EASTMAN ROCHESTER NEW HORIZONS BAND, ROCHESTER, NY

Five Original Members of the Very First NH Band

Compiled by Barry Rabson

BARRY RABSON When in 1991, I first saw the Eastman School of Music's ad in the Rochester newspaper, it literally changed my life. It asked people who might be interested in joining a band to attend a meeting at the Eastman school. My recollection is that 35 or 40 people attended. Some of them had played band instruments in their youth. Others, like me, had never. Now over 27 years later, of those who joined the original Rochester band, only four or five are left. Unfortunately, some of the original members have passed away. Some have just left Rochester for warmer climes. This picture is of the remaining crew.

At our first meeting in 1991, Roy Ernst asked me what instrument I would like to play. Having only studied piano as a child, and remembering my love of Benny Goodman, I asked if he could teach me how to play the clarinet. Of course, he said yes, and assigned me to an Eastman School graduate student. Three weeks later, Roy said that he thought I was ready to play in the band. My response was that I could only play one note, and that was a “C”. He said fine, and that whenever “C” came up in the music, I could then play it. Twenty-six years later, I can play all the notes.

HARVEY STERON During one of our first few rehearsals, when we weren't responding very well to Dr. Ernst's directions, he told us to play whatever we wanted for a few minutes. After those very cacophonous moments someone (me) yelled out to Dr. Ernst, “Is this your first time conducting?”

At one of our first Spring concerts in the Eastman Theater, we had just finished playing The Canadian Brass version of "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," when from the lower mezzanine level we all heard "Yea, Grandpa," from my 5-year-old granddaughter. This was also picked up on recordings of this concert.

ALAN NEWMAN It is difficult for me to keep this note short. I was literally flooded with memories. I played with the Rochester NHB from 1991 to 2001 and then with the Desert Foothills NHB (Phoenix, AZ from 2001 to 2015. I attended many NHB Band camps, and served on the National Board (NHIMA) from 2001 to 2004. In between times I practiced law. I stopped playing recently due to physical reasons. Prior to 1991, I had never played a musical instrument. I loved the music and all of the people that I met along the way.

HOWARD HOLMES I joined late in the first year on a horn loaned to me by El Mayer (WWII bomber pilot and Distinguished Medal recipient), also a member of New Horizons. He passed away several years ago. This was 47 years after I played in high school but, remarkably, I remembered the fingering, sometimes accurate, sometimes not. We were asked to leave the Memorial Art Gallery as our playing (?) disturbed the working personnel—we couldn't understand why we moved to several other locations in the first couple of years. I was fortunate to be a member of the first NHIMA board of directors and to have been to many music camps, meeting fellow musicians who are now friends.

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At the beginning, Roy ruled that there would be no auditions required to play in the band, and that for those people who did not already play an instrument, they could take up any instrument they wanted to. The result was that the initial band had lots of clarinets, flutes, saxes, and trumpets, but no low instruments. In any case, our first public concert was on December 10, 1991 at the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery’s Cutler Union. There were about 30-35 musicians in the band, and an audience made up entirely of family members. Afterwards, when we got a little better, we started playing concerts in nursing homes and schools. I remember that after these concerts, Roy would say “That was great, so let’s go out for coffee and dessert.”

Coffee breaks were always an important part of practice sessions, and Roy would have to shoo everyone back after the break to start practicing again. Socializing at these breaks resulted in many long-time friendships.

All the years of New Horizons Music have been a joy to me. I am amazed at how advanced and wonderful some New Horizons groups are now, but the very first years were the most fun. The expectations couldn’t have been lower. At that time, it was widely believed that retired people would not be able to learn to read music and play an instrument. Every step of progress was celebrated. When we could play a tune that was recognizable it was cause for celebration. Our first public performance lasted about twenty minutes. That was all we could play, but we couldn’t wait any longer to share this with friends and family. Around the end of the second year we played a concert that lasted almost an hour. I told the audience, “Remember, we’re the band that knows when to stop.” Since some devoted followers heard the music at more than one performance, I said “Don’t worry, it will be different. We have never played anything the same way twice.” Our adventure carried some celebrity. We had large articles in The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Atlanta Journal and many other publications. After the New York Times article appeared, the NBC Today Show made two visits to produce a story that ran internationally. Since those early days, about 250 New Horizons groups have started in the United States and several other countries.