

ripple effects:

mohawk applied music alumni are everywhere

By Glen T. Brown, '84

"A pebble tossed into a pond sends out ripples in every direction, soon to be felt on the distant shore." — Anonymous

A beautiful young singer bows in response to enthusiastic and sincere applause. Family, friends, and faculty have filled the McIntyre Theatre at Mohawk College to attend her graduation recital as part of the Applied Music program. They know the hard work that has gone into preparing for this concert and they see the great results. The singer turns to introduce her band, which is made up of her classmates in the music program, culminating three years of training in one of Canada's most effective and cherished music schools. Another freshly minted batch of music alumni are ready to step into the music business.

If each graduate was like a pebble tossed in the pond making its own waves, the total effect would be more like a tsunami. Over the years we have seen waves of musical achievement expand outward from Mohawk College and touch the lives of many.

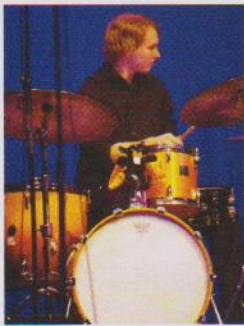
In 1977 Patricia Rolston, concert pianist, local piano teacher, and founding director of the Mohawk College Singers, set out with a team of like-minded Hamiltonians to lobby the Ontario Community College Presidents Council for permission to start a program of applied musical

instruction at Hamilton's newly constructed Fennell campus. Rolston, motivated by the *"everything is possible"* spirit in the decade following Canada's Centennial year, had hopes of building something new and useful for young musicians in the Hamilton area. Rolston knew that the success of her program depended on equipping young musicians with business savvy as well as musical skills. Each graduate needed to be ready to creatively carve out a path for their craft in an ever-changing world.

Raw talent, instructional excellence, and flexibility formed the secret sauce that has enabled Mohawk Music alumni to become some of the major talents in the music industry. Whether they work in a musical back road or in the artistic mainstream, they are tastefully making their mark. Here are a few examples:

Carolyn Credico (2012), a vocalist, found opportunity knocking even before she graduated from the music program. She has been fortunate to be able to work with Don Thompson (Order of Canada, Juno awards) on her first CD of jazz





standards, and has been playing around Hamilton and Niagara with drummer **Johnathan Blaak** (2011) and guitarist Will Mikuna. Blaak plays regularly and books music for weddings and special events. Mikuna recently went on a Canadian tour with Mozambique major artist Wazimbo. Credico expresses, "I just like to sing. I'm

just part of the music, I'm the song. My goal in performing is just telling the story."



Drummer **Jim Casson** (1986) says, "Music has been my full time occupation since graduation. I've been performing, recording, touring, producing and teaching privately now for 26 years." Casson lived in Toronto for 13 years before

returning to Niagara. His recent CD release is entitled *Dark Orchid*. "I spent five years in the *Downchild Blues Band* touring across Canada and the US and I recorded on two CDs with them. We played with *B.B. King* at Massey Hall and many large blues festivals across North America." Casson also toured Europe with Rita Chiarelli and was twice nominated for drummer of the year by the Maple Blues Awards. [jimcasson.com]

Space here is too limited to do justice to drummer/producer/composer **Greg Critchley's** (1983) story. He shares that, "Touring with *Michelle Branch*, opening for *The Who* and *Aerosmith* in Japan, and producing a band at *Sunset Sound* in Hollywood including members of *John Mayer's* and *Bruce Springsteen's* bands are some of my career highlights." Check his website to find out more about his remarkable musical journey. [gregcritchley.com]



Others have been moved to start their own music studio while juggling performances. Vocalist **Elana Laing** (2008) says, "I am still involved with music on a full-time basis.

Since graduating from Mohawk I have been teaching music and performing. I have recently opened *The Hamilton Academy of Music*, on July 2, 2012, with my business partner guitarist **Kaz Simaitis**, (2008) who is also

a graduate of the same program. I perform frequently as soloist, and in ensembles such as the jazz big band *Sophisticated Swing*, a *Bobby Darin* tribute show called *The Bobby Darin Story*, and a wedding ensemble *The Practical Players*." [myspace.com/mslaing]



Andre Bisson, Loretta Hale, Matt Burns, and Brad Cheesman (2005) spent the summer doing festivals, shows and parties as Andre and the

J-Tones Rhythm and Blues Experience, including a brief stint in the U.K. Hale also has formed her own jazz orchestra with several music alumni. [www.andreandthejtones.com]

Bassist/composer **Mark Dunn** (1984) appears regularly in Toronto area jazz clubs as a sideman. Drummer **Dennis Ullman** (1985) has formed his own company *DrumsInc* to encompass his music teaching, adjudication and performance work. Trombonist **Jeff Agospsowicz** (1985) worked with the *Canadian Forces* as a bandsman. [drumsinc.ca]



Keyboardist **Marty Anderson** (1983) says, "I played and toured with *Rik Emmett* (of *Triumph*) for about fifteen years, *Alfie Zappacosta* for a couple, *Robert Pilon* (*Phantom*) for close to twenty, and *Michael Burgess* (*Les Miserables*) for ten, and am currently playing with crooner *Matt Dusk* whenever possible. My production company has worked with the biggest acts in the world including: *Billy Joel, Rihanna, Barenaked Ladies, Black-Eyed Peas, Michael Buble, Kid Rock, Katy Perry, Justin Beiber, Lady Gaga, Nickelback, Norah Jones, Elton John, Jay-Z, and Eminem, to name a few.*" [midnitehour.ca]



Teaching in schools has enabled dozens of music alumni to influence the next generation. Guitarist **Ron Palangio** (1982) humbly admits to having Juno-winning jazz pianist/composer *David Braid* as a student. In addition to his role as Head of Arts at Hamilton's *Cardinal Newman Catholic S.S.*, Palangio has directed the *Golden*

Horseshoe Music Festival, bringing hundreds of area high school musicians and ensembles together each spring. Bassists **John Paul Szarak** (1986) and **Mark Novakovic** (1984) also teach in Hamilton schools.

Tenor sax man **Dan Chabot** (1984) shares, "I'm a teacher for the District School Board of Ontario North East - I teach Music at a JK to 6 French Immersion school (Bertha Shaw Public) - Love it! The biggest impact from my days at Mohawk was to learn that I actually had the discipline and perseverance to succeed. And these qualities are now instilled in me in all the things I do."

"My career hasn't developed any way like I thought it would," remarks woodwind player/ keyboardist/ arranger/ music director **Ross Wooldridge** (1984). "Even though I fully developed my woodwind skills, the reality is that ninety percent of my gigs are on keyboard. There's all kinds of music and all kinds of places to play it. I had to be ready to go where people needed me." Wooldridge is excited about his recent project, the Tribute to the Benny Goodman Sextet. Released in July 2012, the CD captures Wooldridge on clarinet accompanied by a top notch band including Canadian Jazz Musician, Don Thompson on vibraphone. The CD release concert, attended by about 800 people at Ancaster's Fieldcote centre, "was like the great cherry on top of the musical cake of my life."



Mike Noack (1985) says, "I am currently the owner of Swordfish Digital since 1998. We are the largest media broker in Hamilton fulfilling CD and DVD media replication orders for hundreds of customers a year. We are also involved in location recording, specifically conferences and corporate events. I owned a recording studio as part of our

operation in Hamilton for 10 years before selling it in 2007. We worked with many talented musicians from all over Canada and the US. I have also played hundreds of live shows throughout Ontario and the US. Playing live is always fun!" [swordfishdigital.com]



Some alumni have come full circle and are now on the Mohawk Music faculty. Drummers **Kevin Dempsey** (1985), **Anthony Michelli**, (1990), (Alumni of Distinction Award, 2008 and Incredible 40 at 40), and composer/pianist **Adrean Farrugia** (enrolled 1992) are all players at the top of their game. They still have busy performance schedules, but teaching remains important to them.



There are many more stories yet to be told. Yours may be one of them. Here's what to do:

- 1) Update your information with Mohawk's alumni department at alumni@mohawkcollege.ca;
- 2) Sign up for this author's newsletter to stay in touch with Hamilton musicians. [ghmusician.com]

As Applied Music Alumni gain more and more career experience, their integrity and reputation make them indispensable. Their influence spreads farther and wider into the world and multiplies, like ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond. Their music resonates throughout the region and on distant shores.

Thanks to the insights of the director, the support of college administration, and the commitment of every faculty member, Mohawk College continues to train well-rounded, future-ready musicians. The Applied Music program is a great success story to share with the world.

About the author.

Glen T. Brown (1984) teaches, plays drums, and writes about the "criminally ignored" music scene in Hamilton. He teaches at Parkdale Elementary School and publishes Greater Hamilton Musician magazine when he's not dragging a member of his family to a live music event. Reach him at glen@gbrpublications.com. ■■■