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Computers and the Masters of Inner Space
Tin Ears, Spanish Eyes and the Boys in the Bands

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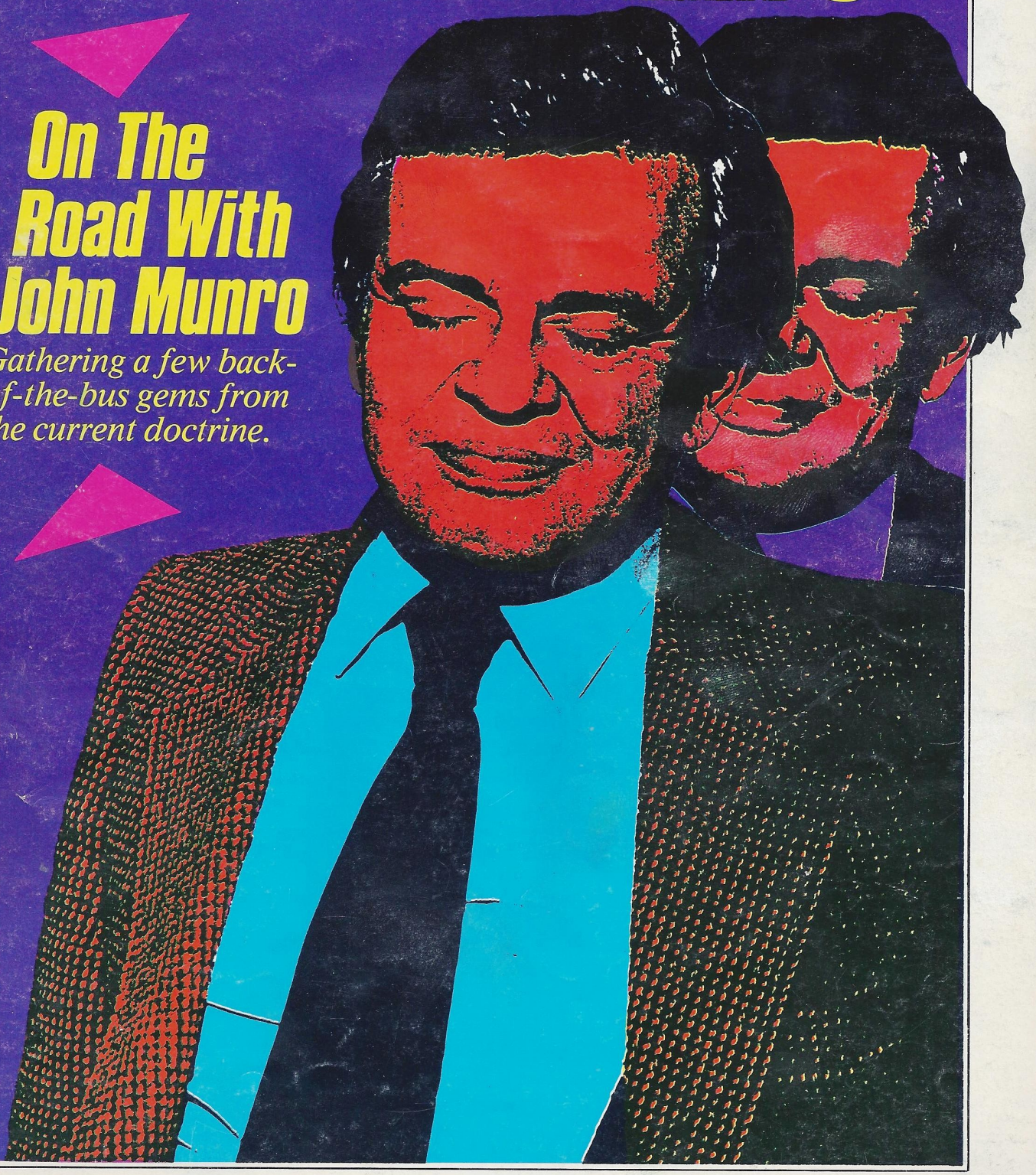

On The Road With John Munro

Gathering a few back-of-the-bus gems from the current doctrine.

The Boys in the Weekend Band

An ode to long nights with tin ears and Spanish Eyes

by John Lawrence Reynolds

It usually starts like this: You think your offspring has been blessed with the gift of musical talent, and you consider it your parental duty to encourage his ability, either through private lessons or in the musical education program at high school.

And somewhere in the back of your mind, you think perhaps there's enough talent there for your tad to develop into a professional musician, like those nice people who play at your bowling banquet every year, or at your club dances on Saturday night. Maybe they'll even make a recording some day. *Then* you'd have something to tell the neighbours. A professional musician in the family. It smacks of artistry, of dedication, of glitter and show business.

Let me tell you what it's really like.

At Westdale high school in the mid-Fifties, a music teacher with a sense of humour as twisted as a pretzel assigned me, the smallest kid in the class, to play the bass fiddle. No macho trumpet, no sexy tenor saxophone, no flamboyant drums. Just a wooden behemoth that created nothing more than guffaws at the beginning. It was a humiliation worse than acne.

But as the year went by, I discovered I had a gift for music, as rough-hewn as it might have been. Soon, whenever a musical event took place in the school, I was automatically included and while the laughs were still there when I trundled down the hall carrying a doghouse with strings, they soon cross-faded into admiration when I began to play the thing well.

Before I left high school, I had my musician's union card and a regular weekend job to keep me in Levis and record albums. I had joined the ranks of the professional musicians in Hamilton.

Mind you, the old Canadian Legion Hall at Park and Vine Streets was not the pulsating musical heart of North America. But for four hours every Saturday night I stood on a bandstand playing polkas and waltzes and jazz standards like *How High The Moon* behind the wheezing saxophone of the band leader and alongside a clinking piano player and a drummer who had all the swing of a large iron wheel with one flat spot on it that regularly went ka-THUNK ka-THUNK ka-THUNK.

It was the music business, and I scrimped and saved and borrowed to buy a fine old German-made bass fiddle for which I didn't have the money to purchase a cover or a case. I also didn't have a car and I was too young to legally play a licenced hall, so the band leader would pick me up at my home each Saturday night and drive me to the back of the hall where I would stumble up the fire escape with the awkward bass and sneak onto the bandstand in order to avoid the challenge at the door.

Not so bad. Except that the band leader had something going with a lady who frequented the dance and he would disappear with her at the end of the evening. He'd pay each of us, then say to me, "You can find your own way home, right, kid?"

Yeah, right. Finding my own way home meant calling a cab and waiting on the corner of Park and Vine at 12:30 in the morning while various drunks lurched by, most reaching out a ham hand to stroke the naked strings of my uncovered bull fiddle, or sometimes just to kick out at it.

One night two of them arrived in concert, a Catawba duet, and they insisted on trying to play my precious $400 bass. While I kept putting myself between them and my fiddle and praying for the slow cab, one or another would reach around to pull the strings like William Tell sighting an apple, and roar with appreciation at the *Whoooooaaaammmmm!* they would make.

Finally they tried to wrench it entirely from me and at that I pushed it forward abruptly, striking one of them on the forehead with the hard maple scroll at the top. Blood gushed from between his eyes, staining the fingerboard, and when the cab arrived a few minutes later the driver discovered me defending myself from two woozy attackers by holding the bass horizontally, the metal spike on its bottom aimed at whichever portion of their anatomy came nearest me and my precious, innocent bass.

Two years later the same bass fiddle was reduced to expensive kindling by the French Railroad System while I was transferring it to Rotterdam during a European tour.

To hell with the music business.

It's like that. Expecially for the journeyman musician who moves from youthful excitement about the creative aspect of music, through young adulthood when the dream seems to be within his grasp...to the mature reality of playing three, four, five hours a week for dancers and diners and drinkers who request some inanity ("Hey buddy, do you know "Night Moves"? My girl likes "Night Moves." Think you can play it for her? There's a drink in it if you can...") and then complain if you don't perform it "just like on the record." You have to be more than talented and dedicated to make a career of music *anywhere*. Because too often the music is the least demanding part of the business.

Look, if someone were to suggest a career to you that would require, say, five years' minimum training, plus regular sessions to maintain your skill, plus an investment of probably thousands of

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J. Michael Lafond/M&M Productions

dollars for the tools to practise it...and absolutely no security of income...would you seriously consider it? That's the music business in Hamilton. Not the careers of musicians in the Hamilton Philharmonic, who are a special, gifted breed and who are (I risk, here, the impaling of myself upon the spiked baton of Boris Brott) *interpreters* more than creators.

Hamilton musicians have had their share of success. Others ply their skills in weekend bands hoping for a break or just for the enjoyment of getting together.

I'm talking about the people on the front lines, the ones in the bar bands and at the weddings and the bowling banquets, to whom Saturday night in front of a TV set is as foreign as raw fish dipped in egg yolk. Saturdays at nine o'clock they climb a bandstand and watch while other people have fun as they work, some of them wondering now and then what happened to the dreams of touring the Las Vegas/Reno circuit, or studying at Juilliard, or working the Broadway shows.

At the end of the night they drain their last glass of booze, collect their money and drive home with the heavy cloak of disinterest draped over their shoulders. Ten, twenty, thirty years of playing and some tin-eared turkey berates them for not playing "Rock Around the Clock."

"I tell every new member that the music business is two words," says Jimmy Begg, Secretary of the Hamilton Musicians' Guild, Local 293, American Federation of Musicians. "Music. And business. If you want to stay in it, you have to look after both."

Begg, a former haberdasher and still a weekend bandleader, oversees—are you ready for this?—the third largest musician's union local in Canada, behind Toronto and Montreal. There are 2,000 members of the Guild, about 25 percent of whom make a living full-time from music, although Begg admits that this includes members of the HPO and masses of rock musicians still wet behind the amplifiers. Among the newest members is Levon Helm, former drummer with The Band, once the pulse behind Bob Dylan.

"There's lots of work in this town," Begg continues. "Between Hamilton Place, CHCH-TV, the jingle houses here and in Oakville, and all the weekend work, the music business in Hamilton has never been better.

"My job is to see that every member gets the best chance to work, and that everybody here appreciates live music."

"The first time Paul Anka came here to play at Hamilton Place we had troubles," Begg recalls. "Anka's a perfectionist, he has a complicated show and everything has to go exactly as it should.

"Three days before the show was to go on, I got a call from his manager. 'We have to use Toronto studio musicians for Paul's show,' said the manager. 'Your guys aren't good enough, so we're hiring out of Toronto.' 'You can't,' I said. 'Then we'll

cancel the booking,' the manager said.

"There I was, with thousands of tickets sold for the biggest act yet to play Hamilton Place, and Anka's threatening to cancel on three days' notice. And you *know* who would have been dumped on when the news got out.

"But I knew the local guys could do it, and I had to insist on him using Hamilton musicians."

Begg allows himself a moderately smug smile.

"The day after the opening show, the manager called me and apologized. He said they did a helluva job."

But Paul Anka shows aren't the way most Hamiltonians get close to local musicians. Frequently it's at weddings and receptions. And all too frequently, where there would have been musicians a decade ago, there are now turntables, amplifiers—and a disc jockey.

"Hell, yes, disc jockeys are still with us," Begg admits, like a man discovering a parking ticket on his windshield. "But for an important event in your life, where's the glamour in having some guy spin records and natter like a ninny?

"When people call up for the price of a live band and they say 'I can get a disc jockey for less than that,' I always answer 'Do you want something monotonous or something memorable?' That's one reason discos have faded, thank God. Dancing all night to recorded music can get monotonous."

The biggest change Begg and his musicians have seen over the years?

"The death of the dance bands. There was a time, before TV and rock-and-roll, when a night out in Hamilton meant hearing a good local band at places like the Alexandra, the El Morocco, the Wondergrove, the Willowbank—and the Brant Inn. Remember the Brant Inn? Wasn't it a terrific place, a great spot?"

On the site of the Brant Inn, at the southern end of Spencer Smith Park, is now a tacky tourist information booth, accompanied by various suburban hoodlums squeezing the last decibel of noise out of their motorcycles.

But during the Forties and Fifties and into the mid-Sixties this was Glamour Central, Hamilton. A date at the Brant Inn was not something to be taken lightly. It meant a gown, a corsage, a tux, practically a commitment. It was a peculiar kind of occasion that's still marked in dresser drawers throughout the city, wherein repose thousands of fading photographs of couples smiling over their rye-and-gingers, the pictures mounted within a yellowing cardboard frame bearing the name of The Brant Inn.

Nor was the Brant Inn strictly a local phenomenon. The CBC carried live broadcasts from the sprawling brick-and-stone complex across Canada, and from Newfoundland to Nanaimo, Canadians heard music and laughter from The Fabulous Brant Inn On The Lovely Shores Of Lake Ontario, Featuring The Rhythm And Harmony Of The Gav Morton Orchestra.

Today, in a slightly tacky shopping mall in Burlington, the Gav Morton name is on the front of a men's wear store, shouldered in between a health food outlet and the ubiquitous Jug Milk Variety.

Inside, a dapper-looking man hunched slightly from age greets you with warmth. He sits down frequently, chats on the phone with old friends often, and periodically sells a shirt, exchanges a tie, straightens a sock display.

For 10 years, from 1951 to 1961, Gav Morton led one of the premier bands in the country at one of the glamour spots in Canada. This was long before Hamilton Place and the O'Keefe were little more than glimmers in an architect's eye. This was when, if you wanted to see Ella Fitzgerald or Tony Bennett or Andy Williams or the like, you waited until they were booked into the Brant Inn, and hoped you had the money and/or a date to catch them.

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"Yeah, I guess I played for them all," Gav Morton recalls now.

"I kept a 13-piece band going there for ten years, after I'd toured Canada with people like Mart Kenney and Bert Niosi. For years people wouldn't think of the Brant Inn without thinking of Gav Morton's band."

And what happened?

What happened was that, in 1961, Andy Williams showed up for a series of appearances at the Brant Inn, bringing with him a brand new book of arrangements and a musical director who was still "working them out." He and Williams kept the Brant Inn band rehearsing for extra hours, smoothing the rough spots, trying to whip the show into order. And Morton, who had to pay the musicians by the hour for the rehearsals, called the overtime cost into John Murray Anderson, the megalomaniac who had built the Brant Inn up to its acknowledged glory.

"Anderson screamed over the phone to me, 'That's it, Morton. You and your band are through here.' "

Morton shook his head. "It wasn't our fault. But he couldn't fire Andy Williams. So he fired me. After 10 years.

"The next week, most of the same musicians were on the stand, with a new leader and a new name.

"But I'd had it. I just wasn't interested in the music business anymore."

The music business in the third largest local in Canada is unique. There's no CBC broadcasting complex, no six days a week jingle and commercial production facilities, no string of clubs around town to nurture and maintain musicians the way you'll find them in Toronto or Montreal.

"Hamilton's basically a country-and-western town now," one musician observed. Strum that gee-tar. Stroke that fiddle. Stomp them feet. There's always room for some hurtin' music.

But look hard enough and you'll find a few dregs from the past, still working as

The Gav Morton Orchestra on stage at the Brant Inn. *Above, Gav Morton today.*

big bands, or as small groups playing light jazz to blend with the surf-and-turf in the dining rooms.

One of the busiest of the Hamilton big bands, and perhaps the best of the bunch west of Toronto, is the Music Machine. Here the two aspects of the music business Jimmy Begg referred to have been distilled into a unified profit centre, as structured in its approach to the business as any division of Stelco.

Hire the Music Machine for your Bar Mitzvah or daughter's wedding or large dinner dance and anywhere from 11 to 17 journeymen musicians will be on the stand, ready to perform at precisely the hour you name. With the full complement, the band will include four singers, two percussionists, plus lighting and sound equipment. There are up to 1,500 individual tunes available for them to play, all scored in arrangements (called "charts"), although the band may bring only 300 with them on any "gig."

In capital investment, not including individual instruments, the Music Machine has over $10,000 in assets. The full band will cost you about $1,500 for the night, and they work perhaps 70 nights a year, including virtually every Saturday.

"Owen Denton, one of the trumpet players, does the bookings, my wife keeps the accounts, and I hire the musicians and call the tunes," says Roger Campbell, the band's drummer and one of its three founders 10 years ago. "We rehearse maybe every two months or so, and only if we have a new chart that nobody's seen. Otherwise, all the guys who work in the band know the tunes and can read practically anything you put in front of them anyway."

Musicians who read music. In a community of bar bands and guitar strummers, that's significant in itself.

What's *more* significant is the slickness of the organization. At the official opening of the Hamilton Convention Centre, one champagne-slurping guest was heard to rave "What a helluva night! And what a great band they brought in from Toronto, eh?"

The great Toronto band was the Music Machine. Which says a great deal about their abilities. And, incidentally, about the way Hamiltonians view anything of quality in this town.

A warning, however:

Ask anything of the Music Machine except perhaps the two most-requested tunes of the North American middle class: "More" and "Spanish Eyes."

"We won't play 'em," Campbell declares emphatically.

Why?

"Because they're dumb, boring tunes that have more to do with Muzak than with good music." He winces, recalling the syrupy inanities of both songs. It's as though he's remembering a battle with a dentist who didn't believe in anesthetics.

"We just won't play 'em. There are too

many other good songs around."

Matt Kennedy will play them however. Plus virtually every other song you can name.

As the piano player at O'Sullivan's in the Royal Connaught Hotel, Kennedy is the antithesis of the Music Machine. He uses no charts, has no lighting equipment, no fancy bandstands with graphics across them, no amplification to carry his music above the din of diners assessing their steak.

Instead he sits down at a small upright piano six nights a week, supported by Brent Malseed on electric bass, and plays anything requested. With elegance and taste.

Listen carefully to him, especially on a Gershwin tune, or a Jerome Kern number, or any of the composers who spent more time on a single chord change in the Thirties and Forties than rock bands devote to an entire chorus, and you'll hear him improvise a few jazz lines, lifting the tune above the mundane, delivering something which is both emphatic and fleeting, gone with the next clink of the silverware.

Among older Hamilton musicians, Kennedy is something of a legend, especially those who remember thundering music from times when he played with various jazz groups around town.

"There's no jazz anywhere in Hamilton anymore," he recalls between sets. "There was a time twenty, thirty years ago, when I started playing, when you could hear good jazz all over town. The old Windsor Hotel would bring in The Soft Winds, with Herb Ellis on guitar, and Duffy's Tavern (now Tilly's Place) and the Fireside Room at Paddy's would have jazz groups."

When the jazz stars came to town they would frequently use local musicians to back them up, and the call would go out for the young Matt Kennedy who could stomp his way through the night, pushing the band and nodding the heads of the audience in tempo. Names like Kenny Burrell, Pepper Adams, Buddy de Franco, Gerry Mulligan and Jimmy McPartlin all played Hamilton clubs and were all supported by a rhythm section led by Matt Kennedy on piano or, for an extended period, on vibes. For twenty years now, Kennedy has also been the heard-but-unseen piano player behind Tiny Talent Time on CHCH-TV. ("The wildest times were before tape, when everything was done live. God, we had everything, kids wetting their pants in the middle of the introduction and once the sponsor, the Golden Guernsey Milk Producers, brought a live cow on for a commercial and the damned *cow* did its number on camera. Geez, it took *days* to get the smell out of the studio...")

He's worked shows on radio and TV such as the original Ken Soble Amateur Hour, New Faces, Stelco Showcase, and

on and on, back to the days of stag dances at places like the old Rainbow Room at King and Sanford streets. ("There were always more girls than guys at the stags so, to make the girls feel comfortable, it was written in the contract that the guys in the band would take turns dancing with the wallflowers all night long....")

In spite of all of the talent and respect, Kennedy has never been a full-time musician. Always, there have been "day gigs" with furniture stores, breweries and electronic distributors. Currently he's a salesman with Bell Canada.

What's kept him devoting 30 years of weekends to music?

"I enjoy it. As long as I enjoy it, I'll continue to play."

What he enjoys most is the chance to stretch, the chance to improvise on the choruses of interesting tunes, to play a touch of jazz. To the journeyman musician anywhere, the improvisation and the swing of jazz is its own reward, transcending mind-numbing choruses of pap like Spanish Eyes.

There are, after all, three kinds of music. Classical music is the realm of the composer, popular music the work of the merchandiser, and jazz the product of musicians. There are times, few admittedly, but times in jazz when the individual musicians function as a group greater than the sum of its parts, when improvisation within the framework of the structure of harmony and rhythm achieves something that the listeners recognize clearly, experience somewhat, and understand not at all, a time when after it climaxes the musicians turn to each other and smile and shake with almost post-coital pleasure and talk, saying god-DAMN, god-DAMN, god-DAMN!

That, too, is the music business. Even in Hamilton.

Kennedy checks his watch and the near-perpetual smile fades a bit. Time to go back to work.

He settles himself at the piano and counts in "All The Things You Are," a lovely, subtle tune that lends itself to flourishes and explorations. One of the diners looks up and listens for a moment, then comments to her companion who listens, too, for a few bars before tackling his roast beef once again.

At the end of the tune there is polite applause and Kennedy smiles that Irish smile as broad as Galway Bay, then checks his watch. Another three hours to go.

Out in the lobby the Muzak plays softly, as permeating as wallpaper. The tune, for anyone who cares to listen, is "Spanish Eyes."

And around the corner, at Waddington's on John Street, a small boy whose age is still single-digit raises a horn to his lips and plays a C-scale faultlessly in return for praise from his jaded music teacher.

Some day, he thinks, maybe I'll be good enough to be a professional musician.

Wow. Wouldn't that be great? ●