

THE BIG FINISH

Bruce Davis

St. Andrew's United Methodist Church

May 19/20, 2018

SUMMER OF '69

Bruce Davis & His Last Band

**Got my first real six-string
Bought it at the five-and-dime
Played it 'til my fingers bled
Was the summer of sixty-nine**

**Me and some guys from school
Had a band and we tried real hard
Jimmy quit, Jody got married
I should've known we'd never get far**

**Oh, when I look back now
That summer seemed to last forever
And if I had the choice
Yeah, I'd always wanna be there
Those were the best days of my life**

**Ain't no use in complaining
When you got a job to do
Spent my evenings down at the drive in
And that's where I met you**

**Standing on your mama's porch
You told me that you'd wait forever
Oh and when you held my hand
I knew that it was now or never
Those were the best days of my life**

**Man, we were killin' time, we were young and restless
We needed to unwind
I guess nothin' can last forever, forever, no**

And now the times are changin'
Look at everything that's come and gone
Sometimes when I play that old six-string
I think about you, wonder what went wrong

Standin' on your mama's porch
You told me that it'd last forever
Oh, and when you held my hand
I knew that it was now or never
Those were the best days of my life

To quote Peter, Paul and Mary, “My bags are packed, I’m ready to go.” The folk trio was leaving on a jet plane; Nancy and I will be in her Volkswagen Beetle.

Moving van comes on Friday. There won’t be near as much to load as there might have been. When Jesus sent his team on relocation, he told them to “take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt.” It hadn’t occurred to me taking staff was an option. Not even Charlene?

Nevertheless, Nancy and I committed to divest ourselves of a lot of stuff. Perhaps half of our combined libraries has been humped to the Half-Price book store (I’ve talked previously about that trauma); a Salvation Army truck hauled furniture away; clothes gleaned from the closets went to Goodwill; the lease on my Toyota Rav4 expired this month and I turned it in, so as to drive only one car east. Of all these partings, however, most sorrowful was selling my Ampeg B-15 flip top bass amplifier.

Brian Adams got his first real six-string from the “five-and- dime.” I got my first bass guitar and amp from Sears. Some guys at school were putting together a band. They had drums and guitars, but no bass.

Ironically (or perhaps fittingly--even, dare I say, providentially), my initial attraction to bass guitar had been at a church function, some kind of youth rally at the Goodwill headquarters building in downtown St. Louis. The program included a local band that

launched into “Time Won’t Let Me,” by the Outsiders. Listen for the bass run....

Time won't let me
Time won't let me
Time won't let me.....
Wait that long

As if that wasn’t cool enough, I could not help but notice: the bass had only four strings, played one string at a time. I could do that.

Short digression: The musical incompetence of garage band bass players would become a running joke. Next time you view Tom Hanks’ otherwise wonderful homage, “That Thing You Do,” stick around through the end credits. Only then do you realize the bass player doesn’t even merit a name. We know the others, left to right on the album cover, as Lenny, Guy and Jimmy; the fourth is so inconsequential as to be listed only as “The Bass Player.”

More insulting, this scene from the 2012 film, “Not Fade Away.”

The guys are assembling in the basement, going into a Bo Diddley beat... Here comes the bass player down the stairs... Keep your eyes on him....

What’s the joke, you ask? The poor guy’s lost on a song that **ONLY HAS TWO CHORDS!**

Before I could join a band, however, I would have to surmount religious objections: I was a preacher’s boy. The acoustic six-string had been one thing; going electric and joining one of these rock and roll bands would be quite another. My mother was again’ it. What will people think?

In what I would later realize was a genuine act of courage for a small-town Methodist pastor, my father intervened. As I recall, we made a deal that I’d pay for the Silvertone bass and amp out of money made in the hay fields.

The Neptunes were a hit, legends in a three-county area, making good money playing street dances and sock hops. If we were going

to keep up with the competition, we were going to have to upgrade our equipment. The Silvertone was scrapped, replaced by a Fender Jazz Bass. That was a no-brainer. The choice of amplifier was more problematic.

My dad had taken me to a music store in St. Louis. The salesman highly recommended what he introduced as an Ampeg B-15. My teenage self was not impressed. It was kind of a squat thing, downright drab, particularly with the top flipped. And weren't tube amplifiers a thing of the past? Not that I understood exactly what tubes did; I just knew they added to the overall appearance of datedness.

My eye was drawn to another amp, this one with bright and shiny controls and entirely modern solid state technology. I'll take that one. Powered it up for our first gig and felt really cool, until blowing a speaker halfway through the show. Took it back to the store, got it fixed; next show, the thing blew up again. Grrr.

And so it came to pass that I wound up with the Ampeg after all, kind of surprised when people who actually knew their way around music equipment would come up at a gig to take an admiring look. I would learn the Ampeg B-15 was in fact much-esteemed. The Motown sound was grounded by James Jamerson playing a Fender Jazz Bass through an Ampeg B-15.

Took it with me to the University of Missouri in Columbia, but the times were a'changin' yet again. By the late '60s, quality of sound mattered less than volume, and the Ampeg wasn't really built for Led Zeppelin. Bought a used Vox Super Beatle, standing almost as tall as I was. I remember bringing it back to the freshman dorm room. 'Twas was late, theoretically quiet time, but I couldn't wait to go through a few runs, so I powered up and plugged in. The Vox volume dial did not differentiate between high and low; I put it at what I thought was low volume, but when I hit the first note, I thought the room was going to explode. Boom!

But I kept the Ampeg and it's well that I did, as the Super Beatle was itself subject to equipment malfunction. It became a moot point my junior year. I was working the front desk at a motel, the job

description including assorted handyman stuff. I'm about the least handy man I know and in the course of trying to relight a hot water heater, the thing flamed up on me, toasting my right hand. The band found another bass player, but fell apart soon after.

Took the bass and amp with me to seminary. This was the mid-70s. It wouldn't have occurred to me that an electric instrument might be heard in church. On the other hand. One of my classmates had a twelve-string guitar.

What was okay in the church of that time was "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore" and acoustic stuff like that there. Coming in high on the list of stupidest things I've done, comparable to Esau trading his birthright for a bowl of soup, I traded the Jazz Bass for the 12-string.

Not that the 12-string wasn't used to good purpose. It was. But I have a hard enough time keeping this six string in tune, twelve strings being exponentially more challenging. And as far as relative value of the two instruments, I don't even want to think about it...

Through it all, I held on to the Ampeg, wiring it to my turntable, playing Springsteen at a volume of "stand up & let it shoot right through you!"

Circa 1990, I dared bring the Ampeg B-15 to Kirkwood United Methodist Church in St. Louis, to see if the congregation might be ready to amp things up a bit. Started with baby steps, closing a service with an electrified "When The Saints Go Marching In." I know that sounds tame, but I remember congregants sitting there open mouthed, not knowing what to think, when this old couple, Norm and Jan Potashnik, seated in the far back pew to my right, got up and started dancing, others joining them in what quickly turned into a conga line.

I'll hear fellow clergy say their congregations won't abide anything new. I'll ask, "Have you tried?"

Anyway, the Ampeg was back in business, the band becoming a featured part of the ministry. I'd come into possession of a second-hand Fender bass; then, when a genuinely accomplished bass player

offered his services, I moved over to keyboards, also run through the B-15. I can play three chords on a whole lot of stuff.

The Ampeg put in a lot of hours in Springfield, Missouri, featured in not one but two new worship services. We built a contemporary hour around the considerable musical gifts of a brilliant high school youth, name of Susan Marek, who has gone on to make a career in music. In the Confirmation service of a few weeks past, I said the strongest youth programs feature a few highly committed young people who, in turn, attract others. Through Susan, we met Lucas Grabeel, who played drums in the contemporary hour. Lucas has gone on to a fine career in Hollywood, credits including “High School Musical.”

UDIO: ALAN JACKSON, SOFTLY AND TENDERLY, :00- slide change

Then on Sunday evenings, the Ampeg would get a very different kind of usage, via what I called The Bible and Bluegrass Service. Wish I could find a picture of Don Sharp, but am not surprised that I can't. He was a quiet, unassuming man of the Ozark hills, a few years older than myself, I suppose, possessed of slight build, gray beard and an astonishing gift for guitar.

Don and I shared an appreciation for the old gospel standards, “Softly and Tenderly” being a particular favorite. Most evenings the music was just him and me, the Ampeg tubes producing just the right bass sound to back the humble virtuoso.

The Ampeg came north with me to Omaha, only to find I wouldn't have much use for it. The newly opened sanctuary featured a state-of-the-art sound system, with capacity to run keyboards and guitars, including bass, through the house board.

A short digression. When Nancy and I were offered the appointment to St. Andrew's, everyone, from the bishop to the Staff-Parish Committee, bragged on the music ministry. I was going to love the St. Andrew's music ministry. Only to get an e-mail while still in Springfield that the music director had been fired and the choir was quitting the church.

Not the whole choir, as it turned out. I have such a deep appreciation for those who stayed, Pam Fleury being the glue that held the program together. Among the departed was a professional-level bass player, him having been among a number of musicians getting paid for play. At 5.2 million dollars in debt, St. Andrew's was not going to have money to be hiring replacements.

Our first weekend at St. Andrew's, September 2005, it wasn't preaching before a new congregation that intimidated me. What intimidated me was the prospect of playing bass guitar behind Leon Adams on keyboard. I would come to appreciate that Leon, now living in Steilacoom, Washington, is a genuine musical genius, in the Ray Charles mode. All I knew that first weekend was that I was WAY out of my depths.

I'd only been in town a few days; there'd been no time to practice. I was back into a Fender Jazz Bass by then and figured if nothing else I could stand up here for visual effect, go through the fingering motions with the volume turned down.

And what I remember vividly, all these years later, is how kind Leon was that first Sunday morning, greeting me with a big smile, encouraging me to plug in and play along. Leon would later try to teach me to read charts, only to finally give up--good-natured about it, even then.

With the bass running through the house system, the Ampeg was relegated to my office, getting some occasional work as a practice amp, but not much more than that. It might sit for months without being powered up, which, as Bill Wert would remind me, is most definitely not good for tubes.

It had crossed my mind I might as well try to sell it. The motive was not wholly pecuniary. This was a vintage piece of equipment that deserved a better fate than gathering dust. On the other hand, the prospect of parting with the B-15 hurt my heart. The Ampeg and I had been through many adventures, going back to my own summers of the '60s, me and the guys from school, playing 'till my fingers bled, standing on Gilda Watson's porch.

Retirement brought the issue back into focus. Did it make any sense to move the Ampeg to Gettysburg? True, bands were prominent in the Civil War era, but you couldn't hardly march with an electric amplifier. Bob Tjarks and Tyler Scritchfield had alerted me to an online enterprise called Reverb, "the world's largest music gear website," confident I would find a buyer there.

I was astonished, frankly, at what vintage amps might sell for. I set a price that seemed to be mid-range for an aged Ampeg, posted photos, with a description. I wasn't trying to deceive anyone.

After a half century of being loaded and unloaded at such diverse venues as street dances, high school proms, Busch Stadium, polo matches, Annual Conference sessions of the United Methodist Church, Patio Pool in Wright City (swimming pools and electric amplifiers really don't mix unless you're into electrocution), tent revivals, county fairs, battles of the bands, etcetera, the Ampeg showed outward and visible signs of wear and tear.

However, the buyer should consider this: After fifty plus years, all the working parts, including tubes and speaker, were original. In all that time, the only repair had been to the power cord. The Neptunes were playing a dance at Wentzville High. Eddie Ragar hit a cymbal so hard that it came flying off the stand, severing my electric connection with guillotine precision. But with that one freak exception, the Ampeg B-15 had never spent so much as a day in the shop.

Still, it was a little hard to imagine someone was actually going to want to buy the thing, at least not at the price I was asking. That's me and my sweetie at a talent show fundraiser in St. Louis--"I Got You Babe," as I recall--the Ampeg behind her. Given all the memories associated with the B-15, I was sort of hoping I *wouldn't* get an offer; but in fact I received an inquiry from Chicago, a fellow named John McNeal, gushing over the prospect of gaining possession of a vintage Ampeg B-15.

To make a long story short, young Mr. McNeal offered to meet me in Des Moines for a personal handover. It pleased me greatly to meet the new owner. I had told him it was important to me that the Ampeg find a good home and John could not have been more gracious. A few days later, he sent a communication, assuring me he was “totally in love with the amp,” and “after firing it up it sounds great....” That meant a lot to me.

Another song from Christian folk, “You want to pass it on.” It felt right and good to have passed this cherished piece of equipment to a young enthusiast who appreciated its value. For that matter, as the song says, “That’s how it is with God’s love: you want to pass it on...”

Driving back from Des Moines that wintery Saturday, thinking on things come and gone, the Ampeg morphed into metaphor. A teaching of Jesus bubbled up, “Have you never read in the scriptures, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’?” Jesus, in turn, was quoting Psalm 118, which begins with the lyric heard earlier in this hour, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”

At verse 21, the Psalmist lifts this praise:

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

What might that have to do with a 50 year-old amplifier, you ask? Despite advice to the contrary, my 16 year-old self had initially rejected the Ampeg, not appreciating its worth. Give me the more shiny, trendy option. I got what I thought I wanted---only to have it blow up on me. Then a few years later, when I wanted something bigger and louder, that didn’t work out, either.

But what served me well, year after year, decade after decade, was that which I had originally rejected. Behold the Ampeg B-15. It hadn’t been much to look at when I bought it circa 1967; fifty years later, the leather handle had disintegrated, the chrome nameplate was catawampus, the outer shell all scratched up from being hauled hither and yon.

But such only amped up the metaphor, bringing to mind Old Testament prophecy that the Messianic cornerstone wasn’t going to be much to look at, either. Isaiah 53:2, “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him...”

This Jesus life was not my first choice, not at all what I thought I desired. But with what I had desired blowing up on me, doors slamming shut all around me, I saw this one door opening, with the sense I was being called through. Without having much of an idea where it might lead, I decided to give it a shot and see what happened. And this is what happened.

Among my favorite works of literature is Marilynne Robinson's, "Gilead," set in small town Iowa in the 1950s; her central character: the aging Rev. John Ames. Like me, John Ames is third generation clergy, his father and grandfather having preceded him at the church in Gilead.

The first Reverend Ames had been an abolitionist, riding with John Brown, despised by his son, John Ames' father, for having preached his congregants into the Civil War, the men getting killed, leaving a congregation of widows.

This third John Ames, in turn, had followed his father into the Gilead pulpit. No one is going to confuse the church in Gilead with St. Andrew's. The old house of worship has fallen into a state of disrepair and the aging Rev. Ames senses the congregation is waiting for him to either retire or die, whichever comes first, so they can build a new one.

I've thought of John Ames often this past year, particularly as I was clearing out my office, sorting through boxes of old sermons. While everything I've presented at St. Andrew's is on some kind of flash drive or disc, my pre-computer manuscripts were produced on a manual Underwood typewriter, revisions literally cut-and-pasted with scissors and scotch tape. I could identify with old John Ames when he writes:

My father always preached from notes, and I wrote my sermons out word for word. There are boxes of them in the attic, a few recent years of them in stacks in the closet. I've never gone back to see if they were worth anything, if I actually said anything. Pretty near my whole life's work is in those boxes, which is an amazing thing to reflect on.

Say, fifty sermons a year for forty-five years, not counting funerals and so on, of which there have been a great many. Two thousand two hundred and fifty. If they averaged thirty pages, that's sixty-seven thousand five hundred pages. Can that be right? I guess it is...

Say three hundred pages make a volume. Then I've written two hundred twenty-five books, which puts me up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity. That's amazing. I wrote almost all of it in the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true. And I'll tell you frankly, that was wonderful.

TYLER: VAMP ON THAT SUMMER OF '69 INTRO CHORD...

There is a certain sadness to the Brian Adams song. I'm thankful to have had my own summer of youth, playing with the rock and roll band, but exponentially more thankful that those were *not* the best days of my life. If the guy in the song had the choice, he'd always want to be back there? Like I said, it's kind of sad...

Nancy and I were given a choice thirteen years ago. I had sort of assumed we were going to spend the rest of our ministry in the Missouri Ozarks, which would have been swell. I had a hot-off-the press true crime book that would be of particular regional interest, with a solid idea for a follow up. Nancy was firmly established in her ministry, with a strong network of friends, both in the church and the community.

When Bishop Ann Sherer-Simpson called from Nebraska, we had a choice to make: stay where we were or take a leap of faith into a new adventure. And there's no place I would have rather been in this time of my life than St. Andrew's United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska.

On Confirmation Weekend, dozens of young people came to the lectern, one by one sharing their creeds, affirming the faith passed on to them through the generations. As I was leaving the building that morning, someone said that they'd like to hear my creed. I thought about that lot.

Back in seminary, the St. Paul School of Theology academic year was divided into trimesters. At the end of each term, we were to write a *credo*—as in creed, integrating the course of study into our personal belief system, capped off then by a Senior Credo. I suppose between the four papers, I've got about 80 pages of single space typed creed. I ran across those in the old boxes; I could read all eighty pages, I suppose, but it seemed more prudent to summarize.

Thinking on how I might approach that, I recalled a story about Karl Barth, one the preeminent academic theologians of the 20th century. Asked in his senior years to summarize his great theological learnings, Barth answered: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

In that spirit, I offer the following as my credo, a summary of what I have learned to be true in these past 44 years of parish ministry:

The wise man built his house upon the rock
 The wise man built his house upon the rock
 The wise man built his house upon the rock
 And the rains came tumbling down

The rains came down and the flood came up
 The rains came down and the flood came up
 The rains came down the floods came up
 But the house on the rock stood firm

The foolish man built his house upon the sand
 The foolish man built his house upon the sand
 The foolish man built his house upon the sand
 And the rains came tumbling down

The rains came down and the flood came up
 The rains came down and the flood came up
 The rains came down the floods came up
 And the house on the sand fell flat

So build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
 So build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
 So build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
 And the blessings will come down

The blessings come down as the prayers go up
 The blessings come down as the prayers go up
 The blessings come down as the prayers go up
 So build your house on the Lord.

When Nancy and I met St. Andrew's, there was legitimate concern this ministry, born of great dreams and visions, might itself go splat. 'Twas a perfect storm: 5.2 million dollars in debt, 25K a month paid to the bank in interest alone, talk of schism in the air, visions of foreclosure signs out front. It was entirely conceivable that St. Andrew's could be washed away.

But long before I got here, the congregation had made this the cornerstone: "To Share The Gospel of Jesus Christ"--and through it all, the house on the rock stood firm.

In our initial campaign to slay the debt monster, more than twelve years past, we developed this "footprints" logo—one that resonates on this occasion. William Faulkner wrote of the difference between a monument and a footprint. "A monument only says, 'at least I got this far,' where a footprint says, 'This is where I was when I moved again.'"

It pleases me greatly to be leaving St. Andrew's in full stride, the congregation moving forward at many and various levels, including the opening of the St. Andrew's Center for Kids; primed for the *coup de grace* on what's left on the debt (down to 62K); anticipating the coming of an accomplished new lead pastor, start date June 1; a terrific staff, lay leadership, and an outstanding menu of ministries in place. The congregation need not miss a step.

Brian Adams laments, “I guess nothing can last forever.” I beg to differ. Has it not been proven in our experience: “Forever God is faithful forever God is true, forever God is with us, Forever....” That’s the faith that has amplified my life these forty-four years, the faith that has sustained this congregation through times of trial and testing. Sing praise. Sing praise.

There’s much more I could say, but “time won’t let me,” so I’ll finish with this. At the culmination of “Sharing, Growing, Changing Lives,” spring of ’06, St. Andrew’s celebrated with a Heavenly Hoedown, and I can think of no better parting words than what Nancy and I shared on that occasion, the song of singing cowboy Roy Rogers and his beloved, Dale Evans:

**Happy trails to you, until we meet again.
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.
Happy trails to you, 'till we meet again.**

**Some trails are happy ones,
Others are blue.
It's the way you ride the trail that counts,
Here's a happy one for you.**

**Happy trails to you, until we meet again.
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.
Happy trails to you, 'till we meet again.**

BRD