

Remembering Bob McMullin

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On Canada Day in 1942, Canada's 75th birthday, a young Canadian, 21-year-old Robert Wesley McMullin of Raymond, Alberta was just getting into the swing of things in his new position as a bandsman in the military band of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Signing up for the armed forces is a serious commitment, especially during a major conflict like the Second World War, but Bob, at least, had an appointment as a musician. His role would not be to fight, but to help raise the morale of those who were fighting.

Bob's four years of service as a bandsman was just the beginning of a musical career that would span more than fifty years, and end with reporters calling him, "one of Winnipeg's most celebrated composers and conductors"¹ upon his death on 3 January 1995. But in 1942, all Bob knew was that he had signed up to serve his country, that he faced probable separation from his much loved wife for the duration of his service, and that he hoped to come back home again and figure out some way to build a career for himself in music.

Bob had no way then of foreseeing a future in which he would be a successful composer and conductor based in Winnipeg, contributing to the musical life of the city in almost every genre, format, and medium of musical expression available. Bob would turn out to be, according to his friend, neighbour and colleague Neil Harris, "a real working professional" and not "an ivory tower musician."² If there was an event or creative endeavour in Winnipeg that involved music, it was very likely that Bob would have some part in it, small or large—this would be his legacy.

Bob's Beginnings

Robert Wesley McMullin, who would be known as Bob or sometimes Moon, was born on 29 April 1921 in Lewiston, a tiny town in northern Utah, USA. Even so, his family's roots had been transplanted to Raymond, Alberta in 1902, when his father Wesley emigrated there from Utah with his parents and some of his extended family. Bob's mother,

Ruby, hailed from Almo, Idaho. While visiting her sister Emma (Mrs. L. D. King) in Canada, Ruby and Wesley met and courted. They married in Idaho in 1910, and then spent four years living in Raymond where Wesley, a mechanic, worked in the machine shop of the sugar factory. Two daughters, Clarice and Vera, were born in Alberta; then the family relocated to Idaho in 1914, where Wesley worked in a different sugar factory. Here their first son Nolan was born. Wishing to live closer to Ruby's parents, who had moved to Ogden, Utah, the McMullins relocated again, and Wesley worked briefly as a barber before he was enticed to work in a sugar factory near Lewiston, the tiny town where Bob was born. After the birth of the youngest son, Donald, in 1923, the family headed back to Alberta to live near their widowed grandmother Lucy McMullin.³ The small town of Raymond was where the family stayed to raise their children.

That raising included a lot of music. Bob's parents, Wes and Ruby, were both musical people, actively involved in the arts in Raymond, participating in plays and musicals in the opera house, playing in dance bands and participating in choirs and cultural events at church. Naturally, Bob was inclined to participate in music as well. Though he had one year of formal piano lessons, Bob received most of his musical education through hands-on performance. His older brother Nolan, five years older, was possibly his most influential music teacher. Nolan formed a dance band, and he quickly drafted his younger brother to play percussion in the group, starting when Bob was eleven. Nolan's band played at dances all around southern Alberta. Hanging out and rehearsing with the older teen musicians in the band, Bob also picked up the clarinet, saxophone and trumpet.

The local newspaper, the *Raymond Recorder*, reported in January 1941, "Bob McMullin left Monday for Calgary to attend school and we understand he is trying out with a band there in hopes of joining it. Good luck Bob."⁴ Regardless of whatever happened with schooling, Bob did get into a band. It was while playing with this band at Sylvan Lake that summer that Bob met the lovely Joan Glover, from Edmonton.⁵ Bob remained in the northern part of the province in pursuit of both music and Joan. They were married on 22 May 1942, after they had both turned 21.

Bob's RCAF Service

In the summer of 1942, Bob became a new recruit for the Royal Canadian Air Force Bands. His daughter Patricia was born in November 1943 while Bob was stationed in Edmonton during the early part of his enlistment. Then



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Mary Rose McMullin

Bob McMullin performing with the Sonny Burke Band (front row, fourth from left), no date.

Bob and his family relocated to Ontario, where the air force bands were sorting out the musicians. In a letter to his brother Nolan, sent from the base, Bob explained that he had been given the chance to play with some “pretty fair” bands. He went on to report, “There are a few good musicians here, but the average ones are not exceptional. The main central band (there are three, and a bunch of duds left over) is the best band in Canada. Kirkwood⁶ is giving trade tests to every musician here, except those in the overseas band which is leaving for England next Monday. He wants to pick out the most suitable men for the #1 central band. Then all the other musicians will probably be posted all over. There are more than 200 guys here now.”⁷ Bob preferred life in Edmonton to life in Ontario, which took some adjustment, but he was happy to have Joan by his side. He told his brother Nolan he had been “very miserable during the month that Joan was in Edmonton” when he initially reported for duty in the east.⁸

Bob ended up being posted overseas. Though busy with his duties as a bandsman, Bob took advantage of the opportunity to listen to orchestras all over Europe, purchasing Novello study scores⁹ so he could follow along as he listened, whether it was on the radio or in the concert hall. This was the method Bob used to teach himself orchestration.

While in the service for four years (1942–1946), Bob went from being a bandsman to sharing the leadership

of the band, finally being appointed as the conductor of the RCAF dance band “Modernaires” which played for the troops in England, France, Germany, Belgium and Holland.¹⁰ Sometimes Bob was homesick, and missed his family, friends and the landscape of Alberta. In his youth, Bob and his family had spent a lot of time at Waterton Lakes National Park, and as he thought about the mountain lakes and streams, he poured these feelings into his first composition for orchestra, *Rocky Mountain Suite*. This work, in two movements (*The Swallow’s Nest* and *Pass River*) took six months to complete.

With the war ended, the camps closing down, and enlisted men and women going home, Bob had more off-duty hours on his hands. In a letter to Nolan, dated 14 February 1946, Bob explained that, in his extra time, “once again my attention has swung to classical music. Last night I went to a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. A 300-voice choir accompanied by an 80-piece orchestra did, among other very insignificant things, Delius’ *Sea Drift*. I say insignificant because *Sea-Drift* was first, and it was superb (Delius is my favourite and the greatest composer ever) so anything that came after it was nothing. It’s a story of two sea gulls who become separated and spend the rest of their lives in vain search for each other ... If you can, have a listen to any Delius you run into.”¹¹

The first mention of Winnipeg in Bob’s life appeared in a notice in Bob’s hometown paper, the *Raymond Recorder*,

which reported on 1 August 1946, “Mr. and Mrs. Bob McMullin and daughter Pat left Monday for Winnipeg where Bob will receive his discharge.” The family was heading back to Edmonton from there, and probably had no inkling that within a decade, Winnipeg was going to play an important part in their lives.

Bob’s Ambition

While Bob was stationed overseas, his brother Nolan had moved his young family (Nolan had married his wife Jane in 1941) to Pocatello, Idaho for pharmacy school. The youngest McMullin brother, Donald, had died in a sugar factory accident in 1941, so Bob had no brothers left in Raymond. Contemplating his own future, Bob wrote to Nolan, saying, “I hope you’re getting along okay in school. Hope you like the courses. I don’t know what to do when I get back but will probably go to Vancouver, get a job, and study under Arthur Benjamin¹² for a while and eventually wind up in CBC with a show or two of my own so I can get away from playing.”

Bob did not go to Vancouver; he, Joan, and three-year-old Pat went to Joan’s hometown, Edmonton. Bob obtained a job there, or several jobs, and one of them was with the CBC radio. Initially, he was hired to play clarinet and trumpet in the station orchestra,¹³ but his talents lent themselves to arranging music and conducting as well. In March 1947, his hometown newspaper reported that “Raymond residents were thrilled”¹⁴ about Bob conducting the orchestra for the *Edmonton Marches On* radio program. Listening to the radio was an important pastime to many people in the late 1940s, and small-town folk were very happy to give their listening support to a hometown boy. Bob’s prediction to his brother Nolan about “wind[ing] up in CBC” was coming true.

Away from the radio station, Bob was an active musician, in his second job, playing clarinet in the Bob McMullin Sextet, live at the Trocadero Ballroom. Sometimes the sextet played for the weekend dances; sometimes the larger orchestra that Bob conducted for the radio would play at the ballroom, and be broadcast live on location. Bob also had a quartet that played at Chic’s Supper Club. So, the part of his prediction about “get[ting] away from playing” was only partially coming true.

In 1948, CBC launched a new radio station, CBX, in Edmonton. The inaugural broadcast took place on Wednesday, 8 September 1948.¹⁵ Sixteen musicians from Edmonton were featured on the program, which was broadcast at 8 PM. Bob McMullin had been retained to write the arrangements of works such as *Home on the Range*, *Oh What a Beautiful Morning* and *Night and Day*. This arranging assignment came his way partly because he had been successfully writing arrangements for use with the orchestra for *Edmonton Marches On*, and partly because of the success of the CBC broadcast of his *Rocky Mountain Suite*, which had taken place in March. The young man from small-town Raymond was beginning to find success with his choice of a career in music.

Bob and Sir Ernest MacMillan

Soon after repatriating to Canada, Bob had decided to send the score for his composition *Rocky Mountain Suite* to Harold Cluff, who had been his sergeant in the RCAF. Bob believed that this composition, born of “bouts of homesickness” when his “mind wandered to thoughts of the Rockies”¹⁶ was actually pretty good. Since Harold Cluff was a musician, and a member of the Composers, Authors and Publishers Association of Canada, it seemed that he would be a good person to contact. One of Cluff’s contacts in CAPAC¹⁷ was Sir Ernest MacMillan, the most famous and respected Canadian musician of the time and the conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Cluff asked Sir Ernest to look at the score and comment on the piece, and he was impressed enough to ask for the orchestral parts.

Bob McMullin’s hometown newspaper, the *Raymond Recorder*, reported: “One night following a rehearsal of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in Massey Hall Sir Ernest instructed the orchestra to play part of the composition on their stands. On completion they were greatly pleased with it.” The Raymond paper quoted Sir Ernest as saying that Bob’s “work is very neat, it is original, there are very few mistakes in the copying.” According to the *Winnipeg Free Press* Sir Ernest commented that McMullin should “keep on working and he may make some of the people in the music world sit up and take notice.” The work, which premiered during a live CBC broadcast on 16 March 1948, was recorded live at Massey Hall in Toronto, with its young composer in the audience to receive the standing ovation that followed the performance.¹⁸

Bob and the CBC (Edmonton)

In early December 1950, the regional talent board for the CBC, headquartered in Winnipeg, heard a demo tape that had been submitted by some of the boys at CBC’s Edmonton radio station. This was the brainchild of Bob McMullin, the conductor of the orchestra, teaming up with Jerry Forbes on the vocals, and Fred Diehl as producer. The name they chose for their demo show was *Linger Awhile*. The board liked both the concept and what they heard, and CBC radio accepted the show for syndication. It aired at 9 PM Mountain Standard Time, where they recorded live in Edmonton, and it was picked up across the country.

Linger Awhile was popular from British Columbia to Ontario, and lasted for about a year and a half; then, in June 1952, it was replaced by (or renamed) the *Bob McMullin Show*, recognizing the importance of Bob’s contribution to the success of the show. The *Raymond Recorder* bragged, “Did you know?—that Bob McMullin, one of our native sons who has made good in the world of music has a program of his own, called *The Bob McMullin Show*,” followed with directions for tuning in.¹⁹

Bob Moves to Winnipeg

It was probably inevitable that, with his own named show maintaining longevity and popularity across Canada, Bob



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McMullin's Shorts, an album recorded by Bob McMullin for CBC Winnipeg in 1971.

would be enticed to move from Edmonton to the regional headquarters of the CBC in Winnipeg. This move occurred in 1955. Daughter Pat remembers this well, because she was twelve years old at the time, and going into Grade Seven. There was some discussion about what to do about Pat's education. The family opted to enrol her in public school in Winnipeg.²⁰

The Bob McMullin Show continued as usual from its new home in Winnipeg, and it would do so until at least 1962. However, Winnipeg offered many opportunities for Bob to get involved in other aspects of music. He arranged music for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, collaborating with choreographer Paddy Stone;²¹ he arranged the music for the Winnipeg Winter Club's ice review.²² In radio work, Bob began to do the scoring of background music to accompany the radio plays that were so popular at the time. A dramatic series called *Prairie Playhouse* produced a serialization of Canadian author Frederick Philip Grove's novel *Our Daily Bread* in 1956, with Bob both composing and conducting the music.²³ This may have been Bob's first experience with this kind of dramatic scoring, but it was the first of many. Bob would go on to score at least 70 radio dramas for the CBC.²⁴

Bob and Television

Bob was such a versatile individual. He could play so many instruments; he could arrange and compose music; he was a talented conductor. Not surprisingly, Winnipeg brought opportunities for Bob to get involved with CBC-TV. In 1957, *Club 41* began to air on CBWT in Winnipeg. This was a locally produced variety show, which aired at 10 PM, after the news. Bob McMullin was both arranger and

conductor of the music for this show. *Toes in Tempo*, a half-hour children's show featuring members of the Winnipeg Ballet, also began that year, and Bob was invited to compose the music for *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which aired on 20 May.²⁵

From this beginning, Bob would go on to be involved with many CBC television shows, both regular programming and summer replacement shows. Initially, most of these shows were straight musical shows, or musical variety shows involving comedy sketches and chats with celebrities. Through his television work, Bob's musicality and quietly brilliant personality touched the lives and future careers of performers whose names range from familiar to famous.

Bob and Lenny Breau

The Lenny Breau biography, *One Long Tune* by Ron Forbes-Roberts, discusses Lenny's interactions with Bob. Lenny had married young, and he and his wife Valerie were facing a rough economic patch in the early sixties; so, they were relieved when Lenny began to be called in as a studio musician, most frequently by Bob, who had a self-named half-hour program on CBC television. "As one of the most respected members of CBC's musical staff, McMullin was free to use any local musician he wanted for his projects and hired Lenny for hundreds of CBC sessions over the coming years."²⁶ Bob had a high regard for Lenny and his talents, even though Lenny was not always easy to work with. One deficiency that was problematic for Bob was Lenny's inability to read music. His "weak reading chops made it necessary for McMullin to give Lenny his parts a day or two before the show so he could have them ready for the session."²⁷

Because Bob believed in Lenny, and was willing to work around his weaknesses, Lenny's considerable talent was allowed to blossom. Rising to the challenge of improving his musicianship, Lenny learned to read music. In his own words, "I had to learn how to read because a lot of times there's a time limit and you have to get things done within a certain time and if you don't read, you don't get it done."²⁸ While Lenny considered most of the music he was required to play for CBC to be pretty mundane, he could rely on Bob McMullin to come up with some good material that allowed Lenny to really use his guitar skills. For example, he loved to play on Bob's *A Touch of Jazz*, a segment of which was used in a documentary: *The Genius of Lenny Breau* (1999)²⁹ to show off Lenny's early playing ability. A viewer of the video—not the original television show—described Lenny's performance like this: "The influential yet relatively unknown guitarist (compared to many guitarists of his day, of course) plays both rhythm and melody in this song, and if I didn't watch the video I would have thought there were two guitarists ... he complements and emphasizes the melodies, but also adds an emotional drive to the song."³⁰

Soon after the *A Touch of Jazz* transmissions, in 1966, when CBC was looking for a personality "with youth appeal" to star in a summer replacement show, they

approached Lenny with the idea of taking the lead in a show that would carry his name. Producer Ray McConnell explained, “I wanted to build a show around them (Lenny Breau and Bob McMullin) and take advantage of Lenny’s jazz playing.”³¹ Now, instead of Lenny backing Bob, it would be Bob backing Lenny, happily assisting the young man he had mentored.

Bob and Randy Bachman

In order to reach out to the teen audience of music listeners, the CBC launched a group of afterschool music shows patterned loosely after *Sing Out!*, *American Bandstand* and other U.S. shows. These shows were known by different names in different places, and changed titles from year to year, but whether they were called *Music Hop*, *Let’s Go*, *Where It’s At*, *Hootenanny*, or *Jeunesse Oblige*, the content was similar. Each CBC location was responsible for one show per week. The weekly segment that was produced in Winnipeg of course retained Bob McMullin as music director.

Randy Bachman related how the Guess Who, freshly returned to Winnipeg from the UK trip that had left them both broke and in debt, were approached to try out to be the house band for *Music Hop* just as it was being renamed *Let’s Go*. This was a piece of much needed serendipity for the band. Before the group auditioned, the question was asked, “Can you read music?” because “the routine was that each week the show’s musical director, Bob McMullin, wrote out the music charts for the musicians to play.”³² Randy, bluffing, replied, “Yes, of course!” which was half true, because two of the guys (Garry Peterson and Burton Cummings) could; but Randy himself and Jim Kale were less proficient in sight-reading, relying instead on learning music by ear.

Worried about how the audition might go, given his bluff, Randy called Bob McMullin a few days before the audition “and asked him how he was progressing with the charts. He was nice enough to tell me both the titles he’d finished and not yet finished.” Randy then went out and bought the records, called a band rehearsal, and learned his parts by ear, so that at the audition, his playing would be up to par. “Not only did we play the songs perfectly, we sounded exactly like the records ... we had the gig.”³³ Bob McMullin was a pretty prescient person—Randy probably did not fool Bob. But Bob would have known that a weakness in sight-reading need not be a stumbling block for a performer with a good ear like Randy Bachman. Bob believed in extending opportunities to young musicians, and then standing back and watching them rise, as their experiences working under his direction helped them to learn things they needed to know, like how to read music, in order to become better musicians.

Certainly, the two years spent working on television helped the Guess Who as a group to build their audience across Canada, and was an important part of jump-starting their remarkable careers. “That CBC show saved our necks,” Burton Cummings confirmed, also mentioning

appreciation for the mentorship of Bob McMullin as he prepared the charts for them to play each week.³⁴ After the Guess Who moved on to bigger and better things, Bob McMullin maintained a relationship with Randy Bachman, collaborating with him on albums produced by other groups (on which Randy might write songs, and Bob would orchestrate them) and on live shows, such as their collaboration between the Guess Who and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra in 1968.

Bob and the Symphony

Before he moved to Winnipeg, Bob had a developing relationship with the Edmonton Symphony. In 1954, that body had commissioned a McMullin composition. *Essay for Orchestra* premiered on 26 January 1954 to favourable reviews. *The Lethbridge Herald* reported this one-movement sketch as “a study of contrasts in tone harmony and rhythm.”³⁵ He was also a guest conductor for the Edmonton Symphony later in 1954 leading the orchestra in a “pop” concert of his own compositions; and on another occasion he guest-conducted this orchestra through a performance of his *Sketches from the Rocky Mountains*.³⁶ He guest-conducted in Edmonton again in 1967,³⁷ and in 1974, at a program of Bacharach, Bernstein and the Beatles.³⁸

In Winnipeg, Bob was sort of pigeonholed as a CBC man, associated with popular music and jazz music rather than the classical fare that was the forte of the Winnipeg Symphony. The collaboration between the orchestra, the Guess Who, and Bob, changed that opinion. The genre-busting concerts, held in October 1968, were in part made possible because the symphony had a new director, George Cleve, who was receptive to the idea, and who was himself popular with the young people of the city.³⁹ The concerts featured scoring by Bob McMullin, who would also be the featured guest conductor. The program included “the entire Sgt. Pepper album ... a montage of all the James Bond movie themes, and several original compositions of the Guess Who.”⁴⁰ This concert was possibly “one of the biggest happenings on the music scene ... in all of Canada ... Musically, this concert is a fantastic experiment; culturally it represents a major breakthrough and commercially it’s loaded with potential.”⁴¹

This prediction proved to be prophetic: the Guess Who collaboration concerts were both sold out, the “kids at the concert seemed to enjoy the symphony”, and the Winnipeg Symphony booked Bob McMullin to return as a guest conductor the following April.⁴² *Canadian Composer’s* critic, Frank Morriss, was effusive in his praise. The music critic for the *Winnipeg Free Press* for nearly 30 years before moving on to *Canadian Composer*, Morris was at this time in his mid-sixties. He was not a fan of rock and roll music, admitting that rock music seemed to him to be full of “frenzy and yelling,”⁴³ so he was pleasantly surprised to discover how much he enjoyed the collaboration concert. Morriss was also impressed with the youthful audience. He commented, “A better behaved and more attentive

audience I can't remember. When Bob McMullin walked out to conduct the orchestra on three selections on its own, he was greeted with the same enthusiasm that marked their merger with the Guess Who." Morriss' only complaint about the concert was that "the concert was too short. Which really isn't a complaint at all." He further applauded Bob McMullin's work to bring the disparate musical genres together, saying the arrangements were all "first rate, musicianly and right."⁴⁴

After the conducting success Bob enjoyed on the Winnipeg Symphony collaboration with the Guess Who, he earned the trust of the Symphony organization. They valued him as both a conductor and an arranger, and he was invited back frequently as a guest conductor. He conducted many "pops" concerts for them, including a significant collaboration with jazz trumpeter Doc Severinsen in March 1974.⁴⁵ One of the works performed in this collaboration was Bob's own composition, *Concerto for a Centennial*.⁴⁶ This work must have impressed Doc Severinsen, because he commissioned McMullin to write a trumpet concerto for him. He asked for a piece that would be too difficult for anyone else to play—a piece written particularly to Doc's own skill set. McMullin worked on this piece for several years. About the experience, he said, "This is a unique experience for me precisely because I have been taking the time. I have always gone through a sort of agony while composing, perhaps because I haven't had the formal training. While melodies are not difficult for me, developing them has always been a weakness. However, when I get flurries of inspiration or ideas for Doc's piece, I can set them aside for a while, and make adjustments at a later time; I can ponder them more intensely."⁴⁷ This work, completed in 1979 and named simply *Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra*, was the piece that Bob considered to be his finest.⁴⁸

Bob and the Rainbow Stage

As well as conducting symphony orchestras, Bob also tried his hand at musical direction for theatre productions in Winnipeg—and did so well at it that he stayed at it for about three decades. This seems a natural fit for Bob, who was once a boy growing up in Raymond, Alberta, where the Raymond Opera House was a community fixture, and theatrical plays and staged musicals and operettas were a constant endeavour. Bob's parents and grandparents had participated in these productions; it is very likely that Bob played in the pit orchestra for productions that required it. But his band work with the RCAF, followed by a decade of radio work had not left him with much time to spare for the stage. Somehow, that changed in Winnipeg. As word got out in the city that Bob could pretty much do anything musical, and that Bob also was willing to bring his strong work ethic to bear on any musical project, he somehow found the time and energy to devote to musical theatre.

Bob began to work as the musical director for Rainbow Stage, Canada's largest and longest-running outdoor theatre and a Winnipeg institution, at least as early as 1960, though he may have begun that relationship earlier.

The *Winnipeg Free Press* spelled his last name incorrectly as McMullen, but stated that before bringing his talents to the Rainbow Stage, the music director at CBC had also directed the University of Manitoba Glee Club in such shows as *Bells are Ringing* and *Wish You Were Here*.⁴⁹ In 1960, Bob was musical director for *Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Carousel* at the Rainbow Stage. What was it like to be musical director there? Well, it was tough. Financial constraints meant that "the Winnipeg Summer Theatre Association cannot afford to pay the musicians for any more [than just two days of] rehearsals. By sheer determination, cast and musicians get to work together for the opening night."⁵⁰

Year after year, newspaper articles extol the virtues of the leading men and women, and only briefly reference the people working hard behind the scenes, or in the orchestra pit. Year after year, though, Bob McMullin's name was mentioned as the musical director, with occasionally a compliment such as "The pit orchestra sounded very good—understandably so when you know that Bob McMullin is conducting," as the reviewer of *Hello Dolly* in 1978 indicated.⁵¹ Another brief nod to Bob's work came in 1979 when the reviewer stated that Bob, as usual, was able to extract "maximal benefits from minimal numbers of bodies"⁵²—again, a testimony to his ability not only to manage the artistic aspects of musical directorship, but the financial ones as well, since Bob would have hired the right mix of musicians to meet both ends.

In 1990, Bob's own show hit the Rainbow Stage. He was asked to write a revue, in celebration of forty years of the summer theatre's existence. All the music used in the 135-minute show, *Say it with Music*, was arranged and conducted by Bob McMullin. A revue "allows the audience to hear and see their favorite songs and dance numbers from musical theatre performed without having to endure an entire production," claimed the *Winnipeg Free Press* reviewer.⁵³ I doubt that neither Bob nor any others connected with Rainbow would have used that wording—aficionados of musical theatre are happy to watch entire productions—but the idea remains, that a revue can take musical numbers randomly from many productions, connect them in some cohesive way, and create a show. In this case, Bob included songs from past shows that audiences had really liked as well as songs from shows that Rainbow stage would never stage in their entirety due to cost or content or logistics. Bob also tried, in selecting the music, to showcase the vocal strength of Rainbow Stage cast, and to create opportunities for cast members to sing something different because the songs are taken out of show context—for example, a young person could sing a song from a role that is usually played by an older person.

The McMullin-composed revue was not Bob's last Rainbow Stage production, though by 1990, he had been the summer theatre's musical director for thirty years. He was still going strong in 1991 (at age 70) for the production of Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. One reviewer applauded Bob's contribution that summer

of 1991, stating that “the orchestra, conducted by Bob McMullin, deserves tremendous credit for their attentive, sensitive and technically admirable accompaniment—they did a terrific job.”⁵⁴ The final and well-deserved accolade for Bob’s work at the Rainbow Stage came posthumously, when in 2004 Bob was inducted into the Rainbow Stage Wall of Fame.⁵⁵

Bob and Enzo Stuarti

Today, few people remember the name Enzo Stuarti, although some people might remember the man in the Ragu Spaghetti Sauce commercials and his trademark comment “That’s a-nice!”⁵⁶ Well, that was Enzo Stuarti, who was a popular musical theatre performer and recording artist during the sixties. Bob McMullin may have met Enzo on the Rainbow Stage in 1960, where Stuarti was contracted to perform the lead in *Pajama Game*, with Bob as the musical director. However, they could have met sooner, since Stuarti’s first engagement in Winnipeg was in 1955,⁵⁷ the same year that Bob moved to Winnipeg. Stuarti really grew to love Winnipeg, and audiences loved him; so, he made a point to return to Winnipeg as a performance venue—and when he did perform in Winnipeg, he wanted his backing orchestra to be conducted by Bob McMullin.

In late 1962, Enzo confided to a *Winnipeg Free Press* reporter that he was working on a new album with Bob McMullin, and that Bob had flown to Minneapolis to work on the arrangements for the music, which would be recorded, but also performed live at the Persian Room of the Plaza Hotel in New York in 1963. The reporter said, “This could mean that maestro McMullen [sic] might be heading for the big time, although he’s doing well enough in Winnipeg.”⁵⁸

Bob’s first reaction to the invitation to go to New York and conduct there for a Stuarti performance was that he was too busy—and that was verifiably true, engaged as he was on CBC projects on both radio and television, as well as his work with the Rainbow Stage and the Winnipeg Symphony. However, in the end, he did not pass up the opportunity, and Stuarti, who enjoyed publicity much more than Bob did, called the *Winnipeg Free Press* to report on his friend’s behalf that Bob had done tremendously well conducting the Milt Shaw Orchestra at the Persian Room of the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Enzo enthused, “They just loved Bob McMullen [sic] and Winnipeg should be proud of him.”⁵⁹ Enzo was not the only one to give Bob rave reviews—the *Variety* critic did as well, stating that though he hadn’t loved Enzo’s performance, Stuarti did have two things working in his favour: “an amiable stage manner, and Robert McMullen,[sic] his personal maestro.”⁶⁰

Gene Telpner of the *Winnipeg Free Press* contacted Bob for his take on happenings in New York, and Bob said, “We’ve had a fabulous engagement here with sell-out crowds every night, a record for the Persian room. Our new record album has sold out of its first printing and is getting a real play on the big stations all over the States. Enzo has a fantastic following here, people have flown in

by chartered planes from all over. Jubilee Records plan to record the Carnegie Hall concert live on October 19. There are a lot of big things in store for Enzo, and he will keep you posted as things develop.”⁶¹ In his typical humble fashion, Bob saw this success as Enzo’s success—he did not see, as the *Variety* writer did, his own important contribution to the performance.

Fans in Winnipeg were waiting in excitement to see how their hometown heroes (Enzo was an honorary Winnipegger to many) did in the Big Apple, on the most prestigious stage—well, there were a handful of “faithful supporters” from Manitoba who made the trek to New York to experience the event first hand.⁶² When the *Variety* review came out, it was much more favourable than the last one had been, saying that Stuarti had proven himself on the concert stage, and then also praising McMullin, who, he said, “controlled the 30-piece orchestra with dexterity becoming the Italian-born tenor’s powerful pipes. Conductor McMullin, who also arranged some of the music for this concert, is adept and proficient on the podium.”⁶³ Back in Alberta, *The Lethbridge Herald* printed a rather lengthy piece extolling the local boy, whose mother “still lives at Raymond,” sharing in the glory of an Alberta export’s Carnegie Hall experience.⁶⁴ In Winnipeg, the local paper was warning, “Don’t be surprised if maestro McMullin leaves Winnipeg before too long for bigger things down east.”⁶⁵ Would success at Carnegie Hall lure Bob into relocating to New York City?

Bob and Film Scoring

Bob was committed to staying in Canada. In a 1965 interview with *Canadian Composer*, he said: “The brain drain to the United States is a bad thing. It reduces our chances of arriving at a distinctive Canadian art form.”⁶⁶ He had no regrets about living and working in Winnipeg, where he was busy doing the many musical things he loved in a place where his family had put down roots. Bob could depend on Winnipeg, and “whatever the musical function, whatever the style of music, Winnipeg long ago learned that it can always depend on Bob McMullin.”⁶⁷ Bob had no regrets about living and working in Winnipeg, but he did have one unfulfilled wish. He told Dennis O’Neill, the interviewer, “If I could write my own ticket, I would like to specialize in writing scores for films and television shows. Good scores add immeasurably to the enjoyment of a play or a film, and audiences learn to appreciate better music almost subliminally. To write a good score you must be able to describe locations and situations musically, to make your notes paint a picture to coincide with the visual action. I have never found any two plays exactly alike—their music must always be unique and distinctive. A good score written for one play can never fit any other.”⁶⁸ Film scoring was the one musical accomplishment that Bob was yearning for, the only endeavour that might lure him away from Winnipeg.

The closest thing to film or television scoring that Bob had done to this point was scoring for radio plays, of which,



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Bob McMullin composing at his piano, February 1969.

as mentioned earlier, he would score 70 throughout his career. It would be a decade after the *Canadian Composer* interview before Bob's scoring wish would come true. By 1975, Bob had shown that there was much more to him than arrangements for half-hour music or variety shows. He had enjoyed his tremendous success collaborating with the Guess Who and the Winnipeg Symphony, with Doc Severinsen. Important people like Doc had commissioned works by Bob. The time was ripe for someone in the film or television industry to notice that Bob had a lot to offer in the way of scoring for film or television.

The opportunity came with *King of Kensington*. As *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Jimmy King boasted, a lot of Winnipeg talent was sought for this situation comedy: "Audrey Tadman is one of the principal writers, Bob McMullin is the musical director, and Helene Winston, whose first starring role was at Rainbow Stage 18 years ago, plays Mrs. King, the mother in the series."⁶⁹ *King of Kensington* ran for five years and 110 episodes, was syndicated in the United States, and got Bob's foot in the metaphorical door to television series music scoring. He began at this point to spend more time in Toronto, because the work necessitated it.

Other opportunities came Bob's way to score for television: *House of Pride*, *The Collaborators*, and *Sidestreet*. He also scored a dozen documentary films⁷⁰ and, according to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, three feature films, *On the Edge of the Ice Pack* (USA 1972), *Race Home to Die* (1973), and *The Shadow of the Hawk* (1976).⁷¹ The first two of these films have dropped into obscurity. *The Shadow of the Hawk*, despite its strong cast with then teen heartthrob Jan-Michael Vincent and Chief Dan George in starring roles, did not do well at the box office, though it is considered a cult classic today. Only this film of the three has any sort of IMDB presence, and can still be purchased.

Bob's Legacy

In 1954, Bob's hometown paper, the *Raymond Recorder* noted that "sometime he will do an opera."⁷² Sometime eventually

came, and Bob ventured to Weyburn, Saskatchewan, where, in collaboration with his friend Ernie Mutimer, a writer from CBC, they produced an operetta, *Cannington's Manners*, which played Weyburn for several years. It was while in Saskatchewan pursuing his interests in this endeavour, that Bob died unexpectedly on 3 January 1995.

At his passing, there were many friends who paid tribute to him. For example, long-time friend Cor Godri, who in 1995 was the treasurer of the Winnipeg Musicians' Association, described Bob this way, "The man had a tremendous musical ear. He was a very pleasant, very tactful person with a good sense of humor. He was extremely human. He understood people."⁷³ "He was a gentleman and a gentle man," said Rainbow Stage veteran Cliff Gardner, "He was enormously talented, but he never had an ego problem. He was always part of the team."⁷⁴

This article's intent was to present an overview of Bob McMullin's life and legacy; to call attention to a career that had great impact on music not only in Winnipeg, but in Canada and farther afield. Many of Bob's accomplishments have not been included in this article; much more could be written. This man from humble beginnings, who lacked formal musical education beyond his one year of piano lessons as a youth, has been described as a "fabulous musician" who was "very conscientious about doing a good job. He was more of an introvert ... he never talked about his accomplishments."⁷⁵ Bob ended his musical career and his life by becoming "one of Winnipeg's most celebrated composers and conductors."⁷⁶ Robert McMullin was a self-effacing musician, but a proud Winnipegger and a proud Canadian. ☞

Notes

1. Oswald, Brad. "Rainbow Stage Longtime Director Dies on Vacation." *Winnipeg Free Press*, 5 January 1995.
2. Gordon, Kent. "McMullin no Ivory Tower Musician." *Edmonton Journal*, 16 January 1995, p. B3.
3. Eames, Ruby Isabel. "History of Wesley Witt McMullin." <http://www.familysearch.org>, accessed 1 April 2017.
4. "News Notes." *Raymond Recorder*, 24 January 1941, p. 2.
5. Email correspondence to the author from Patricia M. "Pat" Cooper, 1 April 2017.
6. Flight Lieutenant Edward A. Kirkwood, who was bandmaster of the Central Band of the Royal Canadian Air Force from 1942–1951, at which time he was appointed Supervisor of Music, RCAF. See *Ottawa Journal*, 17 March 1951, p. 25.
7. Letter from Bob McMullin, stationed in Ontario, to his brother Nolan, living in Alberta. The letter is undated, but assumed by the family to have been written in 1943 or 1944 based on internal evidence. A copy of the letter was furnished to the author by Ronald McMullin of Raymond, Alberta, the son of Nolan McMullin.
8. *Ibid.*
9. O'Neill, Dennis H. "Versatility in Winnipeg." *Canadian Composer*, 4 December 1965, p. 4.
10. "Prairie Regional Schedule." *CBC Times*, 13–19 April 1952, p. 3.
11. Letter from Robert McMullin, dated 14 February 1946, and mailed to his brother Nolan in Idaho. A copy of the letter was given to the author by Ronald McMullin of Raymond, Alberta, Nolan McMullin's son.

Remembering Bob McMullin

12. Arthur Benjamin spent the war years, 1939–1946, headquartered in Vancouver; however, his move to England came in 1946, the same year that Bob returned to Canada from England; so this plan would not have worked anyway. See <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/arthur-benjamin-emc/>
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18. "Bob McMullin of Raymond Stars as Composer-Conductor." *The Lethbridge Herald*, 17 November 1956, p. 16.
19. "Did you know?" *Raymond Recorder*, 15 January 1954, p. 4.
20. Email to the author from Patricia M. "Pat" Cooper, Bob's daughter, dated 26 March 2017.
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23. "CBC Winnipeg to Dramatize Play by Western Author." *Winnipeg Free Press*, 2 October 1956, p. 10.
24. O'Neill, Dennis H. "Versatility in Winnipeg." *Canadian Composer* 4, December 1965, p. 4.
25. "Television Highlights." *Winnipeg Free Press*, 18 May 1957, p. 37.
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27. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
30. Jenie, Ken. "Lenny Breau—Georgia on my mind." *Whiteboard Journal*, 6 October 2014. <http://www.whiteboardjournal.com/blog/18561/lenny-breau-georgia-on-my-mind-from-a-touch-of-jazz/> (accessed 3 April 2017)
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33. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
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38. "Bob McMullin." *The Gateway*, 5 February 1974, p. 8.
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