

Ezra Wenner

KR: So today is August 9, 2018. We're here in Allentown at Wenner Hall, and my name is Kate Ranieri. I'm interviewing Ezra Wenner. Is it Wenner, is that right?

EW: Mm-hmm.

KR: If you could just for me state your name and your birth date, I would appreciate that.

EW: Ezra Wenner, August 4, 1927.

KR: A belated happy birthday.

EW: Thank you. (laughter)

KR: [02:00] And thank you very much for giving us of your time to let us hear from you and your experiences with the band. I would like to start, though, by asking you how you got into music back in the day when you were what age, and how young were you, what got you interested in music, and then we'll kind of move through how you got into the band.

EW: Well, I started playing in May of 1938. I was in what was then South Whitehall High School, which eventually became part of Parkland School. But at the end of the school year my fifth grade, they had school instruments that were available, and at the end of the year there was a trombone and a baritone that was available. Well, I didn't know what a baritone was, but I knew what a trombone was,

[03:00] because I had an uncle that played trombone. So that's how I selected playing trombone. I played there for two years, then we moved into Allentown in 1940. Of course, when we moved, I had to leave the trombone at South Whitehall, so when we moved I didn't have a horn. It just so happens when I started -- what was it, eighth grade in Central Junior High School, the band director happened to be my homeroom teacher. And I don't know how he knew that I had played before, but somehow we got to talking, and he encouraged me to go and get a horn. So I went and bought a horn, my first brand new horn, for [04:00] \$45. I played in the school band for eighth and ninth grade, and at the end of the ninth grade, the band director thought I was well enough to play a solo. So I played my first solo at the spring concert of ninth grade. After that, the summer of 1941, the band director happened to be a member of the Marine band in Allentown, so he asked if I would come and join the Marine band. So I played with them for one summer season, and I played solos with them. And in [05:00] the fall of 1942, I joined the Allentown Band and joined as soloist. In those days, you soloed at most concerts. We had kind of a core band, and we had about three or four regular soloists, so you would solo quite a bit during the year. I did that. I was soloist for over 50 years with

the band. I was section leader for over 60 years, and in 2015 they named the band hall Ezra Wenner Hall. (laughs) As far as the composition of the band's concerned, when I [06:00] first joined, we had roughly about 40 members. But as I mentioned, it was a core band, and you played every job. Today the roster is into the sixties, and we still go with 35-40 members on a job, and the one thing nice about today, we have depth in all of the sections. So you get a chance to take off, you have someone that can replace you who is still capable. A lot of our players are band directors, school band directors and so forth, and with that, of course, and being that during their schooling they've learned all the instruments of the band, so [07:00] it made it nice that we can shift people around in the band if someone can't make it for whatever reason. So we do shift people around in the band. I think the most obvious change over the years since I first joined the band is that in the late 1970s, we started to admit women into the band. Up until that point, we had no women. The only woman we had was a harp player, which was similar to what John Philip Sousa had. We patterned the band after Sousa, so that's the way his band was -- all men, but they did have a harp player that was a woman. [08:00] As far as the band's schedule is concerned, when I joined the band, most of our

jobs were church or Sunday school picnics, and a lot of it was out in Berks or Lancaster county. It seems that we lived on the bus all summer. We did a lot of afternoon and evening concerts, so it was a long day, and our season basically was from Memorial Day until Labor Day. Today, our schedule is basically from March into December, which is a lot better. It keeps the band more active all through the year. We do different [09:00] kind of concerts today. We do the youth concerts, which they bus students. Usually I think it ranges from maybe fifth to eighth grade, something like that. But we do two concerts down at Symphony Hall, and it's surprising. We have 1,200 kids in the audience, and you can hear a pin drop. They're just blown away. They've never heard anything like this before, so they're really a good audience. We also do what we call a Side-by-Side concert, which we get some of the best players from high schools throughout the area. They come in and sit in with the band. The first portion the band just plays, and the second portion [10:00] we have the students come in and play along with us. We have played at Carnegie Hall in New York City a number of times. We've played at the Kennedy Center in Washington, and we've done four European tours. The band still maintains quite a good schedule, 40-50 engagements a year, which is pretty good.

The attendance has not significantly dropped. We still get very good attendance at West Park and a lot of other places, and when we go out of town we get good attendance. When we go out of town, we really get enthusiastic audiences, because, [11:00] you know, this area is known as America's Band City, and most areas don't have bands like this. So we come to an area that they don't have this type of entertainment, and they really, really enjoy the band. The makeup of the band, we constantly have new young players coming in, maybe even high school age or college age, very capable players, and that, of course, helps the band to continue through, so what I say is long live the Allentown Band. (laughs)

KR: Thank you. Of course. [12:00] So the band was not your only job?

EW: No. No, I played in many different organizations. I played in the symphony for about 50 years. I did a lot of dance work with dance bands, a lot of show work, local theater work, did a lot of circuses, ice shows -- let's see, what else? Maybe brass groups, that type. So I've played about everything except rock. (laughs)

KR: That's a lot. Let's see. Do you have any questions at all?

SFM: Just briefly, you mentioned ice shows. Do you ever [13:00] remember there being an ice show at Muhlenberg, maybe in the '50s?

EW: Where'd they hold it?

SFM: In Memorial Hall, apparently.

EW: No, I don't remember doing an ice show there. I remember doing an ice show down at Symphony Hall, which they flooded the stage to do the ice show. I don't remember doing any at Muhlenberg.

SFM: Apparently they flooded the basketball court. Yeah, I just learned that.

EW: Yeah, they can do that. Well, they do that now at the PPL Center. They bring in, you know, even ice hockey or whatever. So they can do that.

SFM: And I guess my other question, more seriously, is having been with the band for such a span, how does Ron differ, what has he continued, what has he changed in the 40 years that he's been the band director?

EW: In the 40 years that he's [14:00] been a director?

SFM: But he was involved before that.

EW: Yeah. I think the most obvious thing is we do a lot more difficult music than we did years ago, which a lot of the new music that's coming out is very contemporary and has a lot of key changes, a lot of meter changes, and so it's a

lot more difficult music than we would attempt to do years ago, which, of course, like I mentioned, we have clientele that a lot of them are music teachers and, you know, have a background in music. When I first joined the band, I don't know if there were any music teachers in it. Most of them they just kind of picked up an instrument and learned it and then played. So our programs [15:00] are a lot more varied than they used to be. When I joined the band, we kind of had a format. You did an overture, you did a solo, and then you did a couple other numbers, where now we'll do a concert with a theme to it. And most of our concerts are not duplicated. Most of the concerts during the year are just for that concert. We don't duplicate programs that often.

KR: So when you were talking about the more sophisticated, a little more complicated music they're playing now, what was your reaction? I'm assuming you were with Johan de Meij. His music, was that more difficult, do you think?

EW: I didn't understand your --

KR: The composer that was your guest composer for the Fourth of July, [16:00] was that considered difficult?

EW: When you first played it, it was kind of difficult, but it all kind of fell into place. And that's true with most of the music, you know. You have to play it a little bit and

kind of get into it, but after a while it all makes sense.

(laughs)

KR: That was a good concert.

EW: Thank you.

KR: Thank you. Do you have any questions? I have one question for you. But if you have on --

TONY: No, go ahead.

KR: Where do you see the band going in the future? Like, do you see it continuing as it is or maybe some big seismic shift or just staying the course?

EW: Well, I think it will basically stay as it is [17:00] now. I'm sure new things will come along, and we'll be doing them, but I don't see a real drastic change. Of course, you can't tell in 20 years what's going to happen.

TONY: There's one I was kicking around, but I think he answered it earlier.

KR: All right. Well, Ezra, thank you so very much. I really appreciate it. You were so organized. (laughter) You did your homework, that's wonderful.

EW: Well, I tried to follow your outline.

KR: Well, thank you.

EW: It gave me something to talk about.

KR: I really appreciate your time and your story. I understand that you're the senior in this organization now, is that right?

EW: Mm-hmm. This is my [18:00] 76th year. I beat Burt [Myers?]. He had 70.

KR: Oh, Myers (inaudible). Go Ezra. (laughter)

SFM: The harp player, they just had their 69th. At 69, I think.

EW: Who did?

KR: The harp player.

EW: She had 67, 69, somewhere in there. Yeah. Yeah, she held the title for a while until Bert retired.

KR: Go Allentown Band. Thank you very much.

EW: Thank you.

SFM: Thank you. [18:45]

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