Music at MIT Oral History Project

David Bondelevitch

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

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Table of Contents

1. Family history and early musical memories (00:01:35) 1

   Herb Pomeroy and MIT—Abramovitz Lecture Series—Phil Wilson—violinist mother—Lawrence Welk Show—trumpet lessons—inspired by Louis Armstrong—hearing Maynard Ferguson, Woody Herman, Count Basie—hearing Frank Sinatra performance with Herb Pomeroy's band—Gerry Mulligan—Dave Brubeck—Dizzy Gillespie—self-taught music reading and piano—Marek Zebrowski—Paul Fontaine

2. Coming to MIT (00:10:18) 5

   Professional musical aspirations—Berklee College of Music summer program—math ahd science interests—Course IV—Richard Leacock—Herb Pomeroy and the Festival Jazz Ensemble—University of Southern California—humanities and music concentration at MIT—studies with Edward Cohen—Everett Longstreth and the Concert Jazz Band—playing "old-fashioned" charts—Ray Zepeda—studies at Berklee College of Music

3. Playing with MIT and Berklee students (00:22:25) 9

   Enthusiasm and passion of MIT students—Herb Pomeroy—playing jazz for pleasure versus playing as a job—MIT Symphony Orchestra—MIT Brass Ensemble—academic nature of MIT students

4. Herb Pomeroy (00:26:08) 11

   Pomeroy's high standards—the importance of a personal relationship with students—sense of humor—Pomeroy's incredible ears—Duke Ellington method of leading a band—Jamshied Sharifi—writing for specific people, not instruments—rehearsal techniques—focusing on sections—making the music breathe—writing each line like a good melody—horizontal versus vertical approach to harmony

5. Improvisation and jazz performance idiom (00:34:34) 14

   MIT students John Ragan, Ray Zepeda, Tom Short, Mike Strauss—writers versus improvisers—backing up soloists—learning how to swing—ear training—Toshiko Akiyoshi

6. Pomeroy's approach to jazz harmony (00:42:43) 17

   Intervallic note combinations and color—Pomeroy's "Line Writing" class at Berklee—create interesting chord structures—horizontal versus vertical approach to harmony—Duke Ellington—avoiding middle registers—mixing sections

7. MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble and lasting musical values (00:49:48) 19

   Playing charts by Phil Wilson, Hal Crook III, Jamshied Sharifi, Duke Ellington, Tiger Okoshi—Notre Dame Intercollegiate Jazz Festival—bebop—Thelonious Monk—dodecaphonic music for jazz at Berklee—Pomeroy as an inspirational educator and motivator

Table of Contents, Cont.

8. Playing at MIT and Berklee (00:59:07) 22
Comparing MIT and Berklee musicians—studies with Charles Schlueter—MIT Symphony Orchestra and David Epstein—MIT Brass Ensemble—MIT Concert Band—recollections of John Corley

9. MIT students as musicians (01:04:15) 25
Mathematics and music—analytical qualities—music as an outlet from MIT studies—perceived cultural restrictions on musical expression—open-minded approach to artistic productions at MIT

10. Current professional work (01:12:13) 27
Emmy for The Hunley *(2000)— music editing for Hollywood films—teaching at University of Southern California—working alongside composers—working with Hollywood studio orchestras—Jamshied Sharifi—putting away the trumpet—importance of music in Bondelevitch's student years at MIT*

Contributors

David Bondelevitch received an S.B. degree in Art and Design from MIT in 1985. While at MIT he played trumpet in the Concert Jazz Band, the Festival Jazz Ensemble, the Symphony Orchestra and the Concert Band. At the Berklee College of Music, he studied jazz composition with Herb Pomeroy. From the University of Southern California he has an M. F. A. in film production. Currently he works as a music & dialog editor and re-recording mixer in Los Angeles. He has won a Primetime Emmy and a Golden Reel Award in recognition of his work.

Forrest Larson, Library Assistant at the Lewis Music Library, has attended training workshops in oral history methodology and practice at Simmons College and by the Society of American Archivists, and is a member of the Oral History Association. He is also an active composer and violist.

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on May 3, 2003, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Duration of the audio recording is 1:20:26.

Music at MIT Oral History Project

The Lewis Music Library's *Music at MIT Oral History Project* was established in 1999 to document the history of music at MIT. For over 100 years, music has been a vibrant part of the culture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This history covers a wide variety of genres, including orchestral, chamber, and choral musical groups, as well as jazz, musical theater, popular and world music. Establishment of a formal music program in 1947 met the growing needs for professional leadership in many of the performing groups. Shortly thereafter, an academic course curriculum within the Division of Humanities was created. Over the years, the music faculty and alumni have included many distinguished performers, composers, and scholars.

Through in-depth recorded audio interviews with current and retired MIT music faculty, staff, former students, and visiting artists, the *Music at MIT Oral History Project* is preserving this valuable legacy for the historical record. These individuals provide a wealth of information about MIT. Furthermore, their professional lives and activities are often historically important to the world at large. Audio recordings of all interviews are available in the MIT Lewis Music Library.

1. Family history and early musical memories (00:01:35)

FORREST LARSON: It's my distinct pleasure to have David Bondelevitch for an interview this morning. It's May 3, 2003. He's from MIT class of 1985. I'm Forrest Larson. We're in the Lewis Music Library.

Thank you very much for coming for this interview this morning.

DAVID BONDELEVITCH: My pleasure.

FL: You played with the [MIT] Festival Jazz Ensemble from 1982 to 1985. And the reason that you're here is it's the 40th anniversary of the formal jazz program at MIT. And there's a concert and reunion this weekend.

Just tell me briefly your current work as a film editor and what that's about. And then we'll get on with the rest of the interview.

DB: Okay. I work as a music editor. And most people don't know what that is. But that's a person who works usually with the film composer or the music supervisor to find and place the correct music in sync with the picture and works with the composer as an assistant for recording original material for the film.

FL: That's great. And you're currently in Los Angeles?

DB: Yeah. We live in Burbank, California. And I also am a lecturer at the University of Southern California where I teach in their cinema production program.

FL: All right. So tell me where you were born. I guess it's on the North Shore?

DB: Yes. I was born in Swampscott, Massachusetts. And because I grew up in the area and I was a musician and especially jazz musician in high school, I knew very well of Herb Pomeroy [trumpeter; Director of jazz bands at MIT, 1963-1985]. And when I was flipping through the MIT course catalog trying to decide whether or not I should apply to technical schools because obviously I had a technical background as well.

And I saw Herb's picture in it. And I thought, what the hell is going on here? What is a world class jazz musician doing teaching at MIT?

And it really sparked my interest. And it made me rethink— because I had initially— I didn't want to go to an engineering school because I thought I'd be bored. And I looked and realized that MIT had one of the most extensive music programs of any school in the country, including music schools.

And it just impressed me so much that I came here when I was still a senior in high school and went to a couple of concerts and saw the jazz band. And there was also a, um, I think Abramovitz—was that the family that did annual concerts [Abramovitz Lecture Series]?

FL: That's right.

DB: Yeah. And they did a jazz concert that year. And I came to that that I think Phil Wilson played at. And I was just so impressed by the university's approach to— or the Institute's approach to music that uh it really changed my mind. And I decided to apply. And when I got accepted, I decided to come here based on the fact that they actually had a full music program and humanities in general.

FL: So we'll get into some more of those, those questions. Did you come from a music family?

DB: Well, no. My father was a high school football coach. And he was an educator. He had a PhD in education. But what he really enjoyed doing was coaching the high school football team. So that's what everybody thinks of him as.

And my mother was an elementary school teacher who had played the violin, and she went to Boston University. She wasn't a music major. But she played in their orchestra. And I guess at one point Arthur Fiedler conducted them. So that was her musical claim to fame that she had played under Fiedler. [Arthur Fiedler was the conductor of the Boston Pops and the Boston University Orchestra.]

But she was not a musician per se. Um, but I guess I must have inherited that gene through her side of the family.

My father loved music and listened to music all the time, although a lot of it was not particularly good music. He listened to polkas because he was, he was first generation American.

FL: Uh-huh.

DB: So he grew up with the polka generation. And he loved the Lawrence Welk Show. And my sisters were older than me. So they were listening to the Beatles. And my parents were listening to polkas and Lawrence Welk. And I was kind of stuck in the middle.

And I kind of rejected both because I ended up listening to jazz. And I took up the trumpet at age ten I remember because I remembered seeing Louis Armstrong on TV and thinking it was so cool, the way that he played. That that was the instrument that spoke to me the most.

And I mean to this day, I think Louis was like the most brilliant jazz genius improvisationalist. He almost single-handedly created everything that we consider to be jazz. And even though he dissed bebop, if you listen to a lot of his playing, I mean it really— bebop comes from his playing.

FL: Can you tell me about some of your earliest musical memories and were they significant to you?

DB: Well, like I said I remember listening to Louis Armstrong. My mother had a more eclectic taste. And she had collections of swing music and opera, although I never really liked opera. It at least introduced me to the orchestra, which I later got more interested in.

My other memories of live music— when I was in junior high school, that was when I really started getting interested in jazz, and we started going to concerts. And I know actually Maynard Ferguson is having a birthday celebration this weekend in Boston. Being a trumpet player, of course, Maynard Ferguson was like wow, he can play high notes. So we went to his concerts every time he came to Boston.

And what other bands did I see? I saw Woody Herman. I saw Count Basie at the Berklee Performance Center. I remember seeing Frank Sinatra, but that was when I was in college. And Herb's band was backing him up when he played at the, uh, Boston Symphony Hall.

Yeah, it was nice growing up near Boston because any time, I could take the subway in and go to the Berklee Performance Center or when I was older to any of the jazz clubs. Or the Symphony Hall has a lot of good jazz concerts, too. We saw Gerry Mulligan there. Who else did we see? Dave Brubeck.

I saw I mean countless concerts in this area. And with the colleges around too, um, between New England Conservatory, and Berklee, and MIT, and other music schools, there was constantly music any night of the week that you wanted to go hear. And a lot of it, because it was university, was very cheap or free even if they were getting professionals to come in.

I remember Dizzy Gillespie played with the Tufts University jazz band once, and I went to see them. Um, yeah, so I had a great experience growing up here.

FL: Did you play any other instruments? Piano or other brass instruments?

DB: Well, my sisters both took piano and hated it. And since I was the youngest in the family, my parents' experience was so negative, that they decided not to give me piano lessons, which is ironic because I was the one person who probably would've learned from them.

And in fact, we had a piano. So I sort of self-taught myself how to read music and how to play one-handed piano improperly with their old books by myself. And then I took up the trumpet and learned really how to read that way. But I never truly took piano lessons until I came here to MIT. And I took—what was the first semester of music — class 26?

FL: Um, well they've changed the course numbers. But it used to be um, um, 21.60.

DB: 21.60.

FL: It used to be.

DB: Right. But then there was a first composition class. 20—

FL: Um, I forgot what that's called now.

DB: 601 or something like that.

FL: Yeah, they're all renamed now.

DB: Anyway, whatever it was there was a requirement that you had to play piano. So I took lessons with Marek Zebrowski [pianist, Lecturer in Music at MIT]. I don't know if he's still here.

FL: Oh yes. Yeah, he's not here anymore. But—

DB: But he was a— he's a brilliant classical pianist. And I'm sitting there having learned how to play wrong with one hand. And he was so frustrated with me. But I felt sorry for him because he's such a good pianist. And he shouldn't have had to teach me how to play.

But I learned a few scales and things. And to this day, I still am essentially self-taught. And then learning jazz harmonies and things, I've learned how to play with both hands. But I certainly couldn't perform publicly. I can compose at the piano. But I'm not a performer at the piano.

But anyway, I played trumpet. I played flugelhorn. I took recorder lessons also when I was a kid, so I'm somewhat proficient on fingerings of woodwind instruments as well. But again, I'm not a performer. But I know well enough how to write for them from having learned the fingerings.

FL: Tell me about your experience with the trumpet prior to coming to MIT like in high school and um—

DB: Well again, I was really lucky living near Boston because I had some great private teachers, including Paul Fontaine, who played with Herb's band and taught at Berklee [College of Music]. And uh— I'm trying to remember who else I had.

I think he was probably the most noteworthy of the teachers that I had. A couple of other local teachers that were good. But he was the biggest name. So by the time I was in high school, I was learning how to improvise jazz because I had a really good jazz teacher. Um, and that was of course private study.

We did have lessons through school. But once you got to the high school level, you were in the ensemble. You didn't get private lessons anymore. So I took private lessons on my own, which I think is something that's sad about our— the state of our musical education system is that yes, in fourth and fifth grade they give you lessons for free. And then after that, you're on your own to learn your instrument. There should really be a weekly music class for everybody that's a real music class and not like music listening, where half the students don't want to be there and they stare at the ceiling. And the teacher puts on a record and stares out the window. Those classes were worthless.

FL: You played in the concert band in high school?

DB: Yeah, we had a concert band that during fall was a marching band and then after that became a concert band, which is common around here.

FL: Yeah. That was like my school.

DB: And then we also had a jazz band, which I played in. And there was a third ensemble. I'm trying to remember what it was now.

I also led my own sort of smaller jazz group that played a couple of casuals when I was in high school. And I did some arranging for the band. But that was again— that was self-taught because I never studied in school how to write for a jazz band. I just bought a couple of books, and read through them, and wrote a couple of charts for our band.

And then when I went to Berklee [College of Music], one of the ways I managed to get through Berklee so quickly was because I had essentially self-taught myself the first semester and a half of what they teach you there. So when I went in, I was— I almost passed out of the freshman year. I was about a semester and a half into what they had learned, which was good because it saved me a lot of money.

2. Coming to MIT (00:10:18)

FL: When you were applying for colleges and just in high school, were you thinking about doing something musically as far as professionally later on?

DB: Yeah, especially earlier in high school, I was pretty much convinced what I wanted to do was be a trumpet player. Um, and— but you know I was smart, too. So my parents, and my guidance counselors, and my teachers, and my girlfriend, I mean everybody was like you don't want to be a musician. You don't want to be a musician. You'll never be successful. You'll never make any money. You'll be on the road all the time. You won't be happy.

So I listened to them. And I applied to other schools in addition to Berklee, which is really where I just wanted to go. And like I said, I really didn't even want to apply to MIT at first until I saw that it was really a more well rounded education than I had imagined.

And it came down to the wire. And I had to make that decision. And I talked to my father. And I said, "You know, Dad, Berklee has a summer program. If you'll let me go to the summer program, then I'll consider going to MIT." And he was like thrilled.

He was like, sure, I'll pay for the summer program if you go to MIT, and you get a real education, and you'll get a real job, which is of course ironic because I ended up working in music and film and not in engineering anyway. But nonetheless, I think he's happy.

FL: Um, did you have some interest in science and technology in high school that—?

DB: Oh, yeah. I mean I was in the— we had a science club. I actually wasn't in the science club. I was the captain of the math team, I'm ashamed to say.

[laughter]

FL: That's great.

DB: And um, I was very much into math and science, even though I wasn't in the science club or the meteorology club. But I was very into it. And I always got As in all my science classes. And at one point I was really serious about becoming an engineer.

And when I came here my freshman year, um, I made some mistakes in what classes I was going to take and what I thought I was going to do. And I pushed myself too hard my first semester. And I sort of caved. And I ended up dropping a class and barely passing another class. And I was pretty miserable my freshman year here.

And I really, sincerely thought about transferring to Tufts, or somewhere else, or to another school, or just going into music. But ultimately, I really felt like I had a lot of connections with the school, that I liked the music program here, and that I felt that somehow I would find myself here. And I had made a lot of friends. And I liked my living environment.

So I decided to stay. And in my sophomore year, I ended up in course IV because I thought that was the most creative of the technical areas, architecture. And by the end of the semester in course IV, I realized I didn't want to be an architect. And I didn't really have the visual skills, drawing skills, necessary for it anyway.

So I ended up in course IV-B, which I don't even know if it exists anymore. But it's basically everything but architecture and visual studies. And that included filmmaking. And there was a guy here named [Richard] Ricky Leacock who taught in the film program, who was a well known documentary filmmaker.

And that really got me interested in film production. And I spent the rest of my time here doing little films. I did one about my father. And I did one about Herb Pomeroy. And I learned a lot.

And then I ended up going to USC for grad school and studying film production there.

FL: What other— you mentioned a couple courses, MIT music courses, you took. Did you take a lot of them? Or—

DB: Yeah, actually I did. I took everything— I was a humanities concentration in music. And I took 21.60, which was a humanities distribution. So I think I took four classes here, 21.60 and then whatever the three composition classes were. It was like [21.]601, 2, and 3, or something like that.

And they were great. They were very strict classical harmony counterpoint, traditional harmony and counterpoint. But they were great. And I think people who go to MIT kind of have a mindset that they like rules. And they like to learn the rules. And they like to abide by the rules to a certain point where they learn them and then somehow expand beyond that.

So having that structure of having to learn two-part harm— two-part counterpoint and then traditional harmony and counterpoint was really good. Because also Berklee is essentially a jazz school so I never learned any traditional harmony and counterpoint there. My first semester there, I'm learning dominant 7s with flat-9 and sharp-13 or sharp-9 and flat-13.

And it's like I had no clue how to write four-part harmony for traditional. And learning that here was really good. And of course, now I'm blanking on the name of the teacher I had who was really good. Actually we had a couple of teachers who were really good.

One was a visiting guy who was a horn player. And another guy was a regular instructor here who wasn't the most personable of teachers.

FL: Was it Ed Cohen [Edward Cohen, MIT Professor of Music]?

DB: Ed Cohen. Who actually—he was a really good teacher. But he wasn't really very friendly. And I think that turned off a lot of people. But I've always been sort of—of the mind that it's more important to learn from somebody than to get along with them. And I really learned a lot from him.

FL: He was well regarded as a teacher in that kind of way. Um—

DB: Yeah.

FL: Yeah. What was your initial impression of Herb when you auditioned for the FJE [Festival Jazz Ensemble]? He has a little story to tell about his meeting with you.

DB: Oh, really? [laughs]

FL: Um, I guess he recognized your last name and um—

DB: Yes, yeah. He saw my last name. Because Herb is from Gloucester, and I'm from Swampscott. And I guess Herb is a high school football fan. He has a son, I guess. I don't know if he played football or whether Herb just always liked football. But he goes to the Gloucester games. And my father was a coach in Swampscott.

So he recognized my father's name because my father also was well known because he has one of the highest win records in New England sports history. He had I think nine undefeated seasons and over 200 wins in his career. So he was pretty well known to high school sports fans.

And like Herb saw my name. And I'm like going into this audition shaking because Herb's like my idol. And I came to MIT and Berklee to study with him. And I was so excited just to be in the room with him. And he says, "David Bondelevitch. Hey, are you from Swampscott?"

So I'm like— it immediately put me at ease because like, oh, wow, he's actually a nice guy after all. And I didn't make it into the Festival Jazz Ensemble, which was kind of a shock to me, considering that I thought I was really good and I was— I had already spent a semester at Berklee.

And I didn't make it into the Festival Jazz Ensemble my first year here. But I guess they didn't even have an opening because they had five great trumpet players already. And I had heard them play. And they were really good.

And if they don't have an opening, then what can you do? So I ended up playing with Everett's [Longstreth] band [MIT Concert Jazz Band] that year, which was good in its own way, especially that year, because for some reason the second band had always been kind of, we just barely have a band. Because there was always enough people for one great band, and enough people who were pretty good, to learn, but there was never like a really kicking rhythm section or a full ensemble. They were always short a few chairs.

And the one semester or the one year I was in it was the one time we really had a good band. And in fact, there was one day that Herb's band couldn't go to a concert or a competition or something, and they sent the second band instead, which had never happened before.

So it was a really good semester to be in that band. And Everett was a very good conductor. Herb actually mentioned this last night, that people complained about how old fashioned his charts were. And I was one of those people because I had gone to Berklee. And I wanted to be with Herb. And I wanted to do all of this more contemporary approach to harmony in playing.

But Herb's right that the purpose for that band is to learn how to play as an ensemble and not how to play as a contemporary band. So you have to learn the strict swing stuff that he wrote. And that was a little frustrating. It was nice playing lead trumpet, coming in and playing lead trumpet. But it was a little frustrating playing all these old fashioned charts.

But Everett's great. For what those charts were, they were very well written. And I had a fantastic time with that band. I made a lot of lifelong friends. Ray Zepeda [MIT 1988] played in that band with me, who's a sax player, who lives in Southern California now. And he's a fantastic friend, and great person, and phenomenal musician. He's a multi-instrumentalist, too. So we had a great time.

FL: So you were simultaneously studying at Berklee when you were going to MIT? Or how did that—

DB: Well, never literally at the exact same time. I sort of hip-hopped back and forth between the two schools. And Berklee actually—like I said, I was so far ahead when I went in. And they accepted a bunch of academic transfer credits from here. So I managed to finish my degree at Berklee in five semesters.

And then at MIT, I actually—even though I almost failed out my freshman year, I managed to get ahead and finish here a semester early. But it was Course IV so—it wasn't quite the same as taking all the engineering classes. But Course IV had its own constraints and demands.

But to me, it was fun. I mean I was taking visual studies, and art classes, and film classes. And I never really thought of it in quite the same way as being in school. It was like—it was fun like being at Berklee.

Being at Berklee was a sheer pleasure. It was just playing music, studying music, writing music all day long. And even though there were days when I was there from 9 o'clock in the morning to 8 o'clock at night—and some of those days I was playing like six hours because I was in ensembles all day long.

It was just—it was fun. I never thought of it as work. And I noticed that there was an attitude from some of the music students that they were bothered by the fact that they had to go to classes. And I'm like, that's why I'm here. I want to study. I want to learn this stuff.

FL: So when you came to MIT, you knew right away that you also wanted to study over at Berklee.

DB: Yeah. I had in fact—

FL: Yeah.

DB: My—in between my senior year in high school and my freshman year here, I took my first semester over the summer at Berklee. And Berklee has a program where the summer is a full semester. It goes through the whole summer. And they cover the exact same material as a regular semester.

So I was able to go every summer in between, as well. And go the spring of my senior year and complete over there, and complete my degree over there while I was completing my degree over here.

And I went to both graduations in '85, which were something like three weeks away from each other, and got my two degrees in four years. Four and a half years really.

DB: Wow. And your degree at Berklee was in jazz composition?

DB: Yes.

FL: Yeah. Wow.

DB: Which is what Herb teaches. So that was my goal. When I went there I said, what does Herb teach? That's what I want to major in. And it made sense.

It actually—I was kind of scared at first about composing because I had just played and not really studied formally. And I realized probably about my second semester at Berklee that I was never going to cut it as a performer.

As a trumpet player in a high school band and even in the MIT band, I was okay. But by professional standards I would never live up to the—I mean when you're a professional trumpet player, you can't miss a note. You have to be on every night.

And I was never going to be that good. I—my chops were never perfect. I would always miss notes. My sight reading was never fantastic so I couldn't really be a studio musician. So I ended up, through luck, in jazz composition, which I really found I had much more talent at than I would have expected.

So I ended up writing some charts for the MIT Jazz [Ensemble] band. When I went to film school, I scored a bunch of my own student films. I've had a couple of pieces that have ended up being in movies.

So it ended up being very helpful to me. And since I work with composers now, I can read a score. I can help them find mistakes. If there's a problem in performance, I see immediately because I'm following along in the score. So it's helped me tremendously.

3. Playing with MIT and Berklee students (00:22:25)

FL: Wow. That's great. We'll get into some more of that I hope near the end of the interview. Can you talk just a little bit about your experience of playing with MIT musicians and then working with the Berklee students and um—

DB: Well Herb kind of mentioned this last night, and that's that MIT musicians are there because they really love it. They want to be there. They look forward all week long.

When I was a student here, I tell you, all week long I would look forward to going to practice with the jazz band. That was the highlight of the week. No question about it. And we practiced twice a week. So it was great.

And we would—as he said, we would be completely focused for those three hours. We would come in. That's all we wanted to do. And yes, we would have fun. We would joke around.

And Herb has a very jovial personality. I think that's one of the reasons he's so loved by all of his students because he's not just a great teacher. But he knew how to pace things, how to lighten the mood in the room, when to tell a joke, just to keep people happy, or excited, or interested in what was going on.

But with the jazz band, we knew we were there because we wanted to play jazz. Whereas at Berklee, I think people were already in the mindset that it was a job for them sometimes. That, "Oh jeez, I got to go to rehearsal. I got another ensemble after this."

Their focus would not be as high sometimes. Certainly their musical prowess was high and many times higher than MIT, although the jazz band here was really good. The [MIT Symphony] Orchestra was really good. I played with the [MIT] Brass Ensemble one year. They were fantastic.

But they were very different. The MIT personality, I think, is different from the general populace and from the type of musicians that would go to Berklee who because they're jazz musicians or pop musicians, they're more free-spirited. They're less focused.

People who go to MIT are academic in nature. And as a teacher at USC, this is a problem I have now is that people are, in general, not very academic in nature. And I get students in first semester who complain that I make them sit still for a three-hour class. [laughter]

It's like if you go to college, the reason you go there is because you want to learn. If you want to learn, you go to class. I have students who don't show up, students who sleep through class. What are they thinking?

People at MIT—yeah there were people who would skip lectures here, and there were people who would sleep through class, but essentially they were here because they wanted to learn the material. And if they were skipping class or sleeping through, it's because they already knew it. They were ahead of the game. They weren't doing it out of disinterest.

People here really were very competitive and wanted to learn the material, whether it was playing in a jazz band or learning engineering. Whereas Berklee isn't quite as academically oriented so a lot of people who went there were kind of on the lazy side. It's very easy to make it through Berklee in some of the majors without doing a lot of work.

Jazz comp[osition] is not one of those. Herb and the other teachers in that program were very demanding. Music production and engineering, which I also studied some when I was over there, is also a very competitive program. But there were a couple of majors there where you could easily slide through without doing a lot of work.

And at MIT it was always academics was first. And if you weren't in academics, whatever you were doing—even if you were just playing a soccer game, people were very intense about it. Everybody's always focused on what they're doing here, which is something I really appreciated.

4. Herb Pomeroy (00:26:08)

FL: So I want to talk about working with Herb Pomeroy. He obviously has high and demanding standards. What are some of the things that he does to inspire students to work hard and play at a high level?

DB: You know that's a good question. I actually—even before you told me you were going to interview me about this, I started thinking about that because I wanted to explain to my wife why Herb was so important to me as a person.

And I had done a short film about him. And I couldn't find it. And fortunately I called my stepmother who was just about to move, and she found it in a box in the cellar, which could have ended up being in the trash if I hadn't called right when I did.

And I watched it. And it's a terrible movie. And my memory was that I shot him rehearsing the MIT band. And I shot him rehearsing a Berklee student band and rehearsing his professional band. And in the—the only thing left is the finished version of the movie, which doesn't have any rehearsal footage in it, which I so wished I had somehow kept the dailies, the stuff that I had shot of that so that I have a reference point.

But what I did see was that I included in the film a lot of stuff of him teaching classes at Berklee. And the way that he taught at Berklee was unique, because he had much higher academic standards than anyone else there. I don't know whether that's just his personality, his nature, the fact that he went to Harvard for a year. I don't know why he was so different from everyone else.

But he had very high standards. He expected you in class every week. He gave an assignment every class. And then when you brought the assignment back, every class he would go around to every student in the class and sit with them personally and go through the assignment correcting it, which always struck me as how important it is to have a personal relationship with your students.

Some of the students didn't like it because they felt like, you know, "I get two minutes with him and then the rest of it's with other people." Well, to me, the point of that was he spent two really intense minutes with me, or really more than that, a few minutes with me that were intense.

And then as he went around the rest of the room, I would watch how he interacted with the other students and showed them what was wrong, or right, or good, or bad about their assignment. Whereas a lot of people, the other people, as soon as he was away from them, they would stop focusing and not be a part of the class anymore.

And I—that personal touch was really important. As I said before, his sense of humor in knowing how, in the middle of a long, boring, technical discussion about harmony or whatever, how to inject humor into that, how to have a personal relationship with the students. Those were the things that I think were really important to me as a student with him.

Now in terms of conducting the orchestra, he was very focused. He had incredible ears. I know that any time anyone played a wrong note or even just a wrong articulation, he would hear it immediately, know who it was, and be able to correct them in a way to get them to play it right without making them feel stupid.

He was never dictatorial or insulting in the way that he led a band, which many people can be, including some of the other people who have conducted here. But, uh, I'm not quite sure exactly how I would say that he conducted that made him such a great conductor other than being a great person.

And he had an individual relationship with everyone in the band. He often talked—and he teaches a whole class in Duke Ellington, or taught a whole class in Duke Ellington. He often talked about the way that Duke would consider the orchestra a congrega—or amalgamation of individuals and not as a unit, a single unit.

And he had that approach to his relationship with everybody in the band. He knew all of us. Knew where we were from. He had a nickname for everybody.

He knew what our specific talents were. He knew that I could be a good lead trumpet player, that I was fairly consistent, but that he couldn't give me—he couldn't make me sight-read. He couldn't put a new chart out in front of the band and expect me to play it perfectly.

He knew that I wasn't a phenomenal lead player. So he couldn't give me a Maynard Ferguson chart and expect me not to clam some of the notes. And the same thing with everybody else in the band. He knew who the great soloists were and knew when to feature them. And he would find the right charts for the band or even if he was having somebody write something for the band, he would have them write specifically for who was good in the band and who could do what.

And I think that made a big difference, too. Instead of just bringing out Glenn Miller charts or stock arrangements that anybody could have played, these were charts that were specifically for us. And he let people in the band write. Jamie [Jamshied Sharifi, MIT 1983, Director of the MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble 1985–1992] wrote. And I wrote. And I know later on some of the other students wrote for the band.

And we would—the same way. We knew everybody in the band. So I knew who to write for. And I would—instead of writing trumpet—first trumpet or fourth trumpet—I write the person's name on the chart. And that makes a big difference when you come in and you see your name on the chart, you knew it was written for you.

FL: Wow. That's—that's great. When he's rehearsing particularly a new chart but even as you're going along, what are his um—what are his priorities? Like you're going to pass out the music, get a new chart.

DB: Um, you know again it's been so long since I played under him and actually played in general. I think when he passes out a new chart, we tried to make it through the whole thing. And then he would focus on difficult sections of the arrangement. Then he would focus on sections within the orchestra.

So that he often would break up the band and say, "Okay. Trumpets can go home. We'll do an hour with the saxes," because the saxes, when I was there, were really good. And they did a lot of sax solis and solos and stuff that they would need to be there for. So I think he sort of did it in a logical pattern.

But you know another thing he was also big about was making the music breathe as music and not just getting the right notes or even the right articulation. But how to perform musically and get it to feel like a fluid performance.

One of his approaches to writing was that if you write each line like a good melody, whether it's the fourth trumpet part, that person is going to be more motivated to play it more musically so as a whole the whole band will play more musically so it will sound better. And he was very much a conductor like that when he was talking about performing music—that even if you're playing the fourth trumpet part, you still had to be a part of making that great sound and making a beautiful flow to the music.

So if you look at, you know, the Glenn Miller charts, the fourth trumpet part would be dadadaadada because they were thinking you know this way—they were thinking harmony vertically instead of writing a melody horizontally. And Herb was always of the mind that you have to write horizontally and whatever happens vertically incidentally, ninety percent of the time will make sense anyway. Which blew my mind the first time I took his class. I'm like, "Huh?"

FL: We'll get into that in a little bit.

DB: Okay.

FL: But that's, yeah. But that's interesting how it even—he saw a very practical application of that. When he's rehearsing, he obviously has a clear idea about how the piece should go. Does that change over subsequent rehearsals and is it kind of a group process that brings out the end results or was he fairly specific about what he wanted?

DB: Herb knew what he liked, and there were a couple of times, especially when he was playing charts that I had arranged, where I disagreed with him. And in retrospect, he was always right. But when you write something or hear something in your head, you think it must be right.

And maybe with one exception he always had a more musical approach to things. And he certainly knew the orchestra and he knew orchestration better than I ever did. So in terms of musicality, he was always right.

Um, I—I learned tremendous amounts from him. And I was incredibly blessed that he took time playing my crappy arrangements with the Festival Jazz Ensemble. Which the level of musicality was far below what they were used to.

So I really was very lucky that he let the band play that stuff because I learned so much. And even the three years that I was with the band, I wrote one piece a year. And then the year after I left, they played an adaptation of my thesis piece from Berklee.

And I look back at the charts over those four pieces that I wrote, and the first one I wrote, I had almost no training. And the last one I had completed my training.

It's like the difference between night and day. And it's all thanks to Herb. I mean I learned everything from him.

5. Improvisation and jazz performance idiom (00:34:34)

FL: Wow. Did you work with Herb much on improvisation, kind of individually?

DB: Well, not me. That was—I was never a brilliant improvisationalist although I certainly studied it. We had a guy in the band named John Ragan [MIT 1985] who was the one good improvisationalist in the trumpet section. And Ray Zepeda, who played sax, was great. Mike Strauss [MIT 1979] who played trombone was very good.

Um, I'm sure there were other people as well. Those are the ones who come to mind immediately. Oh, there was a tenor sax player named Tom Short [name and class year unconfirmed], I think his name was. His last name was Short. And they were all good. And he did spend time with them.

And again, when we broke up at the end of the day, a lot of times he would keep the improvisationalists and work with them. And I wasn't one of those. So I didn't get that benefit in that here, or even really at Berklee, because even when I was playing in the Berklee band, I think I was second trumpet in his band. I was just a section player.

That was never really what I was about. And especially when you get into jazz composition, it's really like two different types of people. People who want the structure of written music in composition and people who reject that and just want to play.

And you don't really find many jazz musicians who are great at both. Who are great, brilliant writers and brilliant improvisationalists. And the few that were great, like Duke Ellington, really stick out for that reason. Because Duke was a true composer in the traditional sense that he wrote for an orchestra.

And there were other people like John Coltrane who wrote great jazz tunes but .they were just chord changes and a melody. It's not like the same concept of, uh, orchestration and composition that we think of in the classical world.

FL: But as a jazz composer, you're always writing in the context—with the context of improvisation.

DB: Right.

FL: And that's a markedly different kind of piece that you would write if you were writing something strictly written out.

DB: Yeah, of course when you're writing for a big band, it's sort of an in between because you're writing a composed piece, but somewhere in it you have to fit improvisation.

So essentially the band starts playing as a whole at one point and you feature a soloist.

So yeah, you have to write changes that are interesting to a performer. And you have to know how to back up a soloist, which is something I learned from Herb. Everybody who learns how to write for jazz orchestra at first over-writes, when it's time to write for the soloist.

And I wrote one piece that was sort of an homage to Thelonious Monk. And the changes sounded like Monk, and the melody sounded like Monk. And if I had written it for small group, it would've been fine.

But then to write it for a big band and to have all these insane background lines happening underneath the soloist, it was like you could have taken the soloist away and not missed anything because I had written so much for the orchestra in the background to make it sound like Monk backing up a soloist. It was just the wrong thing to do. And he was completely right. He like dropped half of the stuff that I'd written, took it out, and suddenly the soloist could come to the foreground, play a nice little solo, and then have a nice build behind him of other stuff coming in and building to a climax.

But yeah, you do have to know how to write for a soloist. And yeah, you have to have improvisation somewhere in it or it's not really jazz because that's what jazz is all about.

FL: Also, um, when you're working on even the written out part of the chart, there's a—there's a jazz idiom in the way that you're playing those written out parts that's different than if you're playing in a concert band. How did Herb kind of work with you on that? Do you remember any of those—did that ever kind of come up? Or did—were people in the Festival Jazz Ensemble by that time well versed enough that they weren't kind of dealing with some of those issues?

DB: I'm not sure what you mean.

FL: Well, if you hear a jazz trumpet player, even a section player, play a written out part, you can tell that it's a jazz trumpet player as opposed to a classical player.

DB: Right.

FL: And did that ever kind of come up in rehearsal, as far as teaching kind of a jazz performance idiom?

DB: Yeah. I mean learning how to swing is something that's sort of intuitive. So it's hard to teach it. But he could certainly tell you when you're not doing it right. I always found that there's a rhythmic relationship to tempo—that the faster the tempo is the more it is like playing legit like you're playing straight notes like bebopping. Hibidibibibibebop.

You're hardly swinging at all when you're at that tempo. And the slower that you play—if you're playing like a New Orleans dirge, it's almost like a double-dotted quarter note—a thirty-second note. Whereas in a medium tempo it's somewhere sort of in between. It's more like triplets.

Um, and that's just something you have to learn to feel. But yeah, there—I can remember when we'd get new people in the band, a lot of times they would over swing stuff and it would sound hokey. If that's what you mean.

FL: Mm-hm.

DB: But again, yeah, that's just something that Herb would kind of point out and tell them to think about. And it's really something you learn from listening a lot. I think I'm a much better musician now than I ever was just from the fact that I'm older and I've listened to more music.

And you know I hear stuff on the radio. Or I—even when I'm working professionally, if I'm sitting with the orchestra I hear stuff now that I know when I was a student—I think when I was in my first semester and I had to take ear training, I thought how am I ever going to learn this stuff? How am I ever going to hear this? My ear is just never going to be this good.

And now I sit in the booth and I can hear whether there's one violin playing a quarter tone sharp or—my ears have just gotten to the point where I can hear stuff so much better. And I hear when, rhythmically, something is off. I can tell who's playing too fast, or too slow, or with the wrong interpretation.

So it's just—a lot of it is just a matter of learning to listen and the experience of playing. So the more hours you have, the better.

FL: Mm-hm. Did Herb—he obviously must have encouraged people to do a lot of listening to—

DB: Yeah.

FL: Were there particular, um, recordings or artists that he —

DB: No. Actually he really had an extremely broad approach to music. And whatever you liked he—as long as it was musical, he liked it too. Like for instance, the stuff that Jamie [Jamshied Sharifi] wrote for the band was unlike anything that we had ever played before. I don't think any of his bands at Berklee or his professional bands had ever played anything like that before. But he still loved it because it was fluid and musical. And it really had a unique quality and sound to it.

Jamie really brought almost like a minimalist approach to writing for the band that no one had really done before. And I knew—one of the reasons I knew of Herb was because there was a big band [leader] that was very popular at the time called Toshiko Akiyoshi. And she had studied with him.

So I had listened to a lot of her stuff. And I know Herb really liked her work because he had featured her when she was a student years before. So I sort of knew the ballpark of what Herb liked and didn't like. And I knew he didn't like the bands that just played loud, and fast, and high like Maynard Ferguson. And he liked people who had a more lyrical approach to playing.

So I think whatever you listened to as long as it was a musical he was happy with. I don't think he—I don't remember him ever saying go out and listen to this. Except once we did a Duke Ellington chart that was literally a transcription. And he said—he did say go out and listen to this because you were essentially playing the part of Cat Anderson or whoever it was, uh, whoever you were playing the part of. So you really kind of did have to know the history at that point.

But otherwise, no. I don't think he ever told us specifically what to listen to, which was smart because a lot of instructors—I have this problem when I'm teaching film. There are filmmakers who really like certain filmmakers and tell people go out and watch whoever it is. And the students end up copying that style, which is wrong.

You want to be inspired by whatever is inspirational to you. You don't want to end up copying someone because an instructor said they were good.

6. Pomeroy’s approach to jazz harmony (00:42:43)

FL: Um, Herb Pomeroy has a particular approach to jazz harmony that's different than a lot of folks talking—he's interested in intervallic note combinations and color but not seeing them based upon the function or the root of the chord. And when he told me about that theory I was pleasantly surprised, you know, thinking about his being rooted in the Ellington tradition. And I think of—when I hear composers talk about that, I think of more avant-garde composers.

And Herb told me that this came by way of Stefan Wolpe, who certainly is, you know, very much an avant-gardist. Um, you know this—this theory has very practical applications for him in a jazz ensemble. But give me kind of thoughts or remarks about this. Um, and I know it's an open ended question and—

DB: Right. Um, well, Herb taught three classes at Berklee. The first class is the one called Line Writing where he introduces that theory to people. And the second class is the Duke Ellington class where you analyze and learn by copying the style of Duke Ellington. And the third class is really his real composition class.

I never took the third class. I graduated before I got to it. And I kept saying, at some point I'm going to come back to Boston. I'm going to take that class. And then Herb retired, and I missed it.

So I think where he really gets into that theory at its highest would have been in that class. In the first semester, like I said, it kind of blew my mind when he said okay, you think about getting to—you pick highlight moments in the piece. And you create chord structures that you think are interesting there. So there's a basis of jazz harmony.

And then for the parts in between that, you don't think that way. You think horizontally instead of vertically. And you write individual melodies that make sense.

And he had his own set of rules that he himself had developed. And I remember him saying that he had developed this theory because of being inspired by musicians that he—he heard musicians doing different things. And he said, what are these people doing that's different. And he would sit down and transcribe it at home.

And he came up with his own sets of theories based on Duke Ellington, Gil Evans I think was one of them, he said. I don't remember him saying Wolpe. But maybe he did.

And I don't know if he did—if he ever mentioned any other classical composers. But I know he did like a lot of them. I know he liked [Paul] Hindemith.

So I'm not exactly sure exactly how he came about these theories. But he did have a pretty rigid set of rules almost like learning traditional harmony and counterpoint that [J. S.] Bach would have written except they're different rules and they're applied to how to write a horizontal line that will ultimately make sense with a bunch of other horizontal lines so that you couldn't, for instance, have huge intervallic structures between a bunch of different instruments.

Or you couldn't have notes clumping all together between the instruments. Or you couldn't have all of the notes always crossing each other back and forth, although some of that was actually preferred, that he liked the sounds of, instead of everything moving parallel to each other, which is the way most jazz musicians write, he liked parts crossing each other here and there but not all the time.

So there was definitely—you did have to pay attention to what was going on vertically. But you were thinking about how to write a line that made sense for each instrument instead of—

FL: So he's really thinking contrapuntally even though it may not be strict counterpoint.

DB: Yes. Yeah, not by—not by the old definition. But in fact, it was often preferred if you could have the melody on the top and the bottom line being in contrapuntal motion, that they were moving against each other. And also his approach to orchestration was very much like Duke Ellington's—that you don't always write for everybody in their middle register, which again in writing for jazz band, you want to make it easy for everybody. You want to make it consistent for everybody. So the easy thing to do is just write for everybody in their middle register.

His was the exact opposite in which he would say okay, in the sax section the most boring thing you can do is have alto, alto, tenor, tenor, baritone. He would say, let the tenor play the lead. Or let the bari play the lead. Or have the alto on the bottom or tenor on the bottom just to change the color and the texture.

And the most interesting sounds on the instruments were at the extremes. At the highs and the lows, except for on the tenor sax where it's really honky if you have them play low. But other than that, he would tell you to try and orchestrate so that they are at their extremes so that you get an interesting sound-color out of them.

And if you're writing for brass, write for mutes. If you're writing for a melody—well, probably the most famous example is "Mood Indigo" that Duke Ellington wrote, where he has a muted trumpet, I think it's a muted trombone or maybe it's an open trombone, and a clarinet. And you would think okay, clarinet or maybe the muted trumpet is going to be on top. But no. He put the clarinet on the bottom so that its – its chalumeau register—its lowest, darkest color.

And that way the whole—those three instruments have to sort of balance each other in tone and in color so that they all work together. And he also didn't space them out evenly. He put the clarinet way down at the bottom. He put the trumpet and the trombone close up at the top so that you get a unique sound out of those three instruments.

And Herb was very much of that mind that you should experiment with orchestrational colors. And yeah, most jazz conductors would not be doing that. They would be telling you okay, write a sax soli. Write traditional for the sax section where you just harmonize it in four parts and double one of them where you drop one of the parts down an octave so that you have another part. And that's just boring. Herb was the exact opposite of that.

FL: And he wasn't interested in, kind of, a sax section kind of sound and a trumpet section sound but really mixing things up.

DB: Yeah, absolutely. Mix it up so that you sometimes had sections within sections or you had sections crossing each other. I—that's one thing I really enjoyed a lot was a—we had one person who played French horn in the trombone section. So I had her play horn.

Herb wasn't fond of French horns in the jazz world because he always felt that most the time they couldn't swing or play right. And it wasn't—he didn't feel like it was quite the right sound most the time blending in. But I liked that. I liked having the sax section double and knowing who to write for. Charlie Marge [MIT 1984], who is here for the reunion, he played tenor, clarinet, oboe, and I think something else.

And we had—Ray [Zepeda] played—at that time, he played soprano [saxophone] really well. And now he doubles on flute and clarinet. So we had a bunch of people who could play different instruments. So you could create even just in the sax section, I could write lead with flute and clarinet and the flute up an octave. And then have the rest of the saxes underneath that, which would give it a nice, different color than what you're used to.

FL: Wow. With the Festival Jazz Ensemble, can you talk about some of the different kinds of charts that you played?

7. MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble and lasting musical values (00:49:48)

DB: Wow.

FL: I know. That's kind of an unfair question. But just trying to get a—

DB: We actually—we played the best music. We played some of the same charts that Herb's professional band played, some of the same charts that his Berklee bands played. We had the best writers. We played charts by Phil Wilson, who's a trombone player who I started with at Berklee also. Hal Crook, who I think is also a trombonist but a professional writer.

We played charts by Jamie [Jamshied Sharifi], who played in the band. We played stuff from the actual Duke Ellington book. I'm trying to remember what else we played. But we played such a—

FL: And you did that Ellington stuff with a strict—transcriptions or uh—

DB: No. We did one transcription that someone had done. I don't know who. I think it was a student at Berklee. But that was good.

There was one year that the Festival Jazz Ensemble wasn't quite as good or we were a little bit behind schedule. And he had to pull out some existing, easier charts for us to learn. And that was one of them.

But even still, to me that's a motivation—to play Duke Ellington. We also played stuff by a trumpet player named Tiger Okoshi. I don't know whatever happened to him. But in Boston, he used to be really big.

FL: Yeah, I haven't heard the name for a while. But Herb had a lot of good things to say about him.

DB: Yeah, he was a really great musician. I don't know what happened to him. I expected him to really take off, because he was sort of at the time that fusion was getting big, he was a fusion trumpet player. And I really thought he was going to go places. And I don't know what happened to him.

But we played charts that he did that were really beautiful and musical. And it was nice because it wasn't just all the big loud big band stuff. And as much as I played lead trumpet player, and I liked to play that stuff as a performer, it's also interesting to play stuff that's more musical and to play a wider variety.

We played—you know Jamie's pieces that we played at the, um, Notre Dame Intercollegiate Jazz Festival was closer to art music or classical music than it was to jazz. And although Herb's recollection was that it went over very well, it actually had a very mixed response from both the audience and the judges—that it went over a lot of people's heads.

And some people just thought, this isn't jazz and just didn't like it for that reason. And it was much more slow and ponderous than a lot of the stuff that the other bands were playing. So the audience certainly didn't respond to it the same way. But as Jamie mentioned last night, we did bookend it with two swing pieces.

So Herb was smart enough to know you got to give the audience something to respond to. So we put two complex, up tempo, fast, contemporary jazz pieces at the ends and then played this beautiful piece that Jamie had written in the middle, which I don't think I could have had that experience playing with any other band.

FL: Wow. Did you do any bebop charts? I know that my interviews with Herb, he had a lot of reservations about bebop and—

DB: Yeah. It's interesting because you—as you mentioned, he played with Charlie Parker and other bebop musicians. And he came from that generation. And he certainly could play it.

But even in those days, there were people who were thinking about music differently. And I think Herb just kind of rejected the fact that playing fast and playing a lot of notes was just a way of showing off. And it wasn't necessarily being musical or creating any type of emotional connection to the audience. It was just sheer—the sheer excitement of playing.

I don't remember playing stuff that you would truly call bebop. And I certainly didn't write any. The closest thing would be that Thelonious Monk piece I wrote, which you would call post-bop. I think most of what we did would be called post-bop where you know rhythmically it might be fast tempo. And there might be eighth notes spinning along.

But harmonically and orchestrationally it wasn't—you know even when Dizzy Gillespie had his big band, I don't know if I would call that bebop. Bebop, to me, was a trumpet and a saxophone playing, spinning fast eighth notes as fast as they could to impress the audience.

When Dizzy conducted his big band, it wasn't really like that. When he played a solo it was like that. But when the orchestra was playing, it was orchestrated, uh, much more interestingly. I mean if you listen to "Manteca" or, uh, any of the Latin jazz charts he did especially, it's not bebop at all.

FL: Yeah. Yeah. Did you do any kind of Latin jazz stuff with—

DB: Actually one of the pieces I wrote was Latin jazz that they played my sophomore year. And I think—I'm sure we must have played others. None of them come to mind, though. It was more—a little more towards the fusion in that era where we were playing straight eighth-note jazz is what Herb would call it. I don't think he liked calling it fusion.

But like the Tiger Okoshi stuff was more towards the rock and roll rhythm section but traditional jazz orchestration and harmonies for the rest of the orchestra.

FL: Did you ever feel limited as to what you wanted to do with the band and what Herb wanted to do? I mean was—did you ever feel kind of held back at all?

DB: I would say in Herb's band, no. In Everett's [Longstreth] band, yeah. In other bands at Berklee, in other classes at Berklee, yeah, absolutely. I felt—

It was funny because people—people would get into one mindset whatever it was. Like I had one really good teacher. But he really wanted to teach people dodecaphonic music for jazz. And it was like, you had to learn 12-tone writing in jazz.

And I was like, well I like the concept of atonality in jazz or learning how to write non-traditional harmony in jazz, but I didn't really just want to sit there and figure out a tone row for a whole semester. But that's what you had to do. So there were people who were very strict in some way or another.

But Herb was not really like that. Herb was very open-minded. So whatever you brought in, he would be interested in doing. None of the pieces that I brought in for the band did he ever reject. He always played them with the band.

And I was sure that he would listen to it and say, "Okay, we'll run it through with the band. And we'll play it once. And you can go home."

But he was very open-minded because the pieces I wrote were very different. I wrote a Latin jazz piece. Then I wrote the Thelonious Monk thing. Then I wrote a funk or a fusion thing. And then I wrote my thesis piece, which was a jazz ballad. So they were four entirely different pieces. And he was open to all of them. So—

FL: Wow. Can you talk about some of the lasting musical values that you learned from Herb that stay with you? I know that's an unfair question, but—

DB: Yeah, that's another broad question. Uh, you know some of that's already been answered, like I said. I tried actually in terms of musical values from MIT I think it's more life values that you take away from—you know, seeing the way that he worked with people was really an inspiration to me.

My whole family has always been in education. Both my parents were teachers. Both my sisters are teachers. And I ended up teaching, as well.

So some people find me kind of cold as a person. You might find that hard to believe.

FL: Yeah!

DB: But some people—because of my MIT background, I tend to be focused and direct. And when I criticize people, I am very honest in my criticism. And people take that the wrong way sometimes.

And as a teacher, I have to think back to myself what was it about the people who motivated me when I was a student that made me learn from them? And Herb probably was the single greatest motivator I ever had. So I'm constantly, as a teacher, saying, "How would Herb handle this situation?"

And he was a very personable person—still is—a very personable person. And I have to somehow try to make my personality such that when I am criticizing people, I'm doing it in a positive manner that is a constructive manner that they can take something home from and not just feel defeated—that they failed somehow because I've criticized them, which Herb was extremely competent at doing.

That when I would bring in my crappy charts for the band here, he would still make me feel good about myself at the end of the day, even though he changed a lot of things or made suggestions or corrections that were artistic in nature. And whenever it's an art, of course you can argue it. And I could say, "No. I don't like those notes that you just changed. That's—I wrote them that way for a reason." You can always disagree with that.

But at the end of the day, you have to be able to learn from your mentors. And Herb was a big mentor to me. And he had the ability to make anything that he did—he had the ability to explain it in such a way that I learned something from it.

And so I look back at that, and I always try to think to myself, how would Herb handle this situation? How would Herb make the student learn from this instead of making them feel defeated?

8. Playing at MIT and Berklee (00:59:07)

FL: That's great. Um, did you play in any small jazz combos at MIT?

DB: Not at MIT. At Berklee I did. In fact, when I had my Berklee thesis concert, I was short on players. I don't know why. It was the spring semester. Usually when I was there over the summer, we were very short on players because it was smaller during the summer.

But I was short on players. So I had some MIT players in my Berklee band.

FL: Cool.

DB: Which was kind of interesting because actually a couple of them were better than any of the Berklee players I could get in the Berklee band. Uh, Ray especially was really good. And—I'm trying to remember who else was in my thesis. Uh, the woman who played French horn was in it, as well.

So there were a couple people from MIT who came over. It was uh—it was good. I was—because I was never a great performer, and even as a performer, I was never a great improvisationalist, I was never that at home with a small group because I would be too naked.

And as a trumpet player in a small group, you know you have to kind of feature the trumpet player. So I couldn't like sit in the background and let someone else do all the playing. And as a trumpet player, I had studied as a lead trumpet player. And as an orchestral player, I studied with Charlie Schlueter who's the—

FL: Oh, you did?

DB: Yeah. The principal trumpet for the Boston Symphony. And even within the Boston Symphony, he has such a huge sound and personality that he can create problems when he's playing with a hundred people. And that's the way I learned to play from him.

So playing in a small jazz group, I was playing with such a huge sound that it was always a problem for me. Even when I left here, and I went to the West Coast and I played with an orchestra out there, they would always complain about me playing with too big of a sound. And I'm like, that's the way I wanted to play.

FL: Wow.

DB: So I have Charlie Schlueter to blame for that.

[laughter]

DB: Is he still the lead, the principal trumpet? Or did he retire?

FL: I think he is re—I'll have to double-check it. I've heard something that he—I'll have to double-check on that.

DB: Yeah. I know they tried to get rid of him a couple of times because he—he just overpowers the orchestra. He is a phenomenal musician, and I learned a lot from him. But he also has a bit of an ego. Let's just put it that way.

FL: Did you play in orchestra here at MIT at all?

DB: Yes, I did.

FL: Um, was that most of the time you were here? Or how often was that?

DB: I played, um—I can't remember if it was two or three years. I played—I do remember that one of the years we played at Carnegie Hall. We played the "Firebird Suite" [by Igor Stravinsky]. And we played a [Vincent] Persichetti piano concerto. And I played second or third trumpet.

And I very much enjoyed playing in an orchestra. At that time, I was not as good a classical player as I was later. And the conductor realized that.

FL: That was David Epstein [conductor of MIT Symphony Orchestra 1965–1998].

DB: Yeah. And I did not have a good relationship with him. And that made for an unpleasant experience with the orchestra. Which was a shame because it was a great orchestra and a great opportunity to play. But my memories of the orchestra were not as pleasant as they are with the Jazz Band—let's put it that way.

And my senior year I ended up not playing with them at all. I don't remember. It might have even been two years I didn't play with them. And I ended up playing with the [MIT] Brass Ensemble. And I remember playing one concert with the [MIT] Concert Band, but I don't remember why.

But I know I played at least once with them. I might have been filling in for someone. Or maybe it was during IAP [Independent Activities Period]. I don't remember. But I do also remember playing with the concert band.

So I did play with a bunch of different ensembles here, but not—I mean none of them really compared to the [MIT] Festival Jazz Ensemble just—not just because Herb was brilliant and a great guy but also because that's the music that spoke to me the most. I'm sure obviously there are other people here who would have enjoyed the orchestra more or one of the other ensembles more. But the Jazz Ensemble is really the reason I came here and my motivating factor. So—

FL: Any impressions of John Corley as a conductor [MIT Concert Band, 1948–1999] with the—

DB: Uh, like I said I think I only played one concert with them. And he was actually in many ways a lot like Herb. He was a very jovial person. He really loved what he did. And that shows.

I mean there are a lot of people in the film business, myself included sometimes, who are pretty miserable at times. And that really—if you're a teacher, and you walk into class, and you hate what you're doing, and you're trying to teach people to do the same thing, that can—that can really rub off on the students. Whereas Herb and John really loved music and had a great attitude towards it.

I had other teachers at Berklee who clearly didn't want to teach but were only teaching because they couldn't make a living in music otherwise. Or who were upset that they were never as successful as they wanted to be. And John Corley could have been like that. He could've said, "Oh jeez, I'm a musician, and I'm stuck at MIT."

Or "I could have been a composer. I could have been a famous conductor, but I'm stuck here with a student band." But he—you know he was thrilled with what he did. He loved what he did. And I think that really makes a difference and that's why so many students are motivated to play well under him.

9. MIT students as musicians (01:04:15)

FL: This next question relates a little bit to what we were talking about earlier. It's also broad and gets into a lot of kind of murky subjectivity. But I want to try this in a way because all the people that I've interviewed, I've brought this up. There's this—we were talking about the qualities that MIT students bring to music.

There's—I also wanted to get your thoughts about people who are motivated to study science and engineering and the kind of creativity that they bring that might be different from other artistically minded people. Do you have any thoughts about—I know that's a really difficult subject.

DB: Yeah, it is. There actually has been some research about it. And as you probably know, the same side of the brain that works on science and math works with music.

And I don't think it's a coincidence that there are so many great music groups here. I think it's just instinctive. I don't know why. I mean it's like something that God did that is inexplicable that makes people who like math especially like music.

But there is something inherently mathematical about music in—even if it's not written. Rhythm is always going to be mathematical. It's always going to be grouped together by a certain number of beats.

And harmony—yeah, our nomenclature is mathematical. But still when you add frequencies together, they have mathematical relationships to each other that we sort of base our harmonies on. So studying acoustics at MIT was of unique interest to me because I could look at it not only from how our brain works but also why our music ended up the way it was, or is, because of the way that acoustics works and that our brain perceives acoustics.

And in fact I teach—the first semester class I teach at USC is a sound class where the first two lectures are on acoustics and psychoacoustics and how does our brain understand what we're hearing. So I think it's kind of instinctive in people who have that mathematical mind that they have a musical mind—that they like to...

They're an analytical people. Music tends to group itself in ways that we can analyze mathematically. And I guess that's one way of explaining it. But I mean everyone likes music. If, you know, whenever you meet someone, you say, oh do you like music? Nobody ever says, "No, not really." Everybody likes some kind of music.

And at MIT, you would think it would just be a bunch of geeks who are all the same with pocket protectors, you know the cliché. But it's really not. You know, if you look at MIT and if you look at the types of music that people listen to, it's a huge, broad spectrum from classical and opera to punk rock, or hip hop, or virtually every musical type, there's people who listen to it or perform it here.

So, um, yeah you can sort of make vague stereotypes about MIT and about what type of music they would like. But on the whole, I would say it's an extremely well-rounded education. It's a well-rounded group of people.

But I don't know—that's just one of those inexplicable things that, why do MIT people tend to be attracted to performing music? I'm not sure. Maybe it's because the level of intensity of study here is so high that you need some kind of outlet? And performing music is a very good outlet, emotional outlet?

And it's one thing that I think is lacking in most of America and America educational systems that people aren't encouraged to perform. If you go to other cultures, children are taught from birth to sing, to play musical instruments as a normal daily part of expression, whether it's religious or just cultural.

If you go to Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, you're taught the only place that you can sing is—first of all, you have to be good to do it. In America, you're not allowed to do something unless you're really good at it.

You can't play, you know, baseball unless you're going to be a professional. You can't be a musician unless you're really good at it. You can't sing unless you're really good at it.

But even then you're given constricted places where you can do it, like you can do it in church. You can do it if you're in a musical ensemble. But God forbid like you should just sit around with your family or your friends and play the piano and sing.

Which, of course, we could go back a hundred years. That was what people did for entertainment. You would go to the drugstore. And there would be sheet music on sale at the drugstore because everybody played the piano and sat around and sang. And that was their entertainment for Saturday night because there was no radio or television yet.

So you had to entertain yourself. So you had to learn how to be part of a group, how to converse with people, how to have musical expression with each other. And I think that's something that's lacking now, that sort of America has said, you know, unless you're really good at something, you can't do it. And if it's music—

If you hear a baby now, and they're going lalalalala, the first thing the parents do is say, "Shut up. Stop it. You're bothering people." Or if they pick up their toys and they play the drums with them, which is completely natural to human environment, you make them stop. So instead of developing rhythm and melody by learning to sing, we stifle them when they're kids instead of encouraging them and say, "Oh you like to sing? What would you like to sing with me?"

Or "If you want to play with those, why don't we learn to play rhythm and work together?" Uh, so I've gotten way off topic I think.

FL: No. But that's—that's a tough subject. Do you think that there's different kinds of artistic kind of productions and results that come from the MIT environment that you might not find necessarily at other places? Um, is there something—is there a culture here of kind of creativity that —

DB: I think there's definitely an acceptance of anything here. I remember for one of my visual studies projects for a class—this was at the beginning of time back when a modem was a new idea. And for some reason someone was designing an interface that would write down the output of a modem in color and texture.

And so I said, "Well that's interesting except why don't we instead of using a modem, why don't we have people play musical instruments into it. And then we'll have this, use this to write up the color and texture." And the way the color and texture came out it was like a quilt.

And I found that really interesting. So I gave a live performance for that class where I played with a sax player. And we would deliberately try to pick notes that made interesting colors. And you know at most schools, you know if I had done that at Berklee they'd say, "What the fuck are you doing?"

FL: Yeah.

DB: But here it was like "Oh, that's cool. He's trying something different. He's doing something unique."

So I think there was definitely an open-minded approach to music and the visual arts here that you won't find at most schools. Um, and it was very encouraging. And I also think the analytical mind here and the academic mind was so high that you could get people doing things that no one else had tried anywhere else.

FL: Mmhmm. Wish we had more time to get into that subject. Wanted to tie things up, give you a chance to talk about your current professional work with film. And there's an Emmy award that I guess you had won.

DB: Yeah, I won an Emmy in 2000 for a movie on TNT called *The Hunley*, as a sound editor.

10. Current professional work (01:12:13)

FL: So if you don't mind just kind of opening this up and talking about more of the—um, you know, aspects of editing that you do. And you're—and just kind of what's in—what's involved with it. And I'll ask specific questions as we go along. But just um—because that's an area that not everybody knows a lot about. But you mentioned some of it.

DB: Yeah. I work as a music editor. I also—I'm kind of broad in what I do, which is atypical in Hollywood. You usually do just one thing. But I work in different areas of post production. I do music editing, which as I said means I work with the composer as sort of an assistant to help write the music or get the music in sync with the picture so that it's ultimately delivered the way the director and the composer want it.

And I also work with the music supervisor to choose and place music in movies. But I also work as a dialogue editor, which is more of a technical job, smoothing out the dialogue as it's recorded on the set. And I work as a re-recording mixer, who's the person who blends all the elements together.

So I've actually had experience in various different areas. I'm also on the board of directors of the Motion Picture Sound Editors, which is a group that has an annual awards show and is dedicated to advancement of sound in film. And I've won a couple of their awards. And I won, as I said, the Emmy award.

So I've been doing this for fourteen years. And I've been teaching it at USC for eleven years. So I am pretty experienced. On the other hand, I do have 120 credits or whatever.

But working in the film industry can be very frustrating because as Theodore Sturgeon [author] said, ninety percent of everything is crap. And most of the movies and TV shows that I work on I'm not particularly proud of. They're not things that I would call home and say, you've got to watch this.

And even when sometimes—even when it's good, sometimes the working environment can be very, very bad. The film industry has gotten a lot worse in the last fifteen years. It's much more geared towards getting a product out that is appealing, instead of creating something that's good and knowing that if it's good, there will be an audience for it.

And, because of that, the power of the marketing groups has become much stronger—more so than the director. And sometimes there's such a rush to get a product out to the marketplace so that you can beat any bad word-of-mouth or because you have a time limit, or you have a release date, or whatever, that you work a tremendous number of hours on a project over a short period of time, which again is—it sort of goes against creating great art to spend eighty, ninety, a hundred hours a week working on something for six weeks. Instead of taking the same amount of time and spreading it out over six months where you can actually think about what you're doing.

And all these changes that you're making—many of the times the changes that you're making aren't for creative reasons. They're because some guy in marketing said that a test audience or a focus group said that the ending doesn't work. So we need to change this, or whatever.

So it can be a very frustrating experience. On the other hand, I enjoy my teaching a lot. And I enjoy working with composers. And there is no greater job in the world than being a music editor when you get to sit in a studio in Los Angeles and hear the world's best musicians playing music and getting paid to do it for a living. That is the absolute joy. There's nothing better than that.

We did a movie—it's going to be coming out this summer—where we had a 100-person orchestra that were recording in audio in Studio City. And it was essentially John Williams's orchestra. He just wasn't working that day and it was right before the holidays. So he had gone home, and a lot of people had left town.

But his orchestra was not being used, and we got—literally—the best musicians in the country playing. And it was just such a joy to hear these guys sight-read really complex, mostly atonal music perfectly the first time. And with each rehearsal it would just get better. And you're thinking, how can this—how can this be? How can these guys all be so good? Um, so at times it could be very rewarding. At other times, it could be very frustrating.

FL: Do you get a chance or have you had a chance to write any original film scores at all?

DB: Not really. Uh, you know, when I went through film school [University of Southern California], it's very frustrating because you think of course you're going to be a director when you go through film school. When you go through music school, you think you're going to be a lead trumpet player or with Maynard Ferguson's band or whatever. And of course you end up not getting the one job that you thought was perfect.

But between the three schools that I went to, I sort of found that music editing was what was meant for me. I—you need a technical background to do it. You need a musical background to do it. You need a film background to do it.

So I'm not really terribly frustrated by the fact that I haven't had a chance to write for orchestra or for film scores. Jamie [Jamshied Sharifi] has actually. Jamie's written like five or six film scores out of—he works out of New York.

But I'm not terribly frustrated by that. And a lot of people think that there's something wrong with me—that I should want to be a composer. And I'm like, no. I found my place. And I'm happy with it. So—

FL: Do you get a chance to work directly with the musicians in rehearsal?

DB: Um, I don't rehearse them, but I work with them. Yeah. I mean I'm usually in the booth. But sometimes I'm on the floor. And if I'm in the booth—one of the reasons I'm in the booth is to find mistakes and I can talk to the composer any time and tell them, you know maybe you want the flutes louder here or whatever. So—

FL: Wow. Do you get a chance to play trumpet at all anymore?

DB: I quit because of a number of reasons. One was physical. I was starting to get TMJ [temporomandibular joint disorder] problems. And it was actually really bothering one of my ears. So I said it's too frustrating because to be a good trumpet player, you have to play every day.

And even when I was at my best, I had to practice daily, or I would not be able to play. It's probably the most—maybe horn is worse. But it's one of the most physically demanding instruments. You have to play every day.

And I just couldn't do it. It was getting to the point where I was playing like once a month. And it was more frustration than anything. And finally I said, "I'm putting it in the box. I'm not going to take it out because it's physically painful, and it's frustrating."

So I don't do that anymore. I don't play in any organized groups. I love to sing, though. And I never sang here. But I sang in chorus in high school. And I do outlet myself that way.

FL: All right. So what kind of singing do you do?

DB: Just in the car. Nothing to be proud of.

FL: No, that's great.

DB: But you need some type of musical expression as an outlet.

FL: Absolutely.

DB: And that's a good one.

FL: Well, one last thing. I've had all these questions I've been asking you. Is there—I'm just going to open it up. Is there anything you want to say about your MIT experience, or your musical thing—just any kind of parting shot or anything like that to kind of wrap things up?

DB: Well, you know, like I've said, MIT can be a very hard and lonely environment at times. And it was really great to have the jazz band because it gave me something to look forward to every week. And I would just recommend to people who are having a hard time here that they try to find something they're happy with.

And I think there's such a wide community here that you can do it, even if it's not the jazz band. If it's the—do they still have the, uh, bells group?

FL: The hand bell group?

DB: Yeah, they don't have that anymore?

FL: No.

DB: Well, there was such a wide variety of musical groups when I was here that you could find something to make yourself happy. And I would just strongly recommend that people help find themselves through the arts at MIT, because it was really tremendously inspirational to me.

FL: Well it's been inspirational to me to do this interview with you today.

DB: Thank you.

FL: Thank you so very much for your time and generosity today. Thank you.

DB: My pleasure.

[End of Interview]