

Free!

Volume 1
Number 1 *Free!*

Article 36

2-1973

Alexander's Bands

Paul Holley
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/free>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1973 Student Board of Publications, University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

Holley, Paul (1973) "Alexander's Bands," *Free!*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 36.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/free/vol1/iss1/36>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Free! by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Alexander's Bands



by
Paul Holley

Blinding spotlights, intense heat, a howling P.A. system; play an encore, pack away the instruments and drive most of the night with little rest only to do it all again. Ashley Alexander knows this, the world of the professional musician playing one-night stands, well.

Alexander, 36, director of UNI Jazz Bands I and II and the Panther Marching Band, is in his first year at UNI after serving as an instructor at North Texas State University, Denton, Texas. Supplementing his fifteen years of teaching have been countless hours of playing trumpet and trombone professionally.

Seated in his momento-cluttered office, Ashley Alexander relates a number of anecdotes and personal views on his experiences in the professional world, in his native Oklahoma accent. The entire atmosphere surrounding him seems to be filled with music, perhaps because he was literally brought up on it.

"I started playing dances when I was eight and by the time I was ten or twelve, I could hold my own with a small combo. I worked with my dad's band until I was in about ninth grade and then I went to work for other groups. When I was a freshman in high school, my dad ran out of trombone players, so he brought one home and that's what I had to play

that year. After practically threatening to leave home, I finally agreed to play trombone if I could continue on trumpet."

"Dad's group was a forerunner of the groups that are working on the road today like 'Up With People.' Augmented with four or five high school students our family travelled every summer for about 60 days. We travelled all over the United States extensively, like every state in the Union five or six times. I'd travelled extensively by the time I was out of high school. We played fairs, dinner clubs, Lion's Clubs, Rotary Clubs, and schools. Our unit was set up in two ways: we did a swing program and a religious program. At night, we performed in churches. This did two things: it gave us the evening meal and a place to stay. We slept anyplace where there was a floor or benches. We probably had the first camper ever built. It was a camper truck frame we built ourselves on the back of a 1946 Dodge."

"We travelled first in one truck and later in two cars. We had the first wooden body station wagon Chrysler built in 1952. It was a nine passenger job and we were featured in their magazine."

These first experiences put Ashley Alexander into professional music. Later, he used it as a tool to earn money while in high school and college.

"My first major step came in Stillwater, Oklahoma. There was a big dance band there called "The Varsitonians" that was featured on a coast-to-coast broadcast on ABC. They were a big dance band right after World War II, and I wanted in it so bad that I could just taste it, but the guy in the trombone chair was very good and had no intention of leaving. So the tenor sax and clarinet chair opened and I got in on that. I wasn't primarily a sax player but I was good enough to get by and as soon as a chair opened up, I scooted up to the back row. I worked with that band while I was going through high school. They played a couple of nights a week in Stillwater and I lived in Perry which was twenty-five miles away.

"I worked with a lot of show bands, did a lot of rodeos, worked with a Dutch band, a German band, and circus bands." Ashley Alexander named several celebrities he has worked with in concerts and recording sessions, including Billy May, Stan Kenton, Tommy Sands, Elvis Presley, Bob Hope, and Jerry Van Dyke. He confesses that as much as he has enjoyed playing professionally, he wouldn't want a steady diet of it.

"The professional world as a lot of people know it, doesn't really exist. It's shown many times as very glamorous and extremely interesting—which it is, it's very interesting—but it's so physically demanding because of its travelling and moving so much that you can't survive very long."

"It's great to intersperse it so you can keep current and both play and teach. That's basically what I've always done. The majority of my professional work has been during summers or winters while I was living in an area where I could get loose and play shows during weekends."

According to Ashley Alexander, the disadvantages a professional musician faces today sometimes seem insurmountable. "The guys my age that have gone professionally all the way are practically ruined right now physically. A man just can't stand the pressures, the travel, and the time involved. The money's not good. You can't make a good living at it except for just a very few.

"All the studio jobs in California, New York City, and Chicago have been shut down. CBS in Chicago turned all their musicians loose about fifteen years ago. In New York City, NBC only holds about 20 or 25 men. They used to hold 70 or 80. There are no studios in L.A. that I know of. The big recording studios like RCA and Columbia had staff musicians, but now it's all done by contract making everybody free-lance. This means that either you've got so many jobs you can't take care of them or else you can't find one."

Although presently content to spend his Saturday nights at home instead of on the road, Alexander has managed to keep his feet wet in professional music by making annual appearances at a Dixieland festival held every summer in Odessa, Texas. The festival lasts a week and features 20 to 25 of America's top Dixieland artists. He also recorded an album of Dixieland (a style of music he enjoys playing) in Texas last year.

As a new instructor in UNI's Music Department, Alexander has found that he is particularly fond of its size compared to the much larger North Texas State department.

"North Texas had about 1,200 music majors—four times more than you have here. It was so big that it was hard to become acquainted. There were so many kids that there was an oversupply of students. You were always weeding them out or refusing them admittance. I didn't like that. I'd rather be at a school where the supply and the student body is relatively stable. I don't like to be the bad guy who says, 'You can do it and you can't.' It's very difficult to make decisions you can sleep with when you're weeding out talent because different students mature at different rates. Some will be very good now but won't be as good next year and others will be mediocre now and next year will be a lot better. It's very easy to make a wrong decision that will affect somebody for life."

One of Alexander's first tasks was to reorganize the Panther Marching Band. "We had to start from scratch," he says, "But we've worked very hard and the students have put out great. We've really come a long ways." This fall, the band has been faced with mud, cold winds, and rain yet, with Alexander's help, has always come through.

This winter will find Ashley Alexander directing the concert band, a pep band, and the two jazz bands. Since his main musical interests lie in jazz and big band music, he readily discusses the activities he's planned for the two stage bands. Trips to Grundy Center, Iowa and Triton College in Illinois are planned for the first semester and the UNI Jazz Band will play host to many high school jazz bands at the annual Tall Corn Festival scheduled for January 4, 5, 6.

Says Alexander of the instrumental program, "We're trying to put together an active program that stays educational. We're primarily interested in educational aspects of musicianship and the building of a good strong program. It's learning experience with performing interspersed with it."

For the future, Alexander is certain he won't be going back to full-time professionalism for awhile because, as he says, "I'm about a summer and a dissertation from getting my doctorate and I'd like to finish that."

However, he admits to getting "itchy" occasionally for playing professionally. Presently, he says he would like to spend some time with the jazz bands and individuals who indicate a desire to play professionally. Apparently this idea is important because he explains, "The area musicians will begin to depend more and more on this band (UNI) to supply players as it progresses. As the players become known and the band gets stronger, the area will begin to draw on this because they know that there are good players here."

From one-nighters to directing three bands, Ashley Alexander has been down a long road of experience in his lifetime which he is now sharing with students.