

A Queen's Honour for Our Unique Musical Family

On 31st December 2020 it was officially announced that I have received an award from Her Majesty the Queen in the 2021 New Year Honours List. There are many categories, but mine was "Medallist of the Order of The British Empire for Services to People with Special Needs". It recognised my work as founder and CEO of The Music Man Project.



At the Royal Albert Hall, 2019

After 20 years teaching people with learning disabilities, this award has inspired me to campaign with even more vigour for accessible music education and inspirational performance opportunities for all. It is lovely to be personally commended, but the biggest reward is that it will open more doors to create even greater opportunities for us all in the future.

I accept the honour on behalf of our entire international family, from Music Man Projects across the UK to our overseas providers thousands of miles away in different continents. Many people and organisations have helped me on this journey - a journey that began in 1999 when I tutored a friend with Down's Syndrome and grew into a project with presence around the world that staged a spectacular concert at The Royal Albert Hall. I thank every member of our musical family: the students, regional directors, trustees, families, teachers, carers, volunteers, designers, filmmakers, photographers, fundraisers and audiences. I may be the Music Man, but I lead an extraordinary group of music men, women and children who inspire me to work harder every day.

My personal journey has been full of highs, lows and middles. My natural exuberance means that I usually only promote the highs as I believe positivity and happiness is the secret to learning. The lows have taught me more than the highs. I failed my grade 5 piano, failed auditions to enter music conservatoires, failed to get onto a Music Therapy course and failed the first time I auditioned for a TV show (I succeeded the second time though!). The list goes on, but I believe every failure sows the seed for future success. I try to invest in loss every time. In fact, nowadays I find failure highly motivating!

My parents instilled a self-belief which I still draw upon every time I face rejection. My whole family moved heaven and earth to support my musical development. They couldn't afford much but somehow got me a £50 piano from the local paper and paid for an hour of piano tuition every week. Despite always being an expressive performer, I started late, and so my technique and discipline was a little lacking as I progressed. I passed my piano grades very quickly (achieving Grade 8 by the time I was 14, having only started learning at the age of 11) but I always felt slightly behind other children who started much earlier. With mum and dad's determination I pushed

through, and thanks to inspirational teachers I reached the Junior Department of the Guildhall School of Music. It was my first and most important stepping stone. Despite feeling like the worst pianist in the building (I often hid in the Barbican to avoid being told off by my strict piano tutor!), I eventually found my spark as an improviser – something that most of my virtuosic peers struggled with. I went on to study with some amazing teachers at Kings College, London and the Royal Academy of Music. I felt equally intimidated in these elite and historic surroundings, but my Chinese piano teacher was patient and life changing. She valued what I *could* do and always told me I was tenacious! I also found my niche in musical analysis, eagerly pulling apart the music of famous composers to reveal how they achieved their masterpieces. With that education behind me, I felt secure in my musical knowledge but was still naïve and lacked understanding in leadership and accountability. That all changed after 11 years working at mainstream secondary school. When I left, I was the Deputy Headteacher and gained the qualification for headship. I learnt what can go right and what can go terribly wrong in leadership. I wouldn't change that experience for the world.

I obviously had all the encouragement I needed in my childhood, but it took a while for me to turn this in to true confidence. I can still hear mum telling my 12-year-old self , “You just show them David!” and my friend Colin from my amateur dramatic group shouting, “Give it bags of oomph David!”. Colin gave me my first opportunity to play in front of an audience. I entertained a group of elderly people who had suffered strokes. I realised in that moment that music had the power to change lives.

Throughout my life I have been blessed to have the love, support and guidance of many incredible people. All of them believed in education, believed in music and believed in me. Whether they are family, friends, teachers or other connections, I am grateful to them all. Collectively they taught me to make a positive difference in this world and to not be afraid of failure.

Everything changed in my life when I met Tony, my first ever student. Southend Mencap trusted me to teach a group in the early 2000s and then their General Manager Marc showed extraordinary belief and vision to employ me full-time in 2012. The rest is history!



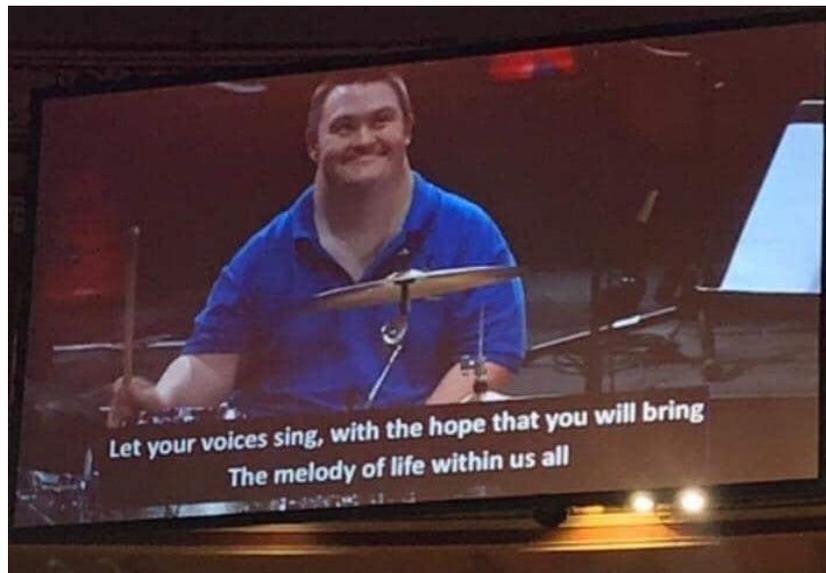
With Tony at the London Palladium, 2015

Our collaboration with the Salvation Army has been a great blessing. It helped us reach more people right across the UK and even led to the start of The Music Man Project in America. I believe our partnership is the perfect match of accessible music and faith for a community who so often gets left behind.



Music Man Project in the Philippines, 2020

I always hoped for a performance at the Royal Albert Hall and it took almost 2 decades to achieve. Duplicating my education service around the country and the rest of the world was beyond my wildest dreams. Having sought out similar services for my Churchill Fellowship, I can confidently say that The Music Man Project is uniquely distinguished by our original music, by the scale of our productions and by the global duplication of our teaching model. Most of all, we are an education service and not corrective music therapy. Our emphasis on performance as the purpose of our music-making remains the most vital motivation for us all. If pushed to identify the most fundamental ingredient of our family, it would be high expectation. I believe in myself and I believe in each and every one of our amazing musicians.



Dan, resident drummer at the Royal Albert Hall, 2019

In 2012 I was faced with the difficult decision to leave my secure job and embark on this new adventure. I was being guided down this path, but fear of the unknown was holding me back. Then I read this message from a parent of one of my Saturday music school students:

“For someone who would scream with fear when more than 4 people gathered in the room to someone who has sung solo in front of 1500 people is a gratitude that I can only bestow on David because he was the one who made this possible. I can only say that without David my daughter would still be sitting in the corner of the lounge

getting more fearful and frustrated with life, leading me into a deeper and darker place wondering if there was ever going to be any good come into hers or my life.”

It felt like a bolt from above. There was no way I could do anything else with my life than provide the same gift to as many people I could, in as many places I could, for as long as I could.

I have many dreams for the future. I would love for some of our more reflective and meaningful songs to be published by the Salvation Army, to be performed by people with or without disabilities in decades to come as a tribute to our work together. I would love to travel to many more overseas territories of the Salvation Army to support their incredible relief work and to connect vulnerable communities through our songs. I would love a purpose-built music facility like the amazing Daniel’s Music Foundation in New York. This would be our official headquarters and the only specialist music education and performance centre for people with disabilities in the country. I would love to return to the Royal Albert Hall with even more Music Man regions, and I would love to take some of our amazing musicians to perform on Broadway and to give a presentation at the United Nations.

In the words of our song titles:

“Have you ever stopped to think that if we join together and follow the magic of music, then you can have it all? There will be highs, lows and middles, but with peace and hope, we can make a difference, note by note. When united we stand, then together we are strong!”



Ruby at the Royal Albert Hall, 2019

With this *family* honour, I will double my efforts on behalf of musicians with learning disabilities, who I proudly describe as the best of humanity.

Peace and Hope everyone,

David Stanley BEM