

Don Gillis Interviews Lt. Col. Hugh Curry. ABA Convention, March 2-7, 1965

American Bandmasters' Association Research Center, Special Collections in Performing Arts,
University of Maryland, College Park

Transcription by Christina Taylor Gibson

Don Gillis: This is a test, we're talking to Hugh Curry

(okay, let's start)

Hugh Curry: Well, I'm talking back at Don Gillis, how 'bout that? Does that look right? Right number of decibels?

D.G.: This is interview number four for the American Bandmasters' Association projected radio show. I'm talking with Col. Hugh Curry, United States Army retired, former Band Director of the United States Army Band, of Ft. Meyer, Virginia in Washington, D.C. Col Curry, welcome to these microphones and thank you in advance for all of the wonderful contributions you, as director of one of the great service bands have made to the band of America!

H.C.: Well thank you very much Don Gillis, you're very kind.

D.G.: I'd like to know, I'm awfully nosy on these interviews, Hugh, I'll tell you at the very outset . . . You come from New England, that's obvious in the one sentence, uh, that you gave us just then.

H.C.: Gee, Don, I've been out of there for twenty years, I didn't know that it still showed.

[laughter]

D.G.: It still shows! What town in New England was it?

H.C.: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

D.G.: I saw a picture of you recently riding a horse in front of an Army Band, you were a band director?

H.C.: If you saw me riding a horse, you should get your glasses changed Don because I've never been on a horse in my life.

D.G.: Well, I'm sorry then.

H.C.: I think that . . .

D.G.: We'll cut this out of the tape and start again.

H.C.: I think that is our past president Ches[ter] Whiting.

D.G.: How's that? That's one of the reasons I'm unsuccessful in this business . . .

[laughter]

D.G.: All of this gets scrapped . . .

H.C.: How'd'ya do Don?

D.G.: As you pointed out this morning, what we need here is a new team. Uh, you are from New England, however,

H.C.: That is correct, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

D.G.: And what was your first interest in music?

H.C.: My first interest in music was the fact that my father was one of the most talented musicians that I've ever known with absolutely no training. He would have been a crackerjack if he had had some sort of formal training, but just wasn't in the cards for him, but he made sure that all of his children, all eight of them, had music in their life.

D.G.: And your own training was done privately of course? Do you remember your first instrumental instructor?

H.C.: Yes, my first instrumental instructor was the organist of the church, who played every instrument and, uh, we had, uh, we had a little orchestra there. This was in, uh, grammar school, and, uh, he taught me trumpet and, uh, I recall the first time I had what you would call professional teaching from the late Louis Claupfeld (?), who was number one trumpet in the Boston Symphony, when I played for him, he said, "well fine, how long have you been playing?" and I said, "About six years" and he said, "The first we'll do is to unlearn everything that you have learned! Sol-fa". So I went for a whole year on long tones!

D.G.: And, uh, did you stay with trumpet? Was trumpet your professional instrument then?

H.C.: Yes, trumpet.

D.G.: And then the beginning of your career with a stick in hand, the baton, the magic, glorious, wonderful baton.

H.C.: Well, I had some of it in college, I went to Boston University College of Music, and I received my first baton experience, uh, out of the band field. I did a lot of, uh, light opera conducting, particularly Gilbert and Sullivan.

D.G.: For my money, this was great experience.

H.C.: Ah, yes.

D.G.: Preparation for band work.

H.C.: Certainly

D.G.: And then what was your first band?

H.C.: Well, uh, the high school band at, uh, Ringe (?) Technical High School in Cambridge, which was a high school for boys.

D.G.: Was there a long period of time from the High School band to the, uh, until, uh, you became conductor of the, uh, of the, uh, Army Band?

H.C.: No, I uh. In 1941, uh, at the time of the draft for World War II, I won the door prize in that draft. And I went into the Army and I played in the 101st field artillery band, uh, and I recall hearing a program, uh, in which you would have heard Karl King playing, in which he said he played the Euphonium that's what I played in that band.

D.G.: They generally put the best trumpet players and they put them on euphonium, don't they?

H.C.: That wasn't what ... it might have been that way with Karl King, but it wasn't that way with me!

[laughter]

D.G.: Alright, you became a euphonium player then.

H.C.: Yes, and I was, I was an enlisted man in that band for a year and, uh, several months, and then I went to the Army music school in Washington and became a warrant of. (?), a band leader, was retained on the faculty of the music school, and, uh, after the United States Army Band, under Tom Darcy (?), went over to North Africa in, uh, 1943, was then assistant leader, uh, became ill, was sent home, and I was brought over, and that was my introduction to the United States Army Band. And then,

D.G.: And then Captain Darcy retired in what year did you uh?

H.C.: He retired on the last day of December in 1945. And then I took over at that time as the director of the band.

D.G.: And just recently retired after ... almost, what?, almost twenty years service.

H.C.: mmm almost twenty, it would look good on a record book, wouldn't it? But it was 19.

D.G.: 19, well, 19 wonderful years. I remember personally, of course, many experiences with the United States Army Band and having heard them play in almost every possible condition from rehearsal hall to Brooklyn Academy Stage, to Watergate, to Departmental Auditorium, and radio, of course. Uh, Hugh, do you have any memories of your greatest single experience? Was it in concert or was, did it happen in the field?

H.C.: No, it was in concert. It, it has to be back in 19-hundred and 51 when we played the premiere performance of the Hindemith Symphony in B-flat for band which was

D.G.: Oh this story I want to hear

H.C.: which was the only major band work that Hindemith ever wrote. He had written, oh, in some of his symphonies, oh, movements for wind instruments, a specific movement, but, this the first time that he wrote, uh, a major work.

D.G.: He was at Yale at this time, wasn't he?

H.C.: Yes, yes, at that time, this was back in 1951, we were doing a series, uh, in Washington in the winter, uh, a weekly series, uh, in which we used, prominent guest artists in each performance. We had singers, and pianists, and, uh, violinists, and, uh, uh, certain guest conductors, and so we, at that particular time, Paul Hindemith was in residence at Yale and so we got in touch with him and asked him if he would come down and be a guest conductor on one of the programs and he would be delighted to, and we also suggested to him that it would be uh, wonderful if he would compose something for the occasion. We thought in terms of possibly an overture or something like that, so you can imagine my surprise when I received the manuscript of a symphony!

D.G.: And it arrived on your desk, and then what?

H.C.: Well, I think it was interesting, d'ya'know, uh, how Hindemith happened to write that symphony? Uh, he came down several days before the, uh, performance to touch things up, and I asked him, uh, of course we were so flattered that he had written,

D.G.: yes

H.C.: for this performance. And I asked him, uh, how it was he had happened to write this major work at this particular time? And he told me that he had always been interested in band. He said, he had played clarinet in a German band in World War I and for many years he had intended to write a principle work for band and had in fact, uh, certain sketches kicking around, but, uh, he indicated that, uh, that uh, that uh, whenever he composed music it had to be for a reason. He didn't just sit down and write, it had to be for a specific event. And so when we invited him to write something for band, he said, "This is the occasion!" And so I said, "Well how is it you didn't write it before?" and he said, "Well, nobody asked me."

D.G.: Well, I think...

H.C.: And that's how we happened to get the Hindemith Symphony.

D.G.: the band world is very, very fortunate that you in your career asked him to do it. You have a history of premieres though during this 20 years. You've been a champion of new music all the way through and of new ideas in band work, uh, and band scoring . . .

H.C.: Well, I, I, recall one of the premieres I had I premiered the Don Gillis short overture.

D.G.: yes, uh, written for opera

H.C.: Did you ever write that opera?

[laughter]

D.G.: Never did finish that, let's take this out here.

H.C.: I think we ought to leave it in Don!

D.G.: [clears throat] well, now that we've successfully cut that out . . .

[laughter]

D.G.: Think of some other works that you have done first performances. Can you, uh, the tip of your tongue?

H.C.: No, uh, you've uh, I haven't

D.G.: I should have asked you to think of this earlier . . .

H.C.: I haven't done my homework, Don

D.G.: Well, let's say, twenty years of playing, you've made thousands of broadcasts . . .

H.C.: yes

D.G.: And what has the response been . . . you've had students of band or band directors writing to you?

H.C.: Oh, yes, the great, uh, uh, the great, uh, area of, uh, new talent, not only for the United States Army Band, but for all of the bands in the the Washington, are the great instrumentalists and musicians that are coming out of our colleges. Uh, these people have had such magnificent training in college that they can step right from the campus right into a professional band and, uh, and start playing right away. It's just absolutely magnificent. The young men that are coming out of college today. I can't speak of the young ladies because we don't have a co-ed band.

D.G.: And in one way that's very unfortunate, they are very lovely players, however, you have certainly taken advantage of the college graduates when building your own band.

H.C.: Oh, definitely.

D.G.: Uh, Hugh, one of the questions I like to have answered on this program because there are many, um, people who are listening, suppose I, I'm Joe Dox, and I have a piece of music that I have written and I think it's pretty good for band, what do I do with it?

H.C.: Well, just submit it to the director of a, I can speak only for the service bands of Washington, I know how we do it, just submit it to the director, uh, for his consideration. Either the Army Band or the Marine Band, or the Navy Band, or the Air Force Band, and you can address them all, Washington, D.C. and it'll get there.

D.G.: And it will be looked at seriously

H.C.: It will be looked at, definitely.

D.G.: You know, uh, is this because you men who are with the service bands have a wide-awake interest in something new that's being written? It isn't in the sense of taxpayers obligation, is it?

H.C.: Not at all. No, there, there's, as a matter of fact, in my twenty years with the United States Army Band, there's never been any political pressure, or anything like that from the Congress, or anybody in the vein to push a particular number, but, uh, we are alert for new music, and that's not exclusively with us, that's all over the country, uh, uh, I can't speak for the colleges, but I see

their programs, I know what they do, and they're doing the same thing. They're always on the outlook for something because you never know where that next fine, great composer is going to come from—he's got to start someplace.

D.G.: I'm going to be, uh, Joe Dox, or I may have been John Dox a minute ago, but I live in Waxahexi (?), Texas, at the moment

H.C.: That's a good place.

D.G.: I really don't know what a band is. What is a band, Hugh?

H.C.: Well, I, I can tell you from my experience a band is a two-fold thing. First of all, a band is a ballyhoo organization that puts on a great show, whether it's military or whether it's a parade going down the street, or whether it's a football game. And I think that's primarily what a band is. But then, even more so, a band has the great capability of being a fine concert organization, and in that concert organization, I have found that the band has much more versatility than the symphony orchestra. Uh, you think of a band—a lot of people think of a band as only marches. That's a very, very, great important part of it, and, uh, I agree with my great friend Karl King on that score, but we can also do things of a symphonic nature, and your average good band can play not only modern symphonic American music but also should be able to play very good jazz too. And, and that's what I think is the great thing about a band is the great versatility of the music and I think that all that versatility should be explored. At least that's been my credo.

D.G.: One other slight question, this is, you stand now at the end of twenty-one years of work with the Army Band and many years before that, although I'm not trying to make you out an old man at this point, you have had, like thirty year of experience in the band field.

H.C.: Yes

D.G.: And you're still a relatively young man.

H.C.: Thank you.

D.G.: Where do you go from here? Where does band go from here?

H.C.: Well which

D.G.: Under Hugh Curry's baton? And under anybody's baton?

H.C.: Well which question do you want me to answer? Where do I go from here or where the band goes from here?

D.G.: Well

H.C.: Well, as far as where I go from here, let me say that I'm available.

[laughter]

D.G.: We have that, radio audience

[more laughter]

D.G.: Now let's talk about the band, where does the . . . These are the final moments of the interview with Hugh Curry... and I had asked the question, where does the band go from here, uh, 1965?

H.C.: Well, I think that the band will go, will, uh, continue going upwards as it has, uh, with finer performers, uh, with finer music, uh, especially music written especially for band. It has to. It wasn't so many years ago that the school band movement was pretty much in the mid-west and it has proliferated throughout the entire country now. I know my own bailiwick, New England, was, uh, primarily a vocal stronghold and now, uh, the school, uh, the high school band program is moving up there. And I think it's moving, uh, all throughout the country, and there can be nothing, nothing at all but improvement and, uh, as I said before, onward and upward.

D.G.: Thank you.