

MEMBER FOCUS: Ray Kirkham



Joining the VMA at only 18 years old, Ray Kirkham's career spans over half a century. It did not take him long to burst onto Vancouver's music scene, as he would find himself playing with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO), CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, and the Dal Richards Orchestra. In addition, Ray is also a founding member of the Vancouver Symphony Brass Quintet.

We were able to chat with Ray, who discussed his time playing with the groups and orchestras he was a part of, as well as one of his career highlights: playing as part of an opening act with the Beatles!

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The start of it all: joining the VMA, Air Force Band

I started in 1963, when I joined the Musicians' union. My friend's father snuck me in to it, because my dad said you can't be a musician since they're all a bunch of drunks. He got me in the Air Force band, which used to be down at Jericho Beach. I have a picture with Ron Smith, a tuba player who I played with in the band. His sister played second oboe in the VSO. I still e-mail her, and we still talk about the old days.

Sharing the stage with the Beatles:

In 1964, I got my first professional job playing at Empire Stadium with the Beatles. That was something special, I didn't expect that. It was with the Dal Richards Orchestra. Dal was doing one of the opening act for the Beatles, and I was asked if I wanted to play in the band with him. I said sure! I made \$22.15, as I still remember. It lasted 25 minutes. The Beatles had to run off stage, because the girls were all charging the stage.

Joining the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO) and CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra:

Then in 1965, I was at university and thinking if I wanted to be a teacher. I got offers to play as a VSO extra, before officially joining the next year. It was quite a long career at the VSO, as I played with them until 2010. I also played in the CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra from 1965 to about 1969. John Avison was the conductor back then. So I did that, while playing with the symphony. We did a lot of great stuff, and had a lot of nice tours to Japan and the U.S. We had a lot of fun.

The Vancouver Symphony Brass Quintet

The brass quintet was very busy, as we had a lot of engagements and recitals. We played many, many years at St. John's Anglican Church. I kept going and going, and eventually I retired from the Symphony in 2010 and played another year with the brass quintet before the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra took over. I was just going over the old Brass Quintet book, and I found a bunch of old programs in there and thought to myself "Oh yeah, that's right!"

The old union office:

The union used to be right across from the Cenotaph on Hastings. That's where you went to get paid. You didn't get any money sent to you. You had to pick up your cheques there, like you were going to a bank. I still remember picking up my Beatles cheque there. Bobby Reid was the president at the time. He was a trumpet player too. Used to play for Dal Richards Orchestra. There were a lot of really good players around back in those days.

Final thoughts

You have your pictures on your wall, but sometimes it's not a good idea to look at them because you're the only one left. I look at them and I think "Oh yeah, there's Dennis and there's Bill and there's Jerry and the Brass Quintet." And there's just Gordon Cherry and me left. My grandkids ask me and they ask "Grandpa, how long have you lived?" And I say, "Well, look at it this way George. I've come down the rapids, and I'm now in the bay." That's my comment on life. I'm just going to try and enjoy it as much as I can.