

B. W. Duncan
1940 - 2016
An Inspirational Passion for Music



At his musically-filled funeral in the picturesque village of Elmley Castle in Worcestershire, a former employee and good friend described the varied and unusual life of B W Duncan as being almost the 'stuff movies are made of'. And so it seems. Born in London in the early stages of the Second World War, as the Phoney War was about to descend into the Blitz, Brian William Duncan spent the early part of his childhood in Perthshire - the Scottish home where his ancestors hailed from. Returning to London in the bleak aftermath of the war, he showed early academic promise winning a scholarship to St Aloysius College (the alma mater of Sir George Martin and Peter Sellers, no less, and where BWD was a direct contemporary of Sir Michael Gambon) only to leave early in search of opportunities and sunshine abroad; both of which he duly found along the warmer shores of southern California, moving there in 1958.

Having previously been introduced to classical music - in particular the French Impressionist composers, along with Delius, Bax, and Vaughn Williams - by his housemaster and lifelong friend / mentor Eric Trevannion Smith, it was in Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles where Brian developed one of the abiding passions of his life:

Modern Jazz. Quincy Jones's 'This Is How I Feel About Jazz', Bill Evans & Cannonball Adderley's 'Know What I Mean?', and the 1961 collaboration between Adderley and a young Nancy Wilson being favourites in his early vinyl collection. At this time, Brian was also a regular at the popular LA jazz venue, the 'Lighthouse' on Hermosa Beach where he saw, amongst others, Charlie Byrd, Seldon Powell, Chet Baker, Bud Shank, the Jazz Crusaders and his favourite vocalist Carmen McRae, often with his then girlfriend the LA-based British actress and singer Georgia Brown.

After a surprisingly successful spell in the US Army, fortuitously leaving just before the Vietnam draft, the travel bug brought him this time to de Gaulle's Paris in the mid 1960s. After work initially as a tennis coach at a private American ladies college, it was here that he hit upon his unlikely career success of educational management, where he found himself particularly adept at administration and being a leader of men (and women) - young and old alike. These years in Paris were particularly happy ones, where Brian continued to indulge his love of music, and jazz in particular. Seeing the likes of Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Thelonious Monk, Milt Jackson, and Blossom Dearie in concert, the summer months were punctuated by frequent trips to the Côte d'Azur and Italian riviera with a succession of girlfriends, including Victoria Milland, daughter of 'Dial M for Murder' Hollywood star Ray Milland.

After leaving Paris and further exploits first in North Africa and latterly Australia where he lived for a further eighteen months, Brian Duncan finally returned to London after fifteen years of exile in the early 1970s, now possessing the soft, mid-Atlantic burr by which his voice was known. Taking an administration post at another private American college in Knightsbridge, it was here that he met and married a young Swiss linguist Monica, who had previously been living in New York, with whom he went on to have three children over the following decade. This also marked the beginning of a 25 year association with the international school that subsequently moved out of London to fine country house premises and where B W Duncan made his name as an internationally acclaimed, award-winning Headmaster in the 1980s and 90s, before retiring somewhat prematurely at the end of that decade. During this time he also served as a highly respected chairman of ISST (indulging his love of sport), as well as being one of the earliest trailblazers for the International Baccalaureate (IB) a quarter of a century before it was applauded by the educational establishment.

During these years his passion for music - jazz and classical alike - continued unabated and what had begun as a small collection of vinyl kept in a suitcase in southern California and then a couple of wardrobes in Paris, rose to become a collection of over

20,000 LPs, 78s, and subsequently CDs at its height - much to the consternation of his long suffering wife who ended up surrendering more and more of the family home to her husband's passion. Sundays during these years were typically spent in the Barn at Merlin's Cave in the nearby Buckinghamshire village of Chalfont St Giles, where Brian, together with family and friends, was privileged to see the remaining cream of the British modern jazz scene including the likes of Jim Mullen, Peter King, Spike Robinson, Allan Ganley, and Bill LeSage, to name but a few. The late Dick Morrissey was a regular and a particular favourite.

In 2000 Brian moved to a rambling Georgian house in the handsome Worcestershire market town of Pershore where his passion for collecting music continued unimpeded. Now with increased time on his hands, this was combined with a love of classic and sports cars, art, and a quite remarkable book and film library. He was viewed as something of a local character with his twice daily military patrols around the market squares and side streets looking for hidden treasures in second hand bookshops, antique emporiums, and picking up turntables, Wharfdale speakers, or any similarly worthy piece of quality hi-fi equipment that someone was so foolishly chucking out. He could also be seen (and heard) early mornings speeding around the countryside, enjoying the tranquil beauty of the surrounding Cotswolds and Malvern Hills, either in his 1980s lipstick-red Porsche cabriolet or 1958 Daimler Dart - with quite possibly Charlie Parker's famed 'Jam Session' or indeed Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde' blaring from the speakers, depending how the mood took him.

Brian William Duncan's love of music was utterly genuine, inspired, and broad; embracing almost all genres within the Jazz, Classical, Easy Listening, Latin, and Brazilian categories. He loathed labels and the narrowness represented by some in the jazz fraternity. He could just as easily be listening to Dave Brubeck, Charlie Parker with Strings, and Hank Mobley, as Shostakovich, Janacek, and Debussy, as Burt Bacharach, Johnny Mathis, and Jose Feliciano. Indeed, one of his most treasured albums was Doc Severinsen with the Henry Mancini Orchestra playing contemporary songs of the early 1970s. Along with the pre-requisite Carols from Kings, no Duncan family Christmas was complete without the annual Tijuana Christmas 'Sound of Brass' album soundtrack; easily 15 years before it was similarly immortalised in the first Bridget Jones's Diary film outing with Colin Firth and Hugh Grant! In the difficult few weeks leading up to his death from cancer at the end of May 2016, he could be heard listening to the late Jacqueline Du Pre playing Elgar's Cello Concerto followed by 'Take Five: the Best of George Benson on CTI'.

And it is with the same infectious sense of humour, breadth of mind, and genuine love of music and vinyl that we hope you will enjoy his fine collection. After all, the late Canadian trumpeter and bandleader Maynard Ferguson famously said, 'there are only two types of music: good and bad'.

And what of his children? His elder daughter became an artist and married the only son of the 5th Lord Churston. His second daughter became an internationally respected doctor of linguistics at the University of London. And his son, a writer and broadcaster who proudly inherits his Father's passion for music - along with many of his CDs...

Benjamin Duncan (son)

Marylebone, June 2017