

Alex Czarnecki

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Recorded in Alex's home on Latham Island in Yellowknife (complete with barking dogs, float planes taking off and sewage pump out trucks)

AC - In the early 60s I guess that's when it was. We had several bands in Montréal and that was a time when I, I really was taking the saxophone very seriously. And I, I studied, I had lessons and most importantly I was, I was actually trying to develop a sound. At any rate we had several bands. But then we just happened to have the right mix and we ended up with a, with a seven piece group in Montréal called the "Island City Seven". We had one of the hottest trumpet players in the city playing with us. The drummer was a big band drummer that was also playing with the Canadian Air Force band, in their dance band. But he was our regular drummer in this seven piece group. And there was a guy that played the vibraphones, two guitarists, a bass guitar, occasionally we had a female singer with us and this band took off. We had a standing contract at one of the most important ski resorts in the Laurentians. We played every weekend and so we were regulars there for about two years and all the debutante balls at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and the Queen Elizabeth Hotel and we rehearsed a lot. We worked very hard and it was the, it was the era of *Tijuana Brass* and, and *Stan Getz* was hot then so it was really an eclectic mix of music from polkas to Latin American to "Watermelon Man" kind of rock. And so it had a brassy sound because I also doubled on the trombone. And those were great years. And perhaps the climax of that came with Prime Minister, former Prime Minister Trudeau hired our band to accompany him for his Montréal campaign. And that was a wonderful thrill. Playing in an open air limousine bus and Trudeau is right in front of me just dancing up a storm and then we played at *Place des Arts* in the, in the open area in downtown Montréal. We spent the whole day. At any rate,

MMS - What year, sorry what year would that it been?

AC - We are talking about the '60s here.

MMS - Okay, so the Trudeau campaign would have been...

AC - Well, it was the year, uh, *Bobby Gimby* was at Expo 67.

MMS - Okay, 67, around that time.

AC -It was all in that era.

MMS - Okay, and you were in Montréal, right in that, that whole Expo thing.

AC - Yeah, yeah. I grew up in Montréal and...

MMS - Okay.

AC - You know we played music there forever. But that was a time when I really think I knew how to play. And you know so much to learn and then big decisions, big decisions Pat, where, we, we were on the verge of quitting everything and just doing music full time and so you know what that's all about. And, so we kept getting these contracts and but I don't know what happened, eventually you know people started going their own way and the guitarist was superb. I mean he was, he was studying to be a neurobiologist and we all had our own, you know, things to pursue. But woven into that whole period was always a dream of coming north. And so I, I taught in Toronto, I mean Montréal for a year at a blackboard jungle school which actually was my turning point to go, to go into teaching. So I had to go and get another degree.

MMS - Sorry, what is a blackboard jungle school?

AC - A blackboard jungle school is a school where I had no warning that what I'm walking into, I was the third teacher in two months.

MMS -Okay.

AC - And I had juvenile delinquents as students and the place was mayhem, with motorcycle gangs and fights and all of them had been failing all of their lives. But that first year I introduced them to music, I introduce them to theatre, art and by Christmas these sort of *Fonzie's* from "Happy Days" were dressed up as little elves and put on their own Christmas play with music for the entire neighbourhood and in the spring we formed a ball team which played in the shadow of the Montréal abattoir. We used to have to wear kerchiefs around our faces because of the stench but they'd never done that. And in the spring they put on a young people's adaptation of "*Macbeth*" and everyone passed. Not one failed and that was my decision to become a teacher. So I had to go to the University of Toronto for another degree, so I didn't play music in Toronto and then the opportunity to come to Yellowknife finally arose. I applied to the school board here (Yellowknife) and lo and behold they sent me a letter, and I was in Europe at the time, that you are welcome so we bought an old Simpson Sears truck for \$500 that was painted that oxide red you know, because they have to and it was an old clunker. We filled it with record albums, two saxophones, a couple of sleeping bags and books. And personal things, little things. And started chugging across... (Chuckles)

MMS - Wow.

AC - And it blew up in Valleyview, (AB).

MMS - Okay.

AC - We ended up hitchhiking. Anyway, let's get back to the music. So I arrived in Yellowknife

MMS - That was about '68 or '69 then

AC - Yeah, '71 by this time.

MMS - Okay, '71.

AC - That was in 1970, '71.

MMS - Okay.

AC - So I had left behind quite a colourful life. In Montréal and fond memories of those band years. And I knew that would never happen again. I said, well not in Yellowknife that's for sure. So I, I wanted to play music up here. And so you know, you meet people. And I went to a few bars and dances and it was quite bad. (Laughs)

MMS - I'm sure.

AC - Not all. But after what I was used to,

MMS - Which bars would have been...

AC - Well, well we had, we formed a little group. You know what I don't remember the, if you name the names of bars in those days but what I do remember is we ultimately formed a little trio with myself, *Penny Aumond* who is now *Penny Ballantyne* and *Wilf Schidlowski* who was a teacher at St. Patrick's High school. And I think our first engagement may have been a New Year's Eve dance at the, what was it called, I don't know if it was "*The Gallery*" or if it was called "*The Gallery*" then. And that was, it was it was really tough. First of all, playing just with three people like there was, I don't even know if we had a drummer with us. Maybe we did. If it was, it was a young fellow by the name of Wayne. Wilf would probably know that. But the kind of music that I was used to playing I couldn't seem to develop it here with this particular ensemble. And so we did it but I also discovered that the crowd was very forgiving. Which was wonderful. And you know, no one really criticized what you were doing. They just, people just enjoyed having a live band, dancing and enjoying and the band being able to play requests as best as we could. But we were as a group, we were absolutely green. I mean, I may even have a recording of that somewhere and I think I would cringe listening to it but that's not the point. People were really very good. Do you want me to talk about different players and music or do you want me to tell you about some of the experiences that we had in those bars. Or what, where do you, what do you want me to... Ask me a question.

MMS - Ask you a question. I guess, when you first, when you first, your destination was Yellowknife and your vehicle broke down in Valleyview, when you first got to Yellowknife I mean, what was, I remember my first impression, I was only three years old. I remember when I came up in the morning and walking outside of the old motel that was where the Lahm Ridge Tower is now, (*Nick*) *Treeshin* used to own that. Old man *Treeshin*, I can't remember his first name now. But I still remember that morning. And for other people as well especially when you have this how can I put it, vision of what the North is. So then you are finally sort of here, in 1971 what were your impressions of the town right off the bat? We don't have to stay there very long.

AC - Okay, no, I can tell you that. It was very clear. And it's only because of the, the extremely rough trip up. I mean with this van blowing up, we were broke I couldn't, I needed a new engine and a farmer towed us back in the Valleyview spent the night in a garage where I still hear the jet, the airguns changing truck tires and we are sleeping in a garage in the back of our, in back of our Simpson Sears truck. Wondering what the, and school was going to start in three days. And I didn't

know how we were going to get there. And the next morning we walked into the café and it was just filled with truckers. And I said I'm going to ask one of these guys where they are going. Carolyn, my wife was with me. And I spotted one guy that kind of looked like may be he's the one. So I introduced myself, I said, I gave them our sob story. He says I'm going to Hay River, hop in. So what an adventure. His name was *Earl Gow*. I'll never forget him. And he was the nicest man in the world. And we sat in his big 18 wheeler and the road was dirt. All the way there. And it was, it had been raining and mud and he was an introduction to the north. And he gave us a running commentary all the way about the northern lights and the birds and the animals and the rivers and he was in love with the North. And he couldn't take us to Yellowknife because he had a fish load to come back then we took a bus from Enterprise to Yellowknife and as we were driving a bullet flew through the windshield of the bus, the driver just about freaked. It was a stray bullet or something or other and the glass shattered, ping (laughs) oh my, oh my, oh my.

MMS - The wild west.

AC - It was. What an adventure coming up here! And all we had was, you know a little handbag or knapsack but they had an apartment for us here. Anyways so here, here, here in answer to your question, Yellowknife was to me an image. After all of this, you know like its 1000, it was like 1000 miles through nothing, dirt roads and bullets and dust and mud. It was like a Shangri-La underneath some kind of a plastic geodesic dome to me. It was like a, unbelievable that something like this could exist which was more or less in the middle of nowhere at the time. Like, I was blown away. But that's only because of the trip. Because you know like at the end of the road what is there? And suddenly I looked around, my goodness, and you know the apartment had running water, toilets, well, and what a change from Montréal and Toronto. Fell in love with it. Although we were only going to come for two years. Well here it is, it's 2006. But anyways, so my impressions of Yellowknife were really, it was quite awesome. In perspective. You know, of what we were doing. And then of course we started settling in and getting to work and went back to Valleyview to pick up the truck about a month later. We went out just in two days, friends came, new friends you know. Teachers and let's go, and got it up here. And my saxophone was still there.

MMS - Beautiful.

AC - I thought maybe someone would steal the damn thing.

MMS - Yeah.

AC - And so that's, that's, that was actually both of our impressions as I remember. And I actually wrote a story about that that was sort of like a memoir and that whole experience of arriving here and kind of being in disbelief. So it was a positive, certainly a positive feeling and of course when you start meeting all the people here, the warmth and hospitality, the genuine feelings of acceptance and taking you for who you are and all of those things, it was really special. And I guess that's what keeps me, you were either hate it, I remember people either hated it or they loved it. There were very few that I can think of if any that just sort of well it's okay. It was either I hate it here or I love it. That's what I remember. Yeah.

MMS - So you came up, it was the Catholic school board that hired you?

AC - Yeah.

MMS - And you were teaching at St. Pats?

AC - That's right.

MMS - What grades are you teaching?

AC - Well, I was teaching grade 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. It was quite a challenge because you know there was such a variety of subjects but the focus was principally on English, on teaching English and art and then we introduced the drama program that grew over the years. Actually blossomed. But that's what I was doing. I was also a guidance counsellor there because that's what I trained in. In Toronto. Yeah.

MMS - Okay. Sure, if we could, if we can sort of I guess pick up where *Wilf Schidlowski* was teaching there as well and he was one of the cornerstones of the musical community at that time for sure.

AC - He was. He knew everybody. Anybody who, anybody who could play anything, Wilf knew about them. Whether it was some guy playing chopsticks or a talented, very talented musician of some kind, Wilf knew. And Wilf had an absolute love for it. I guess it was that having come from Saskatchewan and as a matter of fact a lot of the folks the teachers were from Saskatchewan and maybe they still are today I don't know but... And Wilf just loved playing polkas and a lot of old-fashioned kinds of songs and he was I think a real spirit within the ensemble. Because I don't think there was any band after that first band I just described where Wilf wasn't in it. So I think our last gig probably in 1985 or somewhere around there was Wilf's last gig and my last gig together. So we started together and it was all those years we played together. Other people change but Wilf was there, steadily. We rehearsed at his place in the old teacherage and the whole building would shake there I remember. And, but Wilf was very much a, I don't know kind of like a catalyst in all of this. Because, because of his demeanour, his enthusiasm and other things which actually got quite humorous which I won't talk about.

MMS - That's fine we can leave that there.

AC - We got a lot of work. We were busy every weekend. See there were different bands, I think one was called "*The Alley Cats*" another one was called the.... I gotta remember the names of these things. It will come later.

MMS - So you were playing in multiple bands at (inaudible)

AC - No it was one band that kept changing. You know how people would come and go and now we gotta find a bass player. Now we gotta find a guitarist. Now we gotta find a drummer. And Wilf would come up with these people.

MMS - Find somebody yeah.

AC - But the ultimate group or groups that eventually this evolved into which actually I think we were getting quite good even despite what I said earlier. But there is a group in the last several years in the early '80s through to the mid-'80s or late '70s which had a wonderful, absolutely

versatile accordionist by the name of *Henry Undheim* who was from Norway. He was a worker at Con Mine and he played a beautiful accordion that was of course all electronic and so it didn't sound like an oom-pa-pa accordion it truly had a band sound. And he was really good, I thought he could play anything. And well. He wouldn't hit wrong notes and wrong cords like so many people I worked with here would do. You know, it's supposed to be a minor but it's not. And stuff like that.

MMS – Yeah, gottcha.

AC - But Henry was great. And then I really kind of solid stalwart bassist by the name of *Lloyd Dahl* who was a, he worked at the correctional Institute and he too just loved music. And I remember seeing *Lloyd* playing with *Henry* before we teamed up with them and *Lloyd* always I don't know he just gave me, mesmerized me when he played because he was a big guy and he just had a pretty stoic face but boy when he played, just loved it, I'll never forget him. And so we teamed up with them and I think *JT* was on drums with the group, *John Telgen*. But and *Norman Glowach* was also involved. I don't know if he was a drummer or *John Telgen* but there was also a period also when *Norm Glowach* played drums with us. And then there was myself of course and Wilf and we had a singer, *Huguette Duncan*. She had quite a lovely voice. And so we had this gal singer with us and we were busy constantly. Whether playing weekly at the Legion for two nights or at the Elks two nights and then of course every RCMP ball we were at and those were good years too because we flew they flew us to different you know places where they would have their annual RCMP ball and that was always fun.

MMS - What kind of places would you go to?

AC - Well we went to Smith (Fort Smith) I remember. And our next-door neighbour actually *Ray Weber* was the pilot on that trip. And then we went somewhere else, my goodness did we go to Inuvik? Wilf might have a better memory with that. But we were busy. And so here I was teaching, I was doing theatre at nights, rehearsing, plus music sometimes three nights a week. And so I was a real night owl. You know all about that. But so that's what happened and one of the things that, that I think why we got so many jobs was that we really played just about anything you wanted. We weren't the best rock band in town that's for sure but we did it. But you know we could play polkas and tangos and cha-cha's and you know sort of old-fashioned chatisses or we could play swing *Benny Goodman* stuff and it was really quite a spectrum of music and people loved that. To have a variety.

MMS - And so for what you and *Wilf* were doing, your experience playing in dance bands, dance bands in Montréal and *Wilf's* experience playing in dance bands in Saskatchewan and knowing what tunes work what styles work and then the both of you up here boy, that would've been just a great combination of players to put together a book of music for a dance band up here.

AC - Yeah. And that is kind of what happened. And we were very lucky to have the likes of a *Henry* join us.

MMS - Exactly.

AC - And it has happened. *Randy Demmon*. I don't know if you remember *Randy Demmon*. Played with him quite a lot. He joined our group so we, so we did get some really good players.

AC - And that's one of the unfortunate things today I think, is, there was always live music generally speaking at these events and it was terrific. Even if it was a lousy band, some other band that was still fun you know. But... These, you know, I cannot remember the sequence but I do know also then there was a period where *Wilf* and I and I don't know who else, we were playing with *John* and *Gary Tees*. Who we had, we had something going there for some time. And I don't remember what the name of the group was but I do know that we played several, several situations together. And that too was an interesting mix because they were definitely into the rock scene and doing very well and it was fun. To sort of shift gears and I believe pursuant to that, the last group that played regularly at the Legion and you got all the, you know the nurses ball, we got all this work, it was wonderful. You know they used to have these huge teachers events or teachers conventions always wrapping up with a big ball and we played all those. And, but in that group a wonderful Danish architect I think he was Danish who had befriended, joined forces with us and his name was *Hans Barford*. And he was good. He had a stand-up bass but he also played the electric bass. And so for our purposes he chose the electric bass but he knew his music and he was actually, he actually was the first person that kind of rekindled what I had started this with. Reminded me of how I used to play and probably still could play if I worked at it, back in Montréal. See *Hans* was an accomplished player. *Henry* the accordionist I just told you about, he too was accomplished and excellent however the difference between him and *Hans* was *Hans* was classically trained. Like *Hans* could read and knew, knew, knew music, the theory and all that whereas *Henry* I don't know how he did this had learned everything by ear. He couldn't read a note of music. And yet his fingers on both hands flew across that accordion, like you wouldn't believe. So that was the difference between the two of them. So it had nothing to do with the quality of music. It had to do with their intelligence concerning music and their knowledge of it. So *Hans* was a wonderful asset to the group but it took a little arm twisting to get him to play because he didn't want to get back into this but once he started he was happy going to the Legion every Friday night and Saturday night. Playing music there. People danced 'til all hours. Gosh, we used to have to, you know they didn't have to close it up right away they let us stay longer if people were having a good time. But in the first Legion I'm sort of scattered but I just have some memories of Saturday nights, Saturday was worse than Friday. But Saturday night in the old Legion which was located where "The Office" restaurant is now so the old Legion was down there well, Saturday night around 12:30 or 1 o'clock and it happened very regularly we kind of start pulling back on the small stage we had it's sort of getting a distance between us and the floor because teeth would fly. Some fight would break out and oh somebody would land on stage.

MMS - Oh yeah, okay.

AC - Yeah and it just happened people you know people drink and some people have a lot of fun when they drink other people can get really nasty. But there was inevitably some fight in the Legion on Saturday nights. Geez. Got the chairs flying here and there.

MMS - So you guys were just trying to put as much distance between the danger zone.

AC - Yeah, yeah. I mean and also you had to be careful you got a saxophone in your mouth I mean if something hits you there, geez. And there is another incident there I, whose name I won't mention but he was there to streak across the floor and being the colourful person he is, he took up the dare. What he didn't know was that he had to streak through the crowded Legion where everyone was dancing, mixed crowd, from one end and out the back door which was right beside our little stage. What he didn't know is that those bums locked that door on him. So he goes tearing through the Legion, we're going (musical noises) gets to that door expecting to make a quick escape, it's locked and he had to streak back.

MMS - Had to go all the way back again.

AC - It was so funny. But you know people would pull pranks and everyone took it in stride. So Yellowknife was a really colourful, vibrant, fun place to be doing, to be working again in music and you never had to take it as seriously as you, as you did in Montréal. Where there was competition, there was also a little, people were a little more discerning in terms of what kind of music they wanted. And if you were crummy you wouldn't get hired again. Whereas here, you know, you're not intentionally crummy but there were mistakes. I listen to some of these old tapes and some of them are so out of tune and I can't believe we did that! And I'm squawking anyways and the squawk... It's true. Sheesh! And so that's how it was. And eventually, well I got a job offer at the Banff School of Fine Arts in theatre and so we left and I stayed there for a year and I never went back to playing regular because you know I think I may be, well like any musical instrument but especially a wind instrument if you're not at it, you start sounding worse and worse and worse. And that's what I had worked on all my time in music to develop a sound and I really liked sort of playing a breath like sound and it came and I had a beautiful Selmer saxophone that was my pride and joy. You know I experimented with different mouthpieces and finally I think I was getting there, even here in Yellowknife, you know, it wasn't as good as Montréal but I was getting there but after Banff I never played again and that year I had such a miserable year financially. I was a single dad with three kids and I didn't have any money, nothing, to even buy Christmas presents or a tree so there is a point to this little story. I was, I was like it was so hard. I chopped down a tree right outside our bedroom window. I mean it was crazy. Right off our lawn. I chopped down a tree to have a Christmas tree. And I sold my saxophone for \$400 to buy presents for the kids. I don't know what came over me but that's where it came. You know so here was a, symbolized in this horn, I sold it. So that's like selling, it's like selling your love of music. But that's where it went. I have another one but it's... I haven't even looked at it. Because you know it needs work and all this stuff but so that was the end. That was probably 1987. That's when it all stopped. And I've been asked several, you know not in the last number of years but after that let's go again and I just lost my spirit.

MMS - Part of the reason why I am doing this is what's really has really turned me on in the past, is seeing the pictures of the old jazz musicians and from down in the states and even in Montréal when you're talking about that time in the early '60s because I know in the '50's Montréal was like the New York of the North and of Canada.

AC - It was wonderful.

MMS - And the heavy jazz, the big bands and the jazz players that would come through there. I am sort of trying to find on my own but I went there has got to be an equally as rich a history up here. And that's the reason why I started to go around and talk to these people.

AC - It's a very interesting analogy and you know kind of using that as a stepping stone. Because there is a rich history here. It's just very different. It's very, very different. You know you brought up Montréal in the 50s and my parents were brave enough to buy me a set of drums when I was 10 years old. My brother's a pianist, my father is a pianist, my mother is a pianist and they bought me drums. Can you imagine buying a 10-year-old drums? You gotta be nuts. But they did that. It must've driven them crazy. But that's how I started. I played drums for about 10 years in different groups but anyway I remember going to the Montréal, it was the Montréal Jazz Festival because I had a lady from CBC who was a family friend and she took me and I was a kid. And she took me to go see *JJ Johnson* and *Dave Brubeck* and who was that baritone saxophonist... Oh geez, anyway they were the greats of the time. *Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers* were there.

MMS - In their prime.

AC - And that's what it really inspired me into music. And when I saw *Stan Getz*, I said I gotta play the saxophone. And that's, he was my, not my mentor but he was my, what do you call it when someone is your idol? And I wanted to play like him. Everything I worked on was to get his sound, I just loved it. And so that's where it began at those Montréal Jazz shows and to see these guys playing live, oh my goodness! You know so that developed into several bands in Montréal but you have several before this "*Island City Seven*" and then coming here and bringing that tradition with me. But soon realizing I got to let go of it because it ain't gonna work here. You kind of have to adapt to your environment and that's what we did. At least that's what I did. And so I couldn't really bring that tradition here because, because the environment and the whole mentality for it didn't exist here. This was not downtown Montreal, this was Yellowknife. Kind of at the end of a 1000 mile dirt road. With people from all walks of life here and it was so neat to go to these functions because I used to go to all these Commissioners things and whatever to be in the same room having a wonderful time with everyone from like say the Commissioner to the guy who pumps out your sewer tank. And everybody, we were all interdependent it was wonderful. Everybody had a place and was important in the community. We were, I don't remember any distinctions really and I loved that. I really did. You know? Everybody was respected really for their contribution to making the place work. And so that happened in music as well. You know even though someone didn't have, you know the abilities or the knowledge or the background or the training that you had or someone else had there was always respect. And that's really important. You know?

MMS - Yeah, it's like you said right at the beginning you could, you could come up here and be as eccentric as you were, as you are and most of the people around you were just as much if not more so and there was an acceptance and tolerance you know for the old diamond drillers or the, you know the mine workers, cabdrivers all the rest of it.

AC - Oh those mine dances used to be, excuse the pun, a blast! We had so much fun at the old Con Rec Hall and the Giant Rec Hall and when they would hold their dances and everyone was

out for a good time. Gee! The northern lights would be out I remember in the winter time you'd go out for a quick smoke it would be frigging freezing and the lights were out and you would walk in and the steam would just come, you know the condensation would just barrel through the doors of those old buildings. Oh you got and that it would get cold!

MMS - You had venues to play and a really appreciative audience like you say, people seemed to value the live dance band.

AC - Absolutely. And you know everything from Robbie Burns's nights to Remembrance Day post, Remembrance Day, remembrances to the celebrations we used to play at all this stuff. And people were very appreciative. So appreciative that there were a few New Year's Eves where I really didn't want to be on stage because everybody was pretty well three sheets to the wind after they are singing "Auld Lang Syne", I will never forget at the Legion I am standing there just finishing off the last notes of "Auld Lang Syne" and suddenly this flash comes up on stage and grabs me, the saxophone comes out of my mouth. I don't know who this person was all I remember was her lips were soaking wet and she was huge. Oh God. And she disappeared back into the crowd like she was overwhelmed by the New Year's Eve, that particular New Year's. Oh my God. And drooling... (laughter) so those, those are memories I mean it's part of, part of life that was truly a spontaneous response appreciating having a live version of *Guy Lombardo's* "Auld Lang Syne". You know maybe she would have done that anyway I don't know. I'm going to give her something here. But people were very appreciative and on one occasion at a teacher's function, it was a big teacher's ball, I don't know what group we had there one of the groups there but *Anne McGrath* was a teacher, actress in town she also had a very good voice for, she did quite a bit of music on stage and God, I dragged her up there to sing a few songs and we had rehearsed nothing. She was terrified and you know she pulled off a few numbers and it was really, really quite neat. But I also wrote music in those days. There is a number of songs that were recorded and I wrote children songs for three films and so they were all scored and I still have all this stuff of course. And then we did a drama which involved an old man and an old woman meeting on a park bench. All shot here in Yellowknife. It was the first film I ever made and it was actually the film that as a result of that half-hour drama which had *Bob MacQuarrie* in it and *Anne McGrath* and *Hugh Brennan* and *Anne Cubitt*. No words were spoken, it was just music. No words needed to be spoken but that film got someone's attention, somebody's attention in New York and I was invited to work for ABC network doing drama in New York. And I couldn't do it, the kids were too small. But *Anne McGrath* sang quite a bit of some of those songs, "Sesame Street" bought a whole bunch of my children songs they used to play them regularly on "Sesame Street". So yeah it was also a time for composition so where I didn't play it I would be writing music for film etc. etc.

MMS - This was before the mid '80's?

AC - Yeah this was all around the same time as the band stuff was going on. I was also writing music and lyrics and stuff like that.

MMS - The drama work that you were doing was that within the school or within the community? Both.

AC - Both.

MMS - What productions were you working on?

AC – Well, musicals and then we did 10 years of solid drama with St. Pat’s school and three of those productions went on tour. You know we took about 40 people to Inuvik where “*Fiddler on the Roof*” was performed and then we took over 100 people to Whitehorse, where “*Two hands and Forever*” was put on.

MMS - Wow.

AC - And then *Peter Schaffer’s* “The Royal Hunt of the Sun” which is the story of Pizarro and the Inca leader Atahualpa and how these two came to loggerheads and you know Pizarro destroyed of course, the Inca nation. That toured to Saskatchewan. So we had these productions going on tour. And then one year I was crazy enough to do a musical for the “Singing North” called “Canterbury Tales” while at the same time doing a production with the St. Pat’s group at the school, at the same time doing a film, at the same time teaching, trying to teach. I came close to cracking up that year. That was nuts. Stupid.

MMS - Too much but...

AC - But so yeah so there was a lot of theatre. There was community stuff, school stuff and I did stuff for Mildred Hall School. Sometimes I did a musical with *Bill Gilday*. That I directed for them.

MMS - Do you know, what was the name of that one?

AC - That was called “Trying Out”.

MMS - Okay.

AC - It was a wonderful show that *Bill (Gilday)* wrote and all the kids from Mildred Hall School, not all of them, grades 6, 7. They were great. I’ve got all that on videotape. And then of course following 10 years of that, NACC started. The Northern Arts and Cultural Centre. So over the years including Montréal and Toronto I’ve directed about, I once added them up, I’ve got about 56 productions.

MMS – Wow!

AC – Musicals, dinner theatres and dramatical plays, *Tennessee Williams* work, we did a “Streetcar Named Desire” that kind of stuff too. To “*Oliver*” and “*Fiddler on the Roof*” to...

MMS - To musicals that you’ve written.

AC – “*Man of La Mancha*” not musicals. I’ve never written a musical.

MMS - Oh okay.

AC - But I’ve written music and songs for film.

MMS - Okay.

AC - Not for the stage.

MMS - Okay.

AC - Except for that one in Montréal with those delinquent kids who did the Christmas...

MMS - It was the beginning of it all.

AC - Yeah, that was the beginning.

MMS - One of the things I've always found about this town is that it's always been, the word I use is cosmopolitan and then there's always different cultures and different races of people coming through here to work and it sort of in the early days from talking with other people the mines were the, we were sort of talking they were sort of post Second World War and the European countries sort of coming up but also the people leaving those countries and coming over here to work the mines and..... was it *Hans Undheim*?

AC - *Henry*.

MMS - Henry sorry. I keep getting...

AC - That's okay.

MMS - Because he had a son named Hans, didn't he? I am pretty sure because I grew up with one of his sons. Coming from their country and bringing their instruments and their culture and their musics to this place and we had two mines within sort of the town and stuff. Did you find that as well, coming here?

AC - Yeah the actual music that came with, was certainly here with people of different nationalities and different cultures. The *Henry Undheims*' were rare. Where it would be demonstrated publicly.

MMS - Okay.

AC - You would go to a private function where a mandolin would come out or I think in one instance even of a bouzouki came out. And of course it was a, oh I remember, Ukrainian music as well. Being very distinctly Ukrainian. And I'm sure there was more. But it was not kind of music that would be seen or heard at a public function like a dance. Occasionally I recall there would be a special moment at a dance where a guest performer would do something. Either sing in Russian, sing a Russian folk tune or of course the Scottish element was big here. In terms of the pipe band. They were great. And I guess that still exists. But to clearly identify the evidence of a multicultural musical environment here would be difficult because it was rarely seen at a kind of... at the Legion where we played or at the Elks unless it was a special guest performance or something. Or it was seen of course at the Commissioner's Balls where they would have all kinds of ethnic groups doing their traditional things and that of course, the Dene were foremost in that with their wonderful rhythms and drum dances and songs. It was terrific. And that still goes on today of course. That, that, that I don't know if I'm answering the question.

MMS - No, no, for sure. It just leads me to another one. Were you, when you first, when you first came up here in the early days, were you exposed to a lot of the Dene drumming and the traditional musics that were happening up here?

AC - Only as an outsider viewing it. And it wasn't until later when I began working on a major documentary called "Where the Rivers Meet" which was a social documentary looking at the, at the perhaps the social injustice that was going on generally speaking with native people and also the evolution of two men of vastly different cultures, one being *René Fumoleau* who was a well known priest writer, author, historian and storyteller now and on it goes and *George Barnaby* who was a true blooded native who thought he could change things by becoming a member of the assembly (NWT Legislative Assembly) here and discovered that it was changing him. And all the impact that he thought he could have by bringing back traditional values etc. really wasn't working so he went back to the land. And so this is the story of these two men but it was in the process of that film that I was fortunate enough to immerse myself and be welcomed into native society for almost a year. And it was only there that I was up close and personal with exactly what you just asked. About people singing, people drumming, people dancing and all of this was given, I was trusted to put this, capture it all on film and so I've got some stuff I'll never forget all on celluloid, on 16mm film as a result of that process. And that's when I, that's when I started really, I learned more about native culture in that year and that was about 19, probably '79 or so that we started that and I can't believe, I can't begin to tell you how much I learned. I went into that as green as can be. Even though I had been here for a few years. But I ended up you know spending two weeks in a bush camp on the Mackenzie River at breakup time, living with the people and living their ways. Going on a moose hunt, a real-live moose hunt at four in the morning because there was a moose somewhere nearby, running around falling around in my head holding 100 pound camera. But so that was my first immersion and that was really a stepping stone for what was to come because the friendships that began in that process, some have been, most have sustained until now and others have actually grown to the point where we we're just so close. *François Paulette* is one of them I think we're probably the dearest of friends. And yet when that movie started he was very antagonistic towards me. He didn't know me, I didn't know him. It was like "what are you making a movie on a priest for" you know all this stuff. But we all grew through that process because he knew that my heart was in the right place, I wasn't doing this to exploit anything. And that film ultimately got a standing ovation at the "Margaret Mead Festival" in New York. It was amazing. Because of its, I guess its honesty and also it revealed something to people that they never knew about and *Rene (Fumoleau)* of course bares his soul in it because... I don't know if you've seen it though.

MMS - I'm sorry I haven't seen it yet.

AC - Yeah, it's an hour and *Rene (Fumoleau)* is featured in it. I mean this was a time when he was going through immense personal change, seeking his own liberation. And just hours of interviews where he actually had to look deep inside and question everything he was doing. That was his transition period. The priest who came from France to save souls had to change. And it worked out. It was a tremendous, huge growing experience for all of us. And that was, as I say where it began in terms of, in terms of immersing myself in native culture, music language although I had lots of native kids in class at school that's not enough you know? That's why I really, I really felt sorry for people who came to Yellowknife and never got out of it to see something else. So this filmmaking actually got me into the Inuit culture in the same way.

MMS - Wow.

AC - Spending a week on the land with an Inuit family and so I was very fortunate to be able to do those things. Then I was hired by the government to do, to institute an artists in schools program in the Eastern and Western Arctic and I did that for a year. And I got to go to the most amazing places and be with people at their ceremonies and drum dances and meetings which I would never have had the opportunity to do. My work has actually given me the opportunity to expand well out of Yellowknife. And that I find really, it's been so rewarding you know. And you come to a deeper understanding of where people are and what this is all about. Although I'll never totally understand it and any white guy who tells me they will I don't believe. But at least there is an awareness and now what I'm working on is exactly about this stuff. 200 years ago. So...

MMS - The transition from a musician to your teaching and your teaching brought you up here but you are still keeping your music going, being part of the musical community up here and then your theatre and your drama work coming in and everything just kind of overlapping and the phases. So the music dropped off and, but these other, these other opportunities, challenges just sort of stepped in and to keep you going and just the different area of creativity.

AC - My music wasn't, wasn't limited to playing and writing music for film and writing children's lyrics. It also kept going but in another way because I do believe that the film I did was really the first sort of real look at the "Folk on the Rocks Festival". This was one of the first, second, maybe that, second Festival that was a time when *Roger*, who was it?

MMS - Roger, *Roger Russell* is it Roger Russell?

AC - No, it was the guy from the east?

MMS - *Stan Rogers*.

AC - *Stan Rogers*, yeah that was the year he was here. There was also this wonderful band from South America, it was a terrific festival. And you know I, I was contracted to do a film about this. And so this was a big shoot, you know? I had two cameras going and sound people, brought them in from Calgary. The sound manager had just finished doing "Superman" that year and he came to do this with me. And so I, I didn't, I mean I could have said no I don't want to do this but I did it because of my love for music and all different styles of music and the cultures and so it was a wonderful again, to be involved but this time doing something much like you are doing now. Being the recorder of all of this and then putting it together, I remember the film was called, "A Little More than Music". And it was shown up here quite a few times and also nationally. But so, I was, you know I kept staying involved, Pat, and maybe not playing but doing it in another way.

MMS- Just being creative in a different area, just being able to have those outlets and stuff, so.

AC - Yeah. And so you know of course "Folk on the Rocks", I mean it's changed a lot since then but I know at that time and that particular festival, it was so multicultural, it was amazing. It really was. People from all walks of life who were really good. Not that they're not today I don't know but it's just that at the time it was very special. So... Yeah.

MMS - This is, this is great. Thank you very much for doing this.

AC - But just to conclude this is, are you running here?

MMS - Yeah.

AC - Oh you are. Well this has nothing to do with this but it's a one, to me it's a very special short story to do with... I told you about selling that saxophone. A year later I was in Toronto with one of the designers that I met at Banff and she had a friend who was a singer/musician and a fabulous keyboard player kind of like an *Allen* what the heck is his name, it doesn't matter, boy my names are just falling apart here. But anyway and we met for the first time we had dinner together at her place and he got on her piano and he started playing and singing, he had a great voice and he was so much fun and he played a tune by, among other things, an old *Guy Lombardo* tune which you may have heard we had fun, it goes boo-hoo, da da da da, da da and we are singing this you know and we got talking about music and I told him some of the, he asked me questions about and I told him about saxophone playing and he says to me "you know, Alex, I have two saxophones at home. I'd like you to have them". I've known this man for one hour, an hour and a half. I said "what"? He says, "yeah, they're just in the closet" and he lived just down the street, in downtown Toronto on Church Street in that area. And he said "I'd really love you to...", and I said, "well, what are you, what are you doing with them, Stephen"? That was his name. He says, "well my Dad passed away and he was a saxophone player and he left these to me. And I don't know, I just think they would have a really good home with you". I said, "oh I can't do that". Sean is saying to me, "lets go over and look at them. Come on!" So, we went, walked five minutes, we were at his place, walk into his place, big grand piano sitting there. And he played a few more songs and then he got these saxophones out and one was a tenor and then he brought this little box, like this. I said "a saxophone doesn't fit in there." And he opens it and inside this musty smell comes out, is this silver Soprano sax in a bell shape though it's not this kind, it's a bell shape Soprano sax this big. I says, "holy smokes!" I says, "I know my Dad would probably really want you to have these." I said, "I'm not taking two of your saxophones, Stephen I can't do this. What, what's going....?" He says "well pick one." So I had stuff on the plane and I really liked this little Soprano saxophone. He says, "well, take it." I said, "are you sure?" He said, "absolutely, please." His name was *Stephen Jacks*. And the guy, he played and sang like, I don't know if you know *Peter Allen*? Have you ever heard Peter Allan? He's dead now but he just was a, did beautiful concerts in New York and at Carnegie Hall and just was wild and fun, a great singer and just had a wonderful time on the keyboard. This was what *Stephen Jacks* was like. I said, "well this is an old saxophone, what did your dad play?" "Well," he said, "he was the lead saxophonist with the *Guy Lombardo* Orchestra." I said, "really?" He says, "yes, Saxophone, played New Year's Eve at the Waldorf for all *Guy Lombardo's* years." And so that is what I have sitting in the closet down there. *Guy Lombardo's* saxophone. Beautiful, it's just a little thing and I took it out on the lake that summer, it was a beautiful quiet evening with the sun setting down a little bit there, just past Dettah. And there was a bay there and I took it out and I started playing, didn't play a song, I just ran some nonsense scales you know with notes like da, do do do do doo, dat do do. It was not a soul and it would echo in that bay and it came back to me and suddenly a loon goes hoo hoo hoo. I looked and from here to that, well twice as far away as that cabinet, there's a loon. And I went, da do do do and it talked to me. And it came back and it was joined by a second loon and this dialogue between this little saxophone and these two loons went on for about 20 minutes. I would just go do da do doo just something and they would do

something back and then they would dive down and come back up doo doo dat doo and this went on, it was like, it was like a dream. It was magical! And it was a time when I was healing from various things and so it was like, it was like spiritual, very spiritual to me. At any rate I played some last notes I remember I was just sitting on a rock and Carol's just sitting there watching all this and the sun is setting, dead calm, glass on the lake and these two loons and the saxophone are having this chat. Silly, fun things and I finished I went doo da doo bum boo. And they went do da la doo and they made some funny noises and both dove and I never saw them again. We finished. That was it.

MMS - Wow.

AC - Yeah. So of course I, I told that story to *Stephen* and to *Sean* but I had, had saxophones out there before, that never ever happened. This little *Guy Lombardo* saxophone from his Dad who died and he gave it to me, a total stranger after knowing me for little over an hour just, sigh.

MMS - That's amazing, that's beautiful. Beautiful story.

AC - Yeah. And I've never taken it out again. That was it. That's true. I never took that sax out but that one night I had it with me and I started tooting on it. (Laughs)

MMS - Thank you sir.

AC - Well thank you. It was great, spend a little bit of time together here.