

## Ray Dube

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MMS: Welcome to this episode of Musicians of the Midnight Sun. Today I'm talking with Ray Dube from Fort Smith. Like many other young people in those days, he left his home to attend Sir John Franklin high school and boarded at Akaitcho Hall in Yellowknife.

There, Ray picked up the Bb tenor saxophone and started to play with some of the other young musicians at Akaitcho Hall in a band called "The Nomads". That band name changed to "The Centennaires" when they were invited to perform on the 1967 Centennial barge that travelled all the way from Hay River to Tuktoyaktuk in the summer of 1967.

I just wanted to say thanks very much for being with us here today, Ray, and welcome to Musicians of the Midnight Sun. I'd like to start off by asking you to tell me about your very early years and how you got bit by the music bug at a young age?

RD: Well, I'll tell you, we moved to Fort Smith from Plamondon (AB), and then I went to school there for one year. I know there was dances at the Armories, but I was pretty young, but I got my first electric guitar when I was there. Then, I had buddies and we partied a lot, so I failed Grade 9. Then what happened, is that the parents got together and, "we got to do something with our boys". They said "Akaitcho sounds very good." That's when we all went to Akaitcho. A DC3 picked us up, and went to Pine Point, picked some others up, and we ended up at Akaitcho and I was there for four years.

MMS: Wow. Okay. If I could hold you there, Ray. You talked a bit about Fort Smith and I know your time there was brief. I've heard tell that either Grandin College or Grandin Hall had an orchestra there, in one of the schools. Do you ever remember that?

RD: Not really. But I do know that the Bishop had a bunch of instruments and somebody was teaching brass instruments, but I was never in there. I can't really help you there.

MMS: Okay. How did you feel about going to a Akaitcho Hall and getting on that airplane?

RD: It was certainly different but being with buddies that wasn't so bad at all.

MMS: Sorry, what year would you have gone to Akaitcho Hall again?

RD: Probably went in '65.

- MMS: Okay.
- RD: 'Til '68. Four years anyways.
- MMS: Okay.
- MMS: So, it seemed like you landed at Akaitcho Hall right at the peak because, from what I know in talking with other musicians, Akaitcho Hall opened up like in 1961 or so. From what I understand, the supervisors there had a bunch of instruments and the students could occupy their time, as opposed to going out and raising hell and all the rest of that stuff. But it just like around that time, in '65 or so, that would've been a musically-vibrant place to be going to school.
- RD: Yeah, it was because I think I started Grade 9 there, after flunking Grade 9 in Fort Smith. That was one of the reasons why the parents got together and said, hey, we got to do something. Anyways, at Akaitcho, there was no musical instruments around but the school did, Sir John Franklin. I took music. And that's when, I went to the music class first day. What do you want to play? I says, I don't know. They gave me a B-flat tenor. And that's what I stuck with.
- MMS: OK, so, the instruments were in the high school, and not so much in Akaitcho Hall then.
- RD: Right. They were in the high school. Yeah.
- MMS: Do you remember, who were some of the musicians that were actively playing in those early years at Akaitcho Hall?
- RD: Wow! What happened after a little bit, the shop instructor played the C sax, and then we had a trombone, we had trumpet and we had drums, and we started a little brass band. And then we kept that on. Matter of fact, my escort wasn't very happy. I played about half of my grad dance with that band. I still laugh about it because she wasn't happy at all.
- MMS: I guess not. So, what kind of music were you playing in your brass band? Do you remember any of the songs you were playing?
- RD: It was kind of the oldies. Nothing fancy, nothing new, just waltzes and polkas and stuff.
- MMS: Okay.
- RD: Yeah.
- MMS: You played around the school. Did you play anywhere else around Yellowknife?
- RD: Well, once we got "The Centennaires" ... We weren't called that at the beginning. We were "The Nomads". We took over, I think, it was from "The Arctic Ramblers".

- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: They split or left or quit, or whatever. That's when we started our little band. And then, we started playing in town. I call it in town because from Akaitcho, it was always, okay, got to go in town.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: And then we started playing a few times in the hall. And then, just played as much as we could in town. And then we'd make a whole bunch of, huh, \$30 a night each, maybe.
- It was kind of interesting. But mostly, our dances were every weekend at Akaitcho.
- MMS: When you say you were playing in the halls in Yellowknife, that would've been either the Legion or the Elks. Is that right?
- RD: Yeah. It would probably have been the Elks.
- MMS: Okay. That sounds about right. How about any of the rec halls in either of the two mines, either Con and Giant. Did you ever play out there?
- RD: No, never did. No.
- MMS: Okay.
- RD: I played a lot of ping pong with the guys from Giant and Con mines, but...
- MMS: Okay. Not a lot of music.
- RD: Yeah.
- MMS: I'm just wondering your perspective on the town, because you would've seen the town before the government came in, in '67. In '64 it was more of a mining town.
- RD: Yeah, it was.
- MMS: What do you remember about the town from that time?
- RD: We were only allowed to go uptown once in a while. And then, I remember the old town, where that shack used to be, on top of the rocks there with the airplanes, at the float base.
- MMS: Yup.
- RD: And then, the Gold Range Hotel. Used to go there, eat Chinese food. Other than that, not much.

- MMS: Not much more. You're busy going to school and busy playing music. For sure. So, you're playing the saxophone and you're playing with your group, The Nomads. How did the formation of "The Centennaires" come about? If you could talk a little bit about that time.
- RD: Like I mentioned, "The Arctic Ramblers", I think that's who they were, they dismantled, or whatever.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: So then, between *Lawrence Thrasher, David Evalik, Archie Plamondin, Tom Hudson*, we started just playing for the Akaitcho dances. Things kinda picked up from there and we figured, hey, this is working. That's kind of where it started.
- MMS: From other musicians that I've talked to, there was a little bit of a competition or a talent show to choose the entertainers for the barge. Do you remember that happening?
- RD: I certainly do. It was a highlight. There was about... I'm going to guess... another five bands, local bands. We all went to this hall and they told the crowd, the winners will be on applause. So when we got up there, we weren't the first ones, we were probably in the middle somewheres and the crowd went totally bonkers! They went wild! So, the applause was on our side heavy and that's how we made it to beat the battle of the bands.
- MMS: Wow.
- RD: Yeah. Quite exciting.
- MMS: Beautiful, sounds like a great night, for sure.
- RD: Oh yeah, it was.
- MMS: That would've been 1966, '67 that you're talking there. Right?
- RD: Yeah, probably 60, that's right. Because I remember in '67 we had to write our school exams, final exams, around June 10th or something because we had to leave for the barge on the 14th of June.
- Speaker 3: Okay. You had to do your finals early.
- RD: Yeah.
- MMS: No pressure, no pressure...
- RD: No pressure. Yeah, right.

- MMS: Was there any other kinds of preparations? I'm sort of thinking of... Did you guys learn a whole bunch of new songs, or did you have to get outfits, or that kind of thing?
- RD: Yeah. In fact, at Akaitcho, the superintendent by the name of *Mr. Boxer* was really on my side. And our instruments were pretty old. Anyways. They flew me out to Edmonton. At that time Fender was kind of the brand that was popular, or I picked, I forget, and bought all new amplifiers, bass guitar, drums and then flew back to Yellowknife. It was like Christmas! The boys there just, ooh, brand new stuff, away we go. So, that was the prep there. And then, once we knew that we were on the barge, we got those red jackets made or bought. We had green shirts that we bought. That was kind of our uniform.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: And then, black sweatshirts. So we had to get that kind of in order a bit. But, it all worked out good.
- MMS: That's amazing. Did they take you guys down, or did they just go down and buy the instruments and bring them back?
- RD: No. I went.
- MMS: Oh my goodness.
- RD: Yeah. They gave me... It wasn't a credit card. I forget what the heck they did. But anyways. I went to Edmonton, bought the stuff, charged it... or I forget how it went... and then came back with all the good stuff.
- MMS: Like you say, just like Christmas time. That's a...
- RD: Oh yeah, for sure. For sure.
- MMS: Teenager's dream come true. That's amazing. Just amazing too, that you had supervisors at Akaitcho Hall that were that supportive and would make...
- RD: Oh yeah.
- MMS: things happen. OK, you're back from Edmonton and you've got brand new instruments and uniforms and everything like that. You've done your exams and you're out the door. Where did the Centennial barge tour actually start? How did you get down there? I'll just let you carry that one.
- RD: We went to Hay River. So, we basically flew from Yellowknife to Hay River with all our stuff. That's where the barge started, was in Hay River. At that time I think it was *Arthur Laing*, the minister, that was there for the opening, along with the RCMPs and all that. Of course, can't forget our princess, *Georgina Blondin*, she was the princess for the tour. Anyway, She broke the champagne on the barge, and we left from there to cross the

lake to Fort Providence, our first stop. My mom and dad and my siblings had come to Hay River to see us off and stuff, so it was nice.

MMS: So what was the lake like at that time of year? Was it really rough? Did any of you guys get seasick?

RD: No. Nobody got seasick.

MMS: Okay.

RD: It was good, right through. Once we got to Mackenzie River, then it was just smooth sailing and things went good.

MMS: Tell me a bit more about the barge, the barges, I guess, plural. What kind of things were on the barge?

RD: My memory... We're looking at 55+ years ago.

MMS: Yes, we are.

RD: I'm trying to think. There was an exhibition barge.

MMS: Okay.

RD: In there, there was the Toronto-Dominion Building, which was at that time, the tallest building in Canada, I think.

MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

RD: They had a model of it. You know what? I can't think of anything else that I remember that was in that exhibition barge.

MMS: Okay.

RD: But, we used to have to tour people through it. But Toronto-Dominion, that's the only thing that sticks out in my mind.

MMS: Okay. You had some extra duties, other than just playing music then?

RD: For sure. And then, the other barge had the Ferris wheel, popcorn machine, cotton candy. And then we had our sleeping quarters. But, we used to have to take turns operating the Ferris wheel. It was all good. *Wally Firth* was there, and that photographer, and things were happening.

MMS: From what I understand, *Wally Firth* was there as the reporter on site, for CBC. Is that right?

- RD: That's right. Yep.
- MMS: Anyways. I'll stop interjecting here, and just let you talk about the trip. Because that's where you would've entered the Mackenzie River. Just any stories you have of the highlights, and the communities that you visited.
- RD: Well, just going down the river, we hit at one point, the Ramparts, they're called.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: High cliffs with little waterfalls. Oh, it was just unreal. I've got tons of pictures of stuff like that. Anyways. We kept on going and there's two places I'd like to highlight a bit. One is Fort Norman. We went by scow. The next day sort of thing, after overnighing and there was on the rocks, on the cliff, there's three beaver pelts, a large, a medium and a small. That's a natural thing that's built into the rocks. It's just unreal.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: So cool! And then, once we hit Inuvik, that was quite a scenario. We had partied pretty heavy because every time we'd stop at a settlement and play, they'd always give us a drum dance after, and lots of 24-hour wine with floating raisins and stuff. After the first glass, not too bad! Anyways. When we got close to about 10 miles out of Inuvik... I still remember the captain. *Frank* was his name. Because there was the captain, first, second mate, and an engineer on board. Anyways. He come in into our bunk shack and gave us supreme hell. "Come on, you guys. Get out of bed. Inuvik's got a big welcoming committee and you guys are zonked." Ho, that woke us up. Anyways.
- So what we ended up by doing was, if they're all there, let's give them a show. So, we hauled our instruments on top the barge and cracked the heck out of those amplifiers, I'm surprised it didn't blow. We put balloons around, and then we started playing. We got close to Inuvik and there was a whole flotilla of boats all decorated up and they just followed us in. There was even a scow, which I really remember good, loaded with fish poles. They were drying fish on these long poles in the scow. To me, that hits my fancy. Perfect.
- MMS: Wow.
- RD: Anyways. The dock was full, full, full of people. We had a great time that night and ya, it was totally good!
- MMS: With each of the communities, would you guys be performing on the barge or would you go up into the community and play in the community hall, if they had one?
- RD: We never played on the barge at all. We played in different venues, like shops, mechanical shops that they would clean them up to a point. *Rick Williams* with his big, Hammond organ that weighed a ton, we had to unload that thing every time, all our instruments. I remember one time there was no pickups, the guy come down with a

Caterpillar and a wagon and we loaded up on there. It was that type of deal that we had to... But, never played on the barge itself. It was always in a makeshift place, somewheres in the community.

MMS: You would play your music and have a dance and it sounds like they would bring in their traditional drum music and stuff like that as well. Right? That was pretty normal all the way across?

RD: Yeah, pretty normal. And then the captain had said, "At seven o'clock I'm leaving. I'm going to blow the horn, and if you're not here, you're staying." There's a couple of times there, I remember, you could hear that damn horn. Oh no! Rush like crazy and make it. That's it. Then we'd sleep.

MMS: Just in time. Then you could sleep until you got to the next town. Sounds amazing.

RD: For a couple of times these girls would follow us in a scow. We'd leave, and then pretty soon we see this scow coming and it's three, four girls. They wanted to tag along. We'd wave them off and say, hey, turn around. Because we wanted to meet some other ones. Anyways. The other good part that I still recall and really enjoy is Arctic Red River.

I'm sure there wasn't much more than about 70 people there. Once we got there, they had a nice, welcome sign and the whole bit, but we weren't allowed to step onshore 'til Chief and Council had a meeting. The meeting was about, do we allow these guys to come in our community? Anyways. They had their chit-chat and, "Yeah, you guys can come on out." A one-classroom school, and we all piled in there. And you know what? The 80-year-olds and 85-year-olds there, they were just dancing and kicking and... Oh, it was awesome! Anyways. Plus, with the Ferris wheel and the popcorn and cotton candy, those kids and adults had never seen that before. Anyways. I've got pictures of the little kids there. They were bloated with popcorn and stuff. I'm sure they must have been sick for two days. The Ferris wheel was always a big hit. For a little place, it turned out to be noteworthy. Put it that way.

MMS: I remember from *Wally (Firth)*, he was saying that they got the Ferris wheel secondhand, and that the thing was always breaking down.

RD: Yeah. I remember, one time I was operating it and pretty soon nuts and bolts are landing on the floor. Whoa! Shut it down. Unloaded the people. Had the engineer and he worked on it and we said, no, tomorrow on the travel, fix it. So, he had to tighten every bolt that there was on there, and there's a lot. That scared the hell out of me, when you start seeing nuts and bolts come down on the floor with people on it. Whoa!

MMS: Yeah, that would be pretty scary. For sure.

RD: Yeah, it was.

MMS: So you were on the barge... Sorry... for the whole summer...



RD: Minus two weeks. Once we ended up in Tuk (Tuktoyaktuk, NT), then flew back to Yellowknife and then we had two weeks off. So, I came back to Fort Smith for those two weeks, but then I went to Fort McMurray to visit. Then, as we came back to join up again, we started off in Yellowknife and we went to Snowdrift, Reliance, Fort Smith. But, in Fort Smith we didn't bring the Ferris wheel and all that because there was the rapids.

MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

RD: It was just us guys. We had a really good evening there, playing at the Frontier Village. That was the end of the tour. We went back home, finished off what was left of the summer. Then I went back there again in '68, to start school again.

MMS: If I could take it back to... That's interesting, because nobody's ever really talked about the second half of the barge tour around Great Slave Lake. You got to Tuk (Tuktoyaktuk, NT). I don't know. What was the weather like at that time of year? That would've been... What? Early August, maybe?

RD: Probably.

MMS: Yeah, okay. Wasn't snowing or anything up there though? Was it?

RD: No, no. It was... I can't remember bad weather throughout the whole summer, really.

MMS: Amazing, amazing.

RD: We spent a lot of time sleeping, but...

MMS: Yeah. I imagine between the playing and the hosting and all the rest of that stuff, it would've been like being on the road with any kind of a band that way. One-nighters for however long it took you. Was it about a month that you were on the river tour? Do you remember how long that took?

RD: The first time, yeah, a month. Two weeks off. And then, another two weeks later.

MMS: Okay.

RD: After, to go around the lake. About.

MMS: Yeah.

RD: See what happened to me, Pat, is that I found I was better useful... like I was playing the sax at every stop, but then I kinda dwindled down because I found that I was better at visiting and communicating with the local people, and I loved it that way. So, I kinda, sorta gave it up. Put it that way, in short. I remember Fort Good Hope, I think it was, I recruited two young girls to be go-go girls on the stage. Wow. That made their day.

MMS: I bet.

- RD: I'll tell you that. Yeah, they had fun. We all had fun, at every stop.
- MMS: I can only imagine, and try and visualize, and dream about it. It sounded like an amazing time. I can see, you're almost more like a tour manager or a production manager or something like that and would take on more of that role of organizing the community and you knew what you had on the barge and then just bring that together into an event, as good as you could make it that way.
- RD: Yeah. You're absolutely right.
- MMS: Were there other musicians that dropped in and dropped out as the tour was happening, or was it just you guys?
- RD: It was just us, and that little short cook. I call her short because she was four foot, nothing. She couldn't even reach the cupboard for salt and pepper or plates. We had to do that for her. She was a good cook. And then she did her little number at night. Wherever we played, she put on a little gun belt and a cowboy hat and she'd sing something and people would clap and then she was over. That was it.
- MMS: So, even the cook had a part in the show that way.
- RD: Yeah. The Indian princess, *Georgina*, she didn't sing or nothing like that. She was there for show.
- MMS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- RD: She had two dresses, a white one and a brown one, made out of caribou. Very nice gal. She was from Fort Providence, I think.
- MMS: But it seemed like everything else was... I don't know... just about picture perfect there. Imagining a flotilla of barges tootling on down the Mackenzie River, like I say, it just seems picture perfect.
- RD: It was a wonderful trip. Put it that way. Wonderful summer, right through. I'll never regret it, and that we were lucky enough to have been able to be on it, to begin with. It was one of those good things that had happened to me in Yellowknife. Yeah, for sure.
- RD: You know, I might be jumping ahead in something here, but at Akaitcho, there was a lot of talented artists. One of them painted a mural on the corner of the big dining room, all the way down, and he painted a waterfall. And then, at the bottom of the waterfall painting, we put polythene all on the stage. Then we hauled fresh moss from the bush and laid the whole stage with moss. In the middle, we had a little creek flowing. I had a circulating pump and it looked like the water was coming from the waterfall and it would flow down into a big tub and then circulate. We had all the instruments on that moss. That was our icebreaker dance. What a show! It was just fantastic! For me, for four years, that was one of my... I have to say, other than being away from home, it was my best years. I had opportunities that I would've never, never have. One of them was, I

was designated to meet *Madam Vanier* at the airport and escort her to Akaitcho, which was a highlight. Then, I had breakfast with *Pierre Trudeau*, elbow-to-elbow because I was bilingual. So those are a of couple things that would've never happened if I wouldn't have been at Akaitcho. So, I just wanted to mention that because it's... Not bragging, but I'm just saying that was a good opportunity.

MMS: OK, well this has just been great. Thanks again, Ray.

RD: Thanks, Pat.

MMS: You take care.

RD: Righto. Have a good day.