

Benny Powell
*True Labrador
Storyteller*

Labrador

Life

Vol. 12 No. 1

Winter 2018

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Reviving a rich history

Nain Brass Band releases debut album

story by Mark Turner

The Nain Brass Band celebrated the release of its debut recording at the Moravian Church in Nain on August 8. The occasion was as heartfelt as it was dignified. Along with remarks and prayers from Nunatsiavut President Johannes Lampe, readings on

the history of the band from trumpeter Mary “Binky” Andersen and a dedication to deceased band member, Gordon “Junior” Obed, the band gave moving performances of 11 selections from its 14-song release.

After closing with a commanding rendition of “God Be With You Till We Meet Again” accompanied by the audience, the band formed a receiving line at

the door of the church, extending welcome and expressing gratitude to all present. It was an event 241 years in the making.

For Mary Andersen and fellow-trumpeter Darlene Holwell, the importance of the occasion is profound.

“This history of the brass band is rich,” says Andersen. “We found the love of music when the (Moravian) mis-

sionaries came over to discover us and our ways of knowing. Our intellectual people learned quickly and adapted to the music which we play today.”

Holwell continues the historical thread: “I think the album is important so our youth can learn to play for us when we’re elders. The current brass band members can play for special occasions and for our elders to listen to it today. But we are also showing the world that we are committed in reviving our traditional music.”

Written evidence suggests that this tradition can be traced as far back as 1776, when the Moravian missionary Jens Haven recorded in the Nain Station Diary that “for the first time in Labrador, Easter was celebrated in Nain in the traditional Moravian manner with the playing of French horns and the dawn service at the burial ground.”

Haven did not indicate who was playing these instruments, but 45 years later, missionary Benjamin Kohlmeister observed that Moravian music had become an Inuit affair. Reflecting on his work in Okak, Nain and Hopedale, he noted that the Inuit “delight to join in hymns, of which they easily learn the tunes. Many of the women and children having sweet voices, their singing is very delightful and affecting. Many of them show great capacity for learning to play upon any musical instrument. Violins have been introduced, and French horns, and a few of them accompany the voices with great precision and devotional effect.”

Some time after Kohlmeister’s remarks (it is difficult to know precisely when), the wind instruments formed a separate ensemble that began to perform outside the walls of the church. As early as 1853, a band made up of trombones greeted the mission ship, *Harmony*, in Hopedale and in 1873 a trombone band featured prominently in the dedication ceremonies for the new church at Zoar. As Holwell suggests, the band was a key feature of community life in the Moravian communities of Northern Labrador.

“The brass band played during spe-



Nain Brass Band during the 2016 Inuit Studies Conference. (Photo by Ossie Michelin). OPPOSITE: Playing on the rooftop of the Nain church. (Photo by Tom Gordon)

cial occasions such as 50th birthdays, Young Men and Women’s Day, Widow’s Day, Christmas morning and New Year’s. The band also welcomed and played during arrivals and departures of ships. They even played when Hebron, Nutak and other northern communities had to relocate because they were forced by the government.”

For Inuit and visitors alike, these bands made an indelible impression. In the long record provided by the Moravian *Periodical Accounts*, missionaries frequently comment on these ensembles, often describing the ways in which they enhance significant community events. A sense of awe runs through this commentary. For many correspondents, there is something familiar about these bands: their instruments, their repertoire, and the types of occasions they perform for. But something is fundamentally different about the *tradition*.

“I see myself really when I was younger,” reflects Holwell. “I used to watch the Nain Brass Band pass my house during an Easter occasion. I can see myself at that age.

“Not only that it makes me think of the elders that are here today and that have passed on but loved to listen to us

perform. I guess it really reminds me of what it was like in the past. To have a CD now it’s really showing that we still can have this. This is the future of the Nain Brass Band.”

In the long history of Nunatsiavut’s brass bands, there have been other recordings, but this is the first to be directed by Labrador Inuit themselves.

“The album came together because of a need to document our culture,” explains Andersen. “We revived the brass band because people lost the passion for our musical abilities. But we set an example to say we don’t want it to die out. We want to be proud and send waves of powerful sound back into our ceremonies.”

The revival and the album are closely related. In the last years of the twentieth century, the tradition faded. But with significant supports from the International Grenfell Association and Nunatsiavut Government, the bands have recently witnessed a revival.

“In 2013, the Nunatsiavummiut were invited to attend meetings and practices to revive the tradition. Looking back at our practices, we’ve come a long way,” Holwell explains.

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Howell's comment should be taken literally. Since re-forming, the Nain Brass Band has appeared in venues as diverse as the Torngat Mountains; Herrnhut, Germany; Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik; and St. John's, NL.

Through these performances, they have taken the traditional, ambassadorial function of the brass bands to a new level. Where once they welcomed visitors to their communities, they now bring their tradition to the rest of the world. Because of this, the need for a recording became apparent. But so too did the opportunity to produce such a recording.

Work began on this album during the summer of 2016 in Nain when the band started discussing how it would like a recording to sound. This was a complex task. The band realized that the best opportunity to create such a recording was in St. John's during the 2016 Inuit Studies Conference. The members spent time preparing test recordings at indoor and outdoor venues throughout Nain to deliberate over which venues accurately represented the band's sound. As a result of those discussions, it was determined that the Great Hall in Queen's College at Memorial University provided the most suitable environment and the album was recorded there on October 9, 2016. After the recording was finished, the band spent months combing over each track, listening for inconsistencies and errors and providing recording engineer Stephen Lilly with detailed notes. The final product bears witness to the band's precise attention to detail. For Holwell, though, this degree of precision is part of the musical tradition.

"Playing the music is different. You really have to be able to know the songs by listening to them in church in order to play them. In the past, you see Inuit play their instruments without their music in front of them. They played it by ear."

Sometimes, however, knowing itself is not good enough.

"For example, we play a song called, "Hosianna." We can play the first few chords but the rest doesn't seem right to our tradition. We're still learning from our elders."

The album also provides a way to ensure continuity of tradition, adds Holwell.

"I think the album is important so our youth can learn to play for us when we're elders, the current brass band members can play for special occasions and for our elders to listen to it today. With it, we show the world that we are committed to reviving our traditional music."

For Andersen, as for the rest of the band, the significance of this album is also defined by the legacy of its deceased members. Reflecting on the recent passing of euphonist Karrie Obed, she says: "This album is important because of the legacy of Mister Obed. His life on earth was a gift to everyone. He was the most naturally talented man I ever met. He kept our band strong and kept our music strong. He guided us and believed in our passion. He believed that we can play from the heart and express ourselves through music. When we played we couldn't speak but only smile within our hearts afterwards. Mister Obed will always be in my heart."

The album embodies this legacy.



Album cover.

"This album is precious to me as it captures a time when we were the beautiful strong band with booming music with every note and breath," adds Andersen. "To share the album with everyone is a privilege. We can hear our history in real time today."

Andersen's last point reveals something about the significance of both the brass band tradition and the album itself. Both are history in real time. And, for Holwell and Andersen, being able to reflect on history in real time has led them to think about what comes next in that history.

"I would like the band to start playing with the Nain Choir," adds Holwell. "We do not often play together. I also want to see more members join so more youth are invited to travel the world like we have within the last few years. I also want another album where other songs can be recorded and documented before it's too late. But most of all, I'd like for the band to have access to more instruments so more players can join."

Andersen strikes a more defiant tone.

"Our band needs to stay strong. I want community based learning. I want adequate funding to pair up young people to our band members and instill in them what Mister Obed instilled in me. The band needs to be acknowledged without competing to fight to express ourselves through music. The loss of the band happened before and we need to maintain and sustain our very important tradition without the threat of being underfunded and overlooked. This band is precious to our unique Nunatsiavut culture. Around Inuit Nunangat they don't have our brass band tradition. This goes back to Hebron and Okak and Nutak days. When our elders hear us, they feel their inner child hearing the same beautiful tune of "Jesus Tessiunga", or "Inniksalik Gudipta Iglunga," that was played in their hometowns. Our band needs to continue without feeling threatened."