

Reflections

How Music Affected My Life

Dan Black

August, 1976:

You could still smell the fireworks from our Bicentennial Celebration. Jimmy Carter was about to be elected president, running against Gerald Ford, who lost before he started for pardoning Richard Nixon. The Cowboys were a class organization coached by a man who personified class, Mr. Tom Landry. Gas was less than \$1 a gallon, and you could get a great house for far less than \$100,000. I started teaching for the whopping sum of \$8,600 a year, which seemed like manna from Heaven after teaching trombone lessons for \$2.

April, 2005:

The smoke from the Twin Towers may have settled, but there's a Texan in the White House who won't let even the most liberal among us forget the stench. Good manners precludes any discussion of Dallas professional football, but we can look with pride at no less than three NBA championships within our state lines. The cost of a gallon of gas has doubled, but that's easier to swallow when compared to beginning teacher salaries.

Twenty-nine years ago I was a rookie praying that I wasn't as unprepared as it predictably turned out I was. After that first seemingly endless year at a dirty word-foul language class C middle school I fell into the luckiest break of my career. Spending the next ten years at a junior high that, while not perfect, was about as close as one could ask for. Students there came to school to learn—they actually had been raised to look at school as a means to an end. The natural resources the community offered, as priceless and rare as they might be today, paled in comparison to some of the hidden perks—perks named Rick Lambrecht, Kenny Capshaw, Jimmy Olivas, Al Mendez, Vin Richards, and all the many talented and generous musicians that went into making El Paso-Morehead an I.A.J.E. winner, a TMEA Honor Band, a charter recipient of the Sudler Cup, and allegedly the first Texas Junior High to perform at Mid-West.

After 15 years in El Paso, I joined the rest of the State thanks to an invitation from one of the world's finest gentlemen, Richard Crain. I moved my family 700 miles east to Spring, and spent what was to be the remainder of my teaching career at a sometimes CC, sometimes CCC school. During my 14 year tenure here, I've become a better teacher, largely due to the perks available to a Houston band director—perks named Eddie Green, Tom Bennett, Rick Ghinelli, Mark Edenfield, and Vic Flowers.

Al Sturchio asked me to write this article, reflecting upon these past 29 years. These are some of the things that have transpired in the past three decades:

■ **No pass, no play.** It used to be that good teachers insisted students focus on their academics because it was the right thing to do, not because it was mandated from on high. The same can be said of the "8 hour" rule.

■ Possessing a working knowledge of legalese was not always a pre-requisite for region chairmen. Region chairmen used to have the freedom to guide their divisions through the mutual integrity they shared with their colleagues and the respect of the

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communities they served, not because of a *fear of litigation*.

■ The *UIL state marching contest didn't exist* in the 70's. Failing to advance in this event was not a case for booster club uproar.

■ Neither was there a B.O.A. *Spending upwards of \$25,000 on a 10 minute show was unheard of* then, yet is common practice in parts of our state now.

■ High School band used to be part of a free public school education. Now it's not unusual for *fees to run close to \$1,000 a year*. This isn't for lessons, or an instrument, or even trip fees. Truth be told—it's to pay for that 5 figure halftime.

■ Making All State Orchestra on a wind or percussion instrument used to be done through taped auditions. Two well-intentioned but naive band directors suggested that a *live audition* might serve the needs of both the individual and the orchestra better. Those two were vilified to the point of ostracization. Now, as the origination of that idea has been forgotten, someone or some other division has taken credit for the once reviled idea.

■ Some more naive directors started using the old Apple II *computer to help tabulate audition results* back in the early 80's, and offered to share this with the state. They were patiently patted on their collective heads and turned down—but this time, without ostracization. To the state's credit, it only took them a few years to let Don Woods show them how to do things incredibly more efficiently.

■ In the 1980's, there were 5 NFL players who weighed in at 300 pounds. In 2005, according to a recent editorial in the *Houston Chronicle*, there are 433. *Students have grown* proportionately. In 1978 my school's football team had one eighth grader over 200 lbs. In 2005, both the offensive and defensive lines at my middle school averaged over 200 lbs. One wonders if the additives used to grow larger livestock are having an impact on our students as well.

■ TEAMS, TAAS, TAKS... *Standardized testing* controls our schools. School boards, administrators, academic teachers, and students all feel the accountability stress that directors and coaches have always lived with. One wonders how those teachers would handle putting their class in a public auditorium or perhaps a football field, with an audience, for a public exhibition "against" another school.

■ Despite no pass no play, despite academic restrictions, despite the economic commitments, despite legislative interference, *band programs across the state are thriving*. It's not uncommon to see several hundred kids in a middle school program.

But is increased quantity an indication of higher quality? Since this is a forum for personal opinion, I'll continue with my time-dishonored-habit of sticking my neck out: It seems that the better high schools are better than ever, and that there are more of them. I am anything but objective when it comes to Texas bands, but I think the days of accusing Texas of

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Feeder schools might be a different matter. Thirty years ago there were still significant pockets of ninth grade junior highs, but today the vast majority of feeders culminate in the eighth grade. When those ninth grade bands played Grade V literature, there was a good chance the music would be respectfully performed. This is not necessarily the case when an eighth grade band attempts music this difficult. Eighth graders have only two-thirds the experience of a ninth grader. A more accurate way of stating the obvious is that ninth graders have been playing 50% longer than eighth graders. This difference is huge when attempting music that challenges 11th and 12th graders.

Tonally, my personal opinion is that many eighth grade bands sound better than most of their ninth grade counterparts of 20 and 30 years ago. Notable

exceptions: the deservedly legendary bands of such master teachers as Eddie Green, Billie Nero, Jerry Brumbaugh, and surely several others who I have not intentionally offended.

It is also my personal opinion that, in terms of technique and musical maturity, it is conceivable that the best feeder schools of today are...no...better stop now. These are different matters, and I'm already out on a limb.

It's with a very mixed bag of emotions that I end this 29th year of Texas band-directing. I'm immensely grateful that some far-sighted people saw the advantages of privatization of retirement monies. Yet I'm already missing the podium. And I gotta tell you, I just don't know if I'll be able to stay away when that first middle school football pep assembly rolls around.

Best of luck to all Texas Bandmasters. May you continue to be the gift to your students, and our profession, that you have always been.

Dan Black has taught band for the past 31 years, 29 of those in Texas. He received his Bachelor's degree from New Mexico State and a Masters of Music in Band Conducting from Texas Tech. Mr. Black's bands have been named as Honor Band Finalists four times in two different classes. His 1984 El Paso-Morehead Junior High Band performed as the BBB Honor Band at the Fort Worth TMEA convention. Additionally, his bands have performed at IAJE, TBA, and Mid-West. He was a member of the TMEA State Board of Directors for 12 years, and served as the President of TBA in 1992.

Dan's retirement plans include adding to his five Boston Marathons, completing his first Ironman Triathlon next semester, and following in Jack Fariss' clinic/judge footsteps. Jack, who was Immediate Past President of TBA when Dan joined the Board in 1987, has likened clinicing to grandparenting: "It's great! You just show up, spoil 'em, then give 'em back to their parents!"