

West Van band ages well at 75: Through ups and downs the music has never stopped

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It began as a vision, a vaporous wish, an exercise in civic pride.

The year was 1931. The place was West Vancouver. A few dreamers thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a musical band?"

Twenty willing youngsters came out to the first practice. There were few funds, the depression was looming and musical instruments were hard to come by. But the citizens of West Vancouver soldiered on.

Now, 75 years later, the West Vancouver Youth Band is still sounding the right note. From those shaky beginnings, it claims to be the longest standing band in the Lower Mainland and one of the oldest musical organizations, preceded only by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and the Vancouver Symphony Youth Orchestra.

Its ranks have swelled and shrunk with the rhythms of time. It has seen love affairs blossom, shrieks transformed into symphonies and boys grown into men. From day one, it has marched through the pages of one community's history.

In its early days, it was guided by a group of cigar-chomping men in suits who served as a board of directors and a ladies' auxiliary that kept the uniforms in tip-top shape and debated whether to serve cookies or brownies at band functions.

Now 72, Barrie Gillmore joined in 1944. He used to watch the band leading the May Day parade down Marine Drive. He knew he wanted to join.

It was all so alluring -- the black cape with the green lining, the chance to play the snare drum and then the euphonium. In those yes-sir-no-sir days,

even the inscrutable looks of the band master cast a kind of withering glory over the whole thing.

"I enjoyed playing the music and I wasn't much of an athlete, so that was one thing I could do," he said simply.

He joined near the end of the war. There were guys in the band who went overseas to fight and never came back. That's just how it was.

Grateful for the gifts of discipline and deportment that he got from the band, Gillmore became a band volunteer after he became a parent. He wanted to ensure that legions of youngsters got the same chance he did.

Each generation has swept like a wave through the band ranks, sending a crash of notes through the North Shore mountains and rattling band masters.

As a shy 13-year-old, Bill Murray, who is now 56, lived a stone's throw away from the West Vancouver Community Centre where the band practised. He used to sit in the window and listen. From his safe perch, he developed a crush on a girl in the senior band.

When September sign-up came, he told his mother he had to join.

So he dressed up for the big interview with the imposing Cliff Bryson, one of the many talented band leaders who have come and gone. "You sat in a chair with your best clothes on and waited for your name to come up."

"How old are you?" Bryson asked.

"Thirteen, sir."

"What would you like to play?"

"Trumpet or drums."

"You are kind of old. It's going to take you too long to learn the trumpet. So you can be a drummer."

Murray was overjoyed. He didn't care what he was going to play. He was in the band.

He wasn't the smartest kid in the school. Nor the most popular. Nor was he

an athlete. But here he was, given the chance to play music and to meet kids from private and public schools from across the North Shore who had no preconceived notions of who he was.

There were three bands. The elite A band, the middle B band and the junior C band.

"I was driven. I wanted to get to the A band as soon as possible. I wanted to show Mr. Bryson that he was wrong, that I could advance quite quickly." And so he practised. "I practised extra loud on nights when I knew the band was over there so Mr. Bryson could hear me practising."

He made the A band and rode through the crests and troughs of a band that waxed and waned through the years.

The mid-1960s were a particularly sad, scary time. A trip to Japan had been cancelled. The senior band had dwindled to about 15 members. "We were all looking around and wondering, 'Is this it?' "

Then a new band master named Len Whiteley showed up to revive it. By 1967, Canada's centennial year, it was booming. It went on a tour of British Columbia, opening skating rinks and community halls from one end of the province to the other. Then in Prince George, Murray experienced one of the most unforgettable experiences of his life.

The band members were really tired. They didn't think they were playing that well. Then someone in the audience called out for an encore and they played a combination of *When The Saints Go Marching In* and *Wait Until The Sun Shines Nelly*.

"The whole place went nuts. They were applauding. Everyone in the band had tears in their eyes. The audience had tears in their eyes. They loved it. It was just overwhelming. The applause was almost deafening. The cheering -- you just felt it throughout the whole room. It was amazing."

Murray went with the band to Europe in 1970. He would have never gone otherwise. His family couldn't afford it. Through the years, the band has taken kids far afield, to places like Hawaii, San Francisco and across Canada.

Celebrating the band's 75th reunion made Murray realize that it had given him friendships he didn't know he had. It has been a kind of glue on the North Shore, binding child to child, parent to parent, musician to musician.

In some ways, things have changed, but in others, they haven't. When he watches the present-day band, he wonders who is going out with whom and what kind of intrigues are fomenting behind the scenes. "The faces have changed. The uniforms have changed. But the stories are still the same."

He left the band after seven years, but the band never quite left him. In the early 1970s, in a kind perverse reversal of nature, the youth band gave birth to an adult band. Through it, Murray taught his 65-year-old mother to play the drums. She played them with him at the band's 50th reunion march. When she died, the photos of the two of them were on prominent display.

On his way to work, Murray plays his favourite band tunes. They bring a smile to his face. At the band's 75th reunion, he played the drums. That had him smiling, too.

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Alison Smith is a perky, pony-tailed 17-year-old and a talented alto saxophone player. She is the new face of the West Vancouver Youth Band. In its early years, it never allowed girls. Now, here she is.

To get in, she didn't have to go through a formal interview like Murray did. But each band leader has his own way of putting recruits through their paces. Douglas Macaulay, the current band leader, invites them to a rehearsal, then tests them.

Fix this, fix that. Your hand position is wrong. Sit up straight. Good luck. If they make it through rehearsal, they are in.

Macaulay made Smith read sight music at her first band practice. "It was very hard. I was kind of really scared. I thought. 'Oh, is he going to let me in?' "

Another new face is 18-year-old Stuart Cowan. His older brother, Harrison, was in the band. His uncle was in the band. It stood to reason he would join, too. "It was just sort of something to do, I guess."

He admits that leaving the band next year is going to be really weird. He will miss the band trips and the annual band camp, or weekend workshop as it is now called, in Squamish.

Smith's and Cowan's eyes light up when asked if the band is more sociable than it was in Gillmore's and Murray's days.

In his workday, Stuart's dad, Grant, is a Revenue Canada guy. In his off hours, he is a parent volunteer with the youth band and plays in the adult band.

"For my family, it has opened all kinds of things," said Grant Cowan. Harrison has just graduated from the Capilano College theatre program and, with some guidance from Macaulay, has turned into a fine tenor saxophone player.

Now approaching retirement, Grant is planning to take up full-time music studies.

Through the band, he has made friends with other parents and rubbed shoulders with the mayor and councillors of West Vancouver.

When dealing with such a beloved institution, it is difficult to know how to walk the fine line between tradition and modern times. Macaulay seems to have figured out how to do it.

He took on the job in 1993 at the age of 28 with some trepidation. The band wasn't doing very well at that point. He felt he was too young. He knew he had big shoes to fill, following in the footsteps of legendary band directors like Arthur Delamont and Len Whiteley.

But he took it on and slowly but surely set about rebuilding it to its current level of around 170 members, enlisting parents and trying to make the kids proud enough to actually tell people they were in the band.

He objected when there was a movement among parents to get rid of the uniform. It was part of the marching band's tradition, he argued.

Yet he rejected a suggestion that he wear a tie to rehearsals. He told the band's board of directors that he didn't think the kids would respect him because he wore a tie. Rather, they would respect him because he knows music. Nowadays, "there is more of an equality."

Yet Smith said band members have to respect Macaulay. They don't talk when he is trying to conduct. "He jokes around with us, but when it is work time, it is work time."

The kids have made Macaulay laugh and shake his head. There was this one time when they had just finished a concert by the sea at Ambleside Park. Three of the boys tore off their shirts, dropped their pants, ran down to the pier and jumped in for a swim. The audience was a little puzzled. Was this part of the show?

But mostly the kids have made Macaulay proud.

We live in a tangible world. If you can't hold it or put it on your credit card or hang it on your fridge or call it yours, it has no value.

Yet these kids walk in from that world, play some of the greatest music ever written and then it is gone. "To me, that shows signs of such significant promise for every one of these people."

He has taught entire families of kids. He has had some of them for 10 years, from age nine to 19. The hardest part for him is seeing them grow up and leave.

But that is life. Boys and girls grow up to be men and women. They grow old. And when they look back through the mists of time, what do they remember?

The band.