

# THE GRAND DOMINION JAZZ BAND

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Although I authored this piece, a tremendous amount of assistance was provided in writing it from the collective memories of founder-members of the band, Jim Armstrong, Bob Jackson, Gerry Green, and leader Bob Pelland.

In July, 1982, Mike Cox, the founder of Grand Dominion, met with Witt Mueller, the then manager of Vancouver's thriving, open six-nights-a-week Hot Jazz Club, and suggested the formation of a band made up of musicians of Mike's choosing. A date was set for July 16 and 17, 1982: the musicians selected were Mike Cox (banjo), Jim Armstrong (trombone), and Gerry Green (clarinet), all of Vancouver's Phoenix Jazzers, all British-born Canadians. The American members consisted of Bob Pelland, from Mount Vernon, Washington, piano/leader of the Rainier Jazz Band, Bob Jackson (trumpet), and 'Seattle' Mike Duffy (string bass), from the Great Excelsior Jazz Band, plus Stephen Joseph (drums), from the Uptown Lowdown Jazz Band, all Seattle WA-based bands. Mike named the ensemble the Grand Dominion Jazz Band, after a gig that he used to play in a pub on the banks of the Grand Union canal in England. The band logo, designed by Vancouver artist Jim Rimmer, consists of Britain's Union Jack superimposed on the Stars & Stripes, signifying the international mix of the band, which remains to this day. The Hot Jazz Club event was an instant success, a happy coincidence of musicians who all shared the same musical philosophy and objectives, and were possessed of the innate ability, some how, to come together when it counts.

A decision was made that very night to keep the band going whenever possible, given the commitments of the musicians to other bands and the roughly 110 miles separating Vancouver and Seattle.

Bob Jackson recalls: "From the start, the rhythm was rock-solid and insistent. From that first night it seemed we had achieved a sound that was squarely in the New Orleans tradition, but unmistakably our own: raw, no frills, unflinching and hard-driving. Furthermore, there seemed to be a magical communication amongst us that made us want to play and never stop. That's exactly what happened."

In February, 1983, the band made its first recording, an LP called simply 'The Grand Dominion Jazz Band', and recorded at Vancouver's Pinewood Studios for the George Buck label. Some of the material on this, and the follow-up LP 'Come Back - Sweet Papa', has since been re-issued in CD format. 1984 brought an invitation from Alan Granruth to play the Central City, Colorado, festival in August of that year, our first appearance at a jazz festival. For some time, band appearances were limited to Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., at the Puget Sound Traditional Jazz Society and Vancouver Hot Jazz Club respectively, but then November, 1985, brought our first appearance at the San Diego Thanksgiving Jazz Festival, the first of many. Things began to pick up, and in March, 1986, we made our first recording for the Bob Erdos Stomp Off label, an LP called 'Don't Give Up The Ship' followed two years later with one called 'Ain't Nobody Got The Blues Like Me'. Both LPs have since been re-issued on a CD called 'Half and Half'. Other CDs on the Stomp Off label are: 'San Jacinto Stomp' (1993), 'The Spiritual Album' (1994) and, in 1997, 'Smiles' and 'Daddy's Little Girl', the thirty-odd tunes for both of which were recorded over one weekend session. A second 'double-header' weekend recording session in 2002 resulted in two more CDs with the highly imaginative title of 'Has It Really Been Twenty Years?' Volumes 1 and 2.

What turned out to be a very popular cassette release made up of out-takes from various recording sessions between 1982 and 1990, and called very appropriately 'Odds & Sods', was re-issued as a CD in 2004 and continues to be a popular seller. Our latest release 'Straight Ahead', in early 2006, was a celebration of Bob Jackson's return to the band. The cover (a charging rhinoceros) conveys a not too subtle message about the band's collective approach to the music we play! This approach has never changed, and our passion for the New Orleans style is evident. I was talking to Gerry Green, our reed player, the other day, and he recalled a phrase that our first bass player, Mike Duffy, often used: "You get in touch with Mother Throb, the Cosmic Pulse, and let the music rush over you." Mike always expressed himself very well! Gerry then added, "From day one, the key to the Grand Dominion's sound has been its rhythm section - you hear notes, but you feel the rhythm. I have played with quite a few bands over the years, and Grand Dominion has always brought out the best in my playing."

In May, 1986, we made our first in an almost unbroken string of appearances at the Sacramento Jubilee until the year 2005. In July, 1988, the band went international with the first of three overseas tours, which included appearances at festivals in Edinburgh (Scotland), Marciac (France), and Brecon (Wales). Responding to an enquiry from me about memorable moments with the band, Jim Armstrong commented, "We finished a set at the Brecon festival and the audience rose as one and gave us a standing ovation. Remember, these were hardened, savvy, Brit Trad fans, probably ready to heap scorn on a 'foreign' band. I looked at Bob Jackson and mumbled something along the lines of: 'Is this really happening?' That was when I knew we had 'arrived' and there would be no turning back."

My own 'personal best' recollection was in Chattanooga in 1996, when Adolphus 'Doc' Cheatham joined us on-stage for a few tunes. What an experience it was to share the stage with a legend. At the age of ninety-one, he required a stool to support him, but his trumpet still rang out sweetly, and he sang Sweethearts On Parade, with no hesitation whatsoever. At one point, Bob Jackson was looking closely at the rusty and battered old tin mute that Doc was using, so Doc handed it to him, saying as he did so, "King Oliver gave me that mute." Bob snatched his hand back as though he was being offered the crown jewels, which, in a sense I suppose, he was.

In September, 1991, the first personnel change occurred when Mike McCombe replaced Stephen Joseph on drums. Mike joined us after emigrating to California from Merseyside, England, where he had played for many years with the Merseysippi Jazz Band and also with the Ken Colyer band for a period of time. Mike and his wife Barbara were movers-and-shakers for many years in organising the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee.

The band line-up had been exceptionally stable up to this point, but occasionally there was a need to use substitute players, among them Bob Erwig (cornet), Jim Klippert (trombone), Tom Sharpsteen, Jim Buchmann and Brian Ogilvie (reeds), Trevor Richards, Hal Smith, Clint Baker and Colin Bowden (drums), and Mike Fay (bass). Throughout the life of the band, nobody has ever substituted for Bob Pelland (piano). Bob gets extra credit for perfect attendance.



L/R: (Back) Mike Cox, Gerry Green, Mike Duffy. (Front) Stephen Joseph, Bob Pelland, Bob Jackson Jim Armstrong • Central City, Colorado, 1984



L/R: (Back) Bob Jackson, Mike Cox, Bob Pelland, Mike Duffy. (Front) Gerry Green, Jim Armstrong, Mike McCombe • San Diego, California, c1992



L/R: (Back) Bob Pelland, Jim Armstrong, Bob Jackson, Mike Duffy, Mike McCombe. (Front, kneeling) Jim Marsh, Gerry Green Sisters, Oregon, September, 1995

In January, 1994, the band's first cruise with Carol Neumann's JazzSea Cruises established what has become a long-time relationship. Our happy association with JazzSea Cruises and the Holland America Line has endured to the present day, and we have visited such exotic locales as the Mexican Riviera, the Panama Canal, the Caribbean, New England, and the St. Lawrence Seaway, Alaska, the Baltic and the Mediterranean. We were fortunate to be able to extend the Mediterranean and Baltic cruises to include mini-tours of southern England, playing venues in Bookham, Enfield, Eastleigh, Thame, Crayford, and Colchester.

The next personnel change occurred in 1995, when leader Mike Cox retired from teaching and returned to his native Britain. I replaced him on banjo at the Sisters, Oregon, jazz festival in September of that year. I don't mind saying that my anxiety level was quite high that weekend: Mike's was a big pair of shoes to fill.

It was at this juncture that Bob Pelland assumed the role of band leader. Bob's prior experience as a leader came to the fore, and he has certainly done an exemplary job over the years that I have been a member of the band. He and his wife Mary lived all their lives in the sleepy Washington State town of Mount Vernon, but recently relocated to a home in an idyllic setting, on the seashore on Camano Island, WA. As we used to say in Derbyshire, Bob is quite the dab hand as a chef, and visitors are always assured of a superb meal prepared by Bob and Mary.

By the mid-1990s the band was

appearing at festivals or cruises on an almost monthly basis, particularly on the West Coast, but with occasional forays into locations like Washington DC, Madison WI, St. Louis MO, and Jupiter FL. The Chattanooga TN festival has become an annual event for us, and we are referred to as 'the house band' by organisers Mike and Astrid Griffin.

In April, 1999, we decided to come out of the closet and join the rest of the world by 'going on-line'. This was achieved thanks to the great help of Diz Swift, a great fan of the band and now a retired computer science lecturer. Diz has never once complained about poor working conditions or lack of salary increases, and has even given sterling service as a bus-driver on the two band mini-tours of southern England mentioned earlier. As I often observe to people, I design the website then Diz does the hard part! I can certainly say it has been a great pleasure for me to work with her over the last seven years. She continues to engineer and maintain the site for us, hoping to one day get that elusive salary increase! The website address is: [www.gdjb.com](http://www.gdjb.com) Please stop by and visit us, and make sure you have the computer sound turned on when you do.

The Day The Roof Fell In! This is how we all thought of the news in January, 2000, when Bob Jackson announced that for health reasons he must retire from the band. For the rest of that year we were helped out in fulfilling our commitments by Leon Oakley, Ev Farey, Tony Pringle, and Duke Heitger, and are forever indebted to them. It was finally decided that the best solution to the problem was for Jim Armstrong to switch over to trumpet and for Jim Klippert to join us on trombone. It was during this period that we recorded 'Has It Really Been Twenty Years?' Volumes 1 and 2.

We continued like this for about a year, and then in February, 2001, Mike Fay joined us to replace Mike Duffy on bass. Fay's impressive list of credentials includes stints with the Sunset Music Company, the Golden Eagle Jazz Band, and a host of other top-notch bands. My usual playing position on stage is seated directly in front of the body of Mike's bass, and I can think of no other place in the world I'd rather be, musically speaking. When Mike and Barbara McCombe retired to become globe-trotters in June, 2003, Jeff Hamilton of Magnolia Jazz Band, Sunset Music Company, and Banu Gibson band fame joined us. Jeff lived and played for many years in New Orleans, and studied with the great Cie Frazier, the outstanding New Orleans drummer. We consider ourselves very fortunate indeed to have someone of Jeff's calibre and reputation as a drummer playing with us. Bob Jackson would later regain his health and rejoin us in 2005, enabling Jim Armstrong to revert to trombone, thus re-creating the unique sound that is the front-line of the Grand Dominion Jazz Band.

Our 25th anniversary! I can only address the going on eleven years that I have spent with the band. To say that it has been fun would be a massive understatement. Over the years we have met some wonderful people and I would like to mention just a few of them. We owe a lot to Tom Rippey of Seattle's Puget Sound Traditional Jazz Society who gave us some of our first gigs, and to Bob Erdos whose Stomp Off Records has helped spread our name across the jazz world. Then there are the festival promoters who have kept inviting us back year after year... Alan Adams (San Diego), Gary Sorenson (Port Angeles), Charlotte Dickson (Olympia), and Mike and Astrid Griffin (Chattanooga), to name but a few. We have also met many great musicians along the way, some of whom filled in for one or the other of us at one time or another, and helped us out in times of need. And other bands that we keep running into and who have become great friends: the High Sierra Jazz Band, our cruising buddies in the Buck Creek and Bob Schulz Jazz Bands, and the Climax Jazz Band from Toronto. But perhaps most important of all are the individual fans without whom our music would be irrelevant. They are far too numerous to name all of them, but they are dispersed all over North America and as far away as Europe and Japan. All of them have enriched our lives and we hope that our music has done the same for theirs. We may not be around for another twenty five years, but let's ride this thing as far and as long as we can. On behalf of the Grand Dominion Jazz Band, I wish all of you reading this good health and good times, and keep on jazzin'.

Jim

**Just Jazz**

SPOTLIGHT ON  
**GEORGE HUXLEY**

**DIANA ALLEN and GRAEME BELL**  
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