
Notes from the Other CoEditor: Mr O, My First Gig, and Me Chris Trinidad

As a scrawny and anonymous ninth grader attending an all-boys independent school in Metro Vancouver, I joined the band program out of necessity. The school administration placed me in an advanced French class because I had been previously enrolled in a French-immersion program. As a consequence, my course load was displaced and my timetable was rearranged. The result was that I needed to elect an additional course because a ninth grader surely could not have a spare block in his schedule!

I was sitting in the library one day when the Band Teacher walked in. On a whim, I asked him about the band program. I had heard that the band travelled to different places and I was intrigued by the prospects of participating on a band trip.

He asked, "What instrument do you play?"

"Well, I play a little bit of piano."

"Hmm ... Is there another instrument you might be interested in?"

For some reason, none of the woodwind or brass instruments appealed to me. There was no way my mother would let me bang on the drums in the house, so percussion was out of the question. There was that four stringed instrument that looked like a guitar but was bigger. I remembered that there was another person playing that instrument that I didn't always get along with. After all, he was a football player. So what did athletes know about music anyway? I thought that if he could play it, then I could probably play it better without much difficulty. [The concept of making music with humility hadn't entered my realm of thinking at that age. :)] I signed up as a bass guitarist and the Band Teacher gave me the number to a local music store in order to acquire a rental instrument.

I gave my dad a call, "Hey, Dad! I joined the band. And I need a bass guitar!"

"What?!"

After work, my father went to the music store to pick out a bass guitar for me. He brought it home and laid the case down on the table. I opened the case. It was a movie moment; I could almost hear proverbial "heavenly angels" singing as the basement lights focussed on what was recently revealed and everything else faded to the

background. There she was: a musical instrument of absolute beauty. And the colour: a sparkle blue fade finish.

Right away, I started to practice. The music teacher had given me all of the music so that I could get caught up with the rest of the band. Time passed and I was learning my way around the fret board of the bass guitar. In class, I was getting to know people and I was making new friends. The Band Teacher was no longer just another faculty member at the school. I was to learn that it was hip to call him Mr O.

Mr O invited me to join the after school junior stage band as a second bass guitarist after a few months of playing with the concert band. I'm not sure my athletically inclined friend enjoyed the idea of having another player beside him learning his riffs and stealing his licks, but Mr O's invitation was an offer I couldn't refuse. I recognized a new opportunity to learn more about music, and I knew that I was joining a special group.

I was settling into a groove after a few more months of acquainting myself with the instrument and learning how to play the blues, how to drive the swing, how to layback on the ballads, and how to keep the fire in the funk. Naturally, I was having a good time as both the concert band and the stage band rehearsals were necessary antidotes to the otherwise pedestrian daytime classes. Truthfully, I wondered if I was playing well enough to participate in the upcoming band trip.

The day we left the school for the BC Interior Jazz Festival in Kelowna, the eleventh and twelfth graders laid claim to the rear of the coach. I was developing an appreciation for football players-turned musicians as most were talented both on the field and on the stage. Besides, they were a rowdy and rambunctious bunch. I was generally reserved, quiet, and shy, but in the company of these upperclassmen, I felt a sense of belonging. I sat at the front with my fellow ninth graders and we enjoyed listening to the crude and rude banter that had enveloped the back of the bus. I remember that several times during the ride, Mr O had to march to the back to get them to tone down and clean up their conversations.

Mr O stopped at my row on one of his return marches from the rear.

He asked, "Hey Chris, do you want to play a tune with the stage band?"

I was startled by the suggestion, but elated deep inside.

“Sure, Mr O!”

“So, which tune do you want to play?”

“... uhm ... Tigers of San Pedro?”

It was the tune I was most comfortable playing; a “latin” tune written by John LaBarbera with a samba bass line. When we got settled into our hotel rooms, I immediately took my bass out of the case and practiced. I was nervous as heck, but I was determined not to let Mr O down especially since he’d shown his faith in me on more than one occasion.

Next day, the junior stage band performed while the senior stage band watched from the audience. I stood in the wings anxiously waiting for my turn to join the band as football-buddy-turned-bass player was up there playing for the swing number and the ballad. As Mr O introduced Tigers of San Pedro to the crowd, I took to the stage with my bass guitar in one hand, cord in the other, and music under my arms. Clumsily, I plugged in. My nerves were running high, but this was my moment to shine. I had been just another scrawny anonymous ninth grader up until that point.

“Bloooooooo Bass!”

“Yeah! Go Blue Bass!”

Rather than the jeers, I heard the cheers from the crowd. The positive enthusiasm came from the senior stage band. Tension fell into obscurity as a sense of calm permeated within me. Another clichéd movie moment: the background noise washed out and everything went into silence and slow motion.

Mr O counted the tune in and I started the ostinato bass pattern with the drums. Everything was sounding good and the band was grooving along. And, before I knew it, the tune was over.

I had just played my first gig. As the band walked off stage, applause erupted from the crowd. For the duration of the clinic, I had a mile-wide smile. I couldn’t even remember what the adjudicator was talking about as my head was in the clouds and I was trying to assess what had just happened.

I had been accepted into a fraternity of tradition. Football, band, along with academic excellence, and a strong spiritual foundation were the hallmarks of my high school education. For the rest of the year, Mr O and the music students called me “Blue Bass.” And, when I heard it, I was reminded of feeling accepted.

Had Mr O been a staunch traditionalist and rejected the use of bass guitar in a concert band, I probably wouldn’t be a musician. By inviting me to join the junior stage band, he maintained that I had potential which is something I try to instil in my own student-musicians. By offering me my first gig, he showed confidence in me, and this is a trait that continues to serve me well in all of my endeavours.

After my high school graduation, I enrolled in the Capilano College Jazz Studies program. A few years of adventuring as a music maker in various genres and styles, I applied to the University of British Columbia Teacher Education program. After a successful practicum, I landed my first teaching job at another independent school. After I settled into my new role as a high school music teacher, I invited Mr O to participate as a drummer on a recording project of mine that featured musicians who had positively influenced the course of my development as a musician and a teacher.

At the recording session, the Band Teacher said to me,

“Oh yeah, stop calling me Mr O. To you, I’m Larry. You’re an adult professional now.”

Sorry, Larry, but you’ll always be Mr O to me. And ... thanks for believing in me ... and the bass guitar.

Chris played a Series 10 4 string bass guitar with a blue sparkle fade finish. He didn’t really know what some of the knobs on the instrument did, but was sure that one of them made the bass go louder and softer. He sold the instrument to a fellow student-musician who was also a child actor. Chris is in the process of trying to reunite with the bass guitar so that he can set it up on a stand in his condo with the living room lights focussed on the instrument and with the stereo playing a loop of heavenly angels singing. Obviously, he holds a special space in his heart for that old Series 10. He now endorses bass guitars custom constructed by local luthier Laurence Mollerup.

www.christrinidad.com // ct@iridiumrecords.com