presented itself when the North West Music Co. arrived in Calgary and we were able to pick up a number of original big band scores.

The period February 25, 1971 to June 16, 1972 was a critical one in the life of the Hippocratic Oath. By this time, Dan, with his enthusiasm and obvious teaching ability, had melded a miscellaneous group of aspiring receptive musicians into a very credible band, fifteen strong, including our beautiful vocalist, Janice Butala.

We now had a reasonably comprehensive library including our opening theme (Woodchoppers Ball) - a real attention grabber, and a final sign off theme (Unchained Melody). We were now ready to be discovered.

Our first excursion into the musical world was made possible by Dennis. He arranged for us to play at the Mormon Stake House for a very large social occasion. This was a most enjoyable experience for our band - our audience seemed most appreciative with their applause (possibly just for Dennis) and we all enjoyed good food and lots of lemonade.

Our next engagement was at the Calgary Golf and Country Club where we played for the Medical Curling Club. In spite of a reasonably good presentation this was not exactly a great success, as it was obvious that our band was too large for the ballroom, and no matter how "quietly" we played our audience understandably had difficulty with the decibel level. We were paid the agreed fee of \$75 but were never invited back.

We had two more engagements during this period playing for a Holy Cross staff party (\$100) and a Calgary General Hospital Dance (\$150). At this point, the financial statements for this period (1971 - 1974) as prepared unprofessionally and unaudited by your author, will be found self explanatory and very interesting.

Our basic income was derived from contributions by our members who gave eagerly and generously, knowing we were receiving tremendous value for little investment. The \$18 items represented the \$10 honorarium for Dan and \$8 for beer. Our other source of income was derived from our performances which rarely allowed us to be in a positive cash flow position.

One item in the budget concerns a barbecue - \$85. It was realized that by tying up every Thursday evening (orchestra night) we must selfishly be impinging on our wives social schedule. The suggestion was made that we should have an annual barbecue to show our ever-suffering wives that they were really part of the band, and that we really appreciated their understanding. The first two barbecues were held at Norm's Sylvan Lake retreat, the next at Roy's home near Canmore, and the next two at Don's home in Bragg Creek where we entertained the local livestock with our energetic jam sessions around the fireplace on his large outdoor patio. Thereafter, our barbecues have traditionally been held on the back lawn of Murray's lovely Bonavista home.

By 1973 we could now present ourselves as Calgary's "Other Big Band". Our marvelous appearance with our distinctive music stands and sign, purple shirts, white ties and dark slacks and our lovely vocalist was only surmounted by our professional big band sound. Dick Tregillis was our Master of Ceremonies introducing our band members at an appropriate time in the program, and announcing our sets as we progressed through the evening.

An "Orchestra Wives Table" was always part of our presentation. They were our ever suffering critics. They always seemed to enjoy themselves and enjoyed the good food and liquid refreshments along with the band members. They were also useful (reluctantly?) in the set up and take down stages of our performances for which we were very grateful.

Now that we were being discovered by the public, we very soon became discovered by our good friend Ray Petch - President of the Musicians Union. He complimented us on our great progress in such a short time, and tactfully suggested that as we already had several union members in our band, we were putting these members and our band in a potentially embarrassing position, as we were now competing with other bands in the community, and being a "hobby band" undercutting their fees. A meeting was promptly arranged to discuss our relationship with the union ~ the result being that we instantly became a union band which put us in good standing with the Calgary music community. This was actually a blessing in disguise as we were now able to draw on the union for experienced fill-in musicians in emergency situations, and also, since we must now charge at least minimum union fees, we could now develop a modest capital account - a circumstance which permitted us to donate to several medically oriented funds and cover our band expenses more comfortably.

Looking back 20 years to the 1974 - 1978 era, it is of course impossible, in the absence of any records, to recall all our performances. The following performances that come to mind are therefore noted in a random fashion:

Mount Royal College - Holy Cross Hospital Annual Medical Staff Banquets - probably in 1973 and 1974. On one of these occasions we met Grant Lowry who joined our band and with his talent and enthusiasm moved our trumpet section to great heights - actually our band has never been the same since.

On several occasions, through Don McKeague, we played for Shrine functions. On these particular occasions, we charged our usual union rates and quietly returned most of the funds as a donation to the Shrine Children's Burn and Orthopedic Hospital in Winnipeg.

We enjoyed performing at the Calgary Conference Center for large professional groups i.e. oil companies Christmas parties etc. One of these was particularly memorable - the occasion was the annual banquet of the Alberta Medical Society. Charles Lynch was the guest speaker for the Society and of course was a guest of honour at the banquet. It was well known that he was a very talented harmonica player and it took very little persuasion to have him play several numbers with us, to the delight of our band members, and especially the audience and visiting press members.

McEwan Hall was one of our favorite haunts - tw

o special occasions stand out in our memory. First was the banquet and dance for the Alberta Wheel Chair Games Convention. This was a particularly rewarding experience to watch so many happy people "dance" in their wheel chairs. The other occasion was the University of Calgary Athletic Awards Night. This was a learning experience for us, as it very soon became evident that we were the wrong band for this energetic group demanding upbeat Rock and Roll - all we could do was to give them a heavy rock beat using the handle end of the drumsticks. Grant quickly solved this problem by introducing Rock and Roll and Funky Jazz numbers to our library.

Simons Valley - Holy Cross staff annual banquet - a rustic experience.
Palliser Hotel - fundraiser for the Calgary Symphony Orchestra
Cow Barn (Bragg Creek) - a Bill Kuyt extravaganza - for the American Transit Conference - complete with a miniature rodeo. The president rode into the hall on a horse during an intermission and announced that there would be no more music until several hats were passed - we did very well - an outstanding evening.

Greatest of all were two great Banff experiences. Everyone met at a mall on the North Hill. Bill got the bus for half price. Barney's chicken and beer were on board. There was a very excited and spirited group going to Banff. Great performance on Mart Kenny's band stand. We returned to the shopping centre a very sleepy, sedate group. Home by 2 to 3 a.m. John Beacon slept at the Foothills Hospital. Don McKeague always found his way to Bragg Creek.

Some personal observations from my exhalted position on my drummer's stool.

The Hippocratic Oath Big Band and the modern day Oath would never have existed if:

*there had not been a very successful Musical Medics Doctors Band;

*your author had not contacted Norm Soltice and suggest an amalgamation of his small group and the remnants and library of the Musical Medics;

*in our desperation we had not asked Dan Butala to help us get off the ground;

Dan had not recognized a degree of latent talent during our first 2 - 3 months, and by augmenting our initial group with lead players from his Foothills Concert Band, convinced us that something good could happen down the road;

*we had not recognized our good fortune in having Dan as our leader and teacher. He developed a sense of discipline in our rehearsals, was always patiently demanding in his own uniquely quiet way, all of which allowed him to enjoy the complete confidence and respect of everyone;

*we, as band members, had not developed a camaraderie and sense of good humour which initiated a strong sense of bonding and a discipline for learning which complimented the talents of our leader and mentor.

Having written all the foregoing, your author recognizes that the challenges faced during the formative and developmental years of the Hippocratic Oath have been successfully met and thoroughly enjoyed by everyone concerned. It is also obvious that the great strength of character, great bonding, mutual respect and sense of responsibility of the band members characterized the first 8 years of the Hippocratic Oath and has continued to the present - as witness the very professionally attired and accomplished sound of the modern Oath Big Band of the 90s.

John Birrell
Founder, Drummer
"Drummer Emeritus"

The following is simply a list of names of "founding members" and members associated with the band during the 1970 - 1978 period.

John Birrell
Norm Soltice
Dan Butala
Leo Robutka
Don McKeague
Roy MacKenzie
Murray Caplan
Dennis Remington
Cy Blackwell
Barry Butala
Janice Butala
Julian deCocq
Gerry Reid
Dick Tregillis
Bill Rook
George Findlay
John Deacon
Jack Ryan
Ron Holt
Ron Pratt
John McArthur
Keith Caldwell
[Walter Buehning](#)