

Interview with AK Best

CK: This is Cindy Kus interviewing A.K. Best for the first time on June 27th at the Alpena Public Library as part of the library's Oral History Program. A.K. was a music instructor and band director in Alpena before moving to Boulder, Colorado. He was honored for his role as an educator in a program put on by the Alpena Symphony Orchestra yesterday. And, ah, we are fortunate to have him here with us while he is in town, talking to us about his time in Alpena and the music department that he taught in. Thank you, A.K. for being here. Perhaps we can start out with you giving us a little background on yourself. How, how you, it is that you came to Alpena, where you came from.

AKB: First of all it's a pleasure to be here, Cindy. Ah, I spent 17 years here; some of the best years of my life were here. I raised three daughters here. It's a perfect place to raise daughters. I was lucky to have some wonderful students; highly talented students who made me look pretty good. I came here from Iowa. I was teaching in a small consolidated school near Des Moines, who were absorbing a rapid growth. The area they absorbed from, the parents were all at least one degree of college. Which made up 80% of my band program. My superintendent came to me one day and said, ah, "A.K., the Des Moines system is going to take back the housing development and you are gonna lose 80% of your program. I'll help you find a job. We don't want to see you go; but you need to know what it is going to be like." And he did. Signed up with a music teacher's placement agency out of Chicago, I looked at a few places, and Alpena sounded intriguing-the first County School system in the state. Dr. John Brubaker was the new superintendent and I liked what he had to say so I came up and interviewed.

CK: What year was this?

AKB: 1963, I think.

CK: There was so much going on at that time in history.

AB: Yeah, yeah. And that's how I got here. Ah, and I think I got the job mainly, not because I was such a good teacher, it was because part of my Masters Degree work was in music curriculum. I wrote music curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade that included instrumental and vocal music. It 's still being used to this day in the Des Moines Public School System.

CK: That's impressive.

AB: I'm really pleased with that. I recently learned that. Ah, then when I learned this was the first county-wide system in the state, and we had schools, in the, elementary schools in the county with no general music program, my music curriculum plan-beginning band was at the 9th grade level. String players were taking private lessons. At one time, and the program developed wonderfully, we had enough teachers,

enough teachers to cover all the elementaries, in general music and enough teachers to cover all the elementary in instrumental music. We had beginning band in the elementary, we had beginning orchestra in elementary, we had two junior highs. All those people who did all that wonderful work, sent those talented kids to me in a three-year high school. And I got to look really good! I had, I was on a white horse, on a rose-lined trail, and I loved what I was doing. And my kids loved being here. The teaching staff at that time, maybe it still is- the teaching staff at that time was the best I've ever experienced. The camaraderie in the teacher's lounge. There's the famous E House lounge, where we would go and try to insult each other and give comebacks. We developed a camaraderie there that was a tight-knit group and everybody supported everybody.

CK: And this was at the, at this point...

AKB: The new high school.

CK: Ok, so that would have been after you were here for a few years.

AKB: Oh yeah, yeah. I started out at what was the old high school and they had a music building, which was interesting because it was built for broadcast. The vocal room was on one end and the band room was on the other. In between the two rooms was 18 inches of sand.

CK: Oh my goodness.

AKB: And it was wired to broadcast, radio broadcast. There were microphone hookups in the wall.

CK: What did they use it for?

AKB: I don't know that they ever used it; but it was built for that.

CK: That's fascinating!

AKB: The acoustics...and then it, it got dozed down. And I thought, "That's a sad thing," it could have been used by the radio station maybe. Who knows? Ah....

CK: So you- ok, so that was, you began there...

AKB: Sort of a layered explanation of how I got here.

CK: Right.

AKB: And then, we had the new high school. And one of the best lines I've ever heard came from Bill Finch, the superin, ah, the principal of the High School at the time. The day we moved into the new high school, a very strenuous day for any

administrator. How are things gonna go? What's gonna fall apart? What did we forget? What didn't we do? I met Bill Finch in the hallway in front of his office and he looked at me and he says, "Well, no sense worrying about it, nothing's going to turn out right anyway." I shook his hand and said, "Welcome to the club." It went smooth. They had done a wonderful job of preparing the students and the staff in getting everything ready and the shift was like getting into a brand new car. And we had a wonderful program there, ah-I was the band director and orchestra director. We had a choir director.

CK: Who was that?

AKB: Emmet Heiberg, at he time.

CK: Ok.

AKB: Ah. Then we had two bands, three bands, I think, an orchestra, and I started a stage band. So, I was, those, I had five or six classes, straight, no break. We did, however, were granted 20 minutes for lunch. *Twenty minutes to inhale lunch and go back to work.*

CK: Well, let's go back to the stage band, because I'm just, could you tell me what that is?

AKB: Its ah, you've heard the big bands on the, on the radio?

CK: Mmhuh.

AKB: Gene Krupa, Woody Herman, Les Brown? Big band- big dance band type.

CK: Oh that's great. And was that a first?

AKB: Yes it was. And I did it because not everybody in music is going to be a classical musician. There are kids who are interested in jazz and pop and dance. And if you're going to be in the public school music, you have to remember what you are doing. You're preparing kids to go off into life and say, "I like that piece of music because..." and give a valid reason. That's why every football game was a different set of music, memorized. A different set of charts, memorized. We gave, we used to call it a Christmas concert, but then it was illegal. We called it "Winter Concert". I tried to slip in the same music; because there were a lot of Christians. And then we did what I call my "Educational Concert". And we played heavy music. We played symphonies that were transcribed for band. I wanted the students to understand what Beethoven was like. Understand, what's Bach like. We hit every era of music by the time they graduated. You can't do that anymore; because now we have contests and festivals. And no one goes to those and try to get a 2. You want to get a 1. So you learn one half-time show in three songs. And you do that all through the football season.

CK: So there range is so much smaller.

AKB: During the concert season, they learn really well, three songs. When they leave, the whole purpose, it seems to me- music is not a competitive sport.

CK: No, no it's not, but it has become that it sounds like.

AKB: It has. And it drives me silly because the contests drive the community support, they drive the interest in the program, the board gives them the money, the trophy case gets a trophy, the band director gets the laurels, what do the kids get? *No* music education.

CK: And that's tragic.

AKB: It is tragic! And there are some things as a music teacher you can control; but there are many things you cannot. One's the millage. You can hobnob for that; you can play politic for that. You're pretty much not in control, until you open the door and your kids come into your rehearsal room, you're in control for that hour. As far as the program's concerned, everybody else is in control. I have a very good friend who's a fly fisherman and a writer, who writes wonderful books, and his great line about control is "all the wrong people are in charge."

CK: Well,

AKB: So that's kind of a brief layered, philosophical rant. And I wanted to say that, because I am sorry to see where music education is going.

CK: Is that across the board? We're talking about Alpena right now; but is that...

AKB: Nationwide. It started in the South where they don't have snow. They can have the marching band out all year.

CK: Okay.

AKB: The original festivals and contests didn't originate in schools. It was the city bands in Europe who used to have contests to see which town had the best band. I can understand that.

CK: mmhuh.

AKB: That's a good idea. Because they've already had music education. They understand what they're doing. We are graduating kids now who have never heard or who've never played a Beethoven Symphony. Even though it was written for symphony, you can buy the transcription for band. That's the only way that kids can get to play 'em. They've never played Norman Dello Jollo, another famous American composer. So how can we say we have a music education, as the mayor so boldly

stated? The school is providing a music education for all of its students- it's not. And that's, that's sad; because I remember vividly what it was...and I understand, music always gets kicked around and music program's get sliced; but they never go away. This one is almost gone. No orchestra- that's inconceivable to me. Not every kid wants to play a trumpet or a clarinet, there are some who would really like to learn to play the damned violin. Why would you, why would anybody say, "this little group of students is less important than everybody else." That's discrimination. In it's highest, most terrible form. You kids don't count because you want to take music. Come on! When you turn on your TV tonight you're gonna hear music, and those kids were in the public schools someplace at one time. Not everybody can go or afford to go to Interlochen. Which, by the way, is marvelous if you can do it.

CK: I was excited to see yesterday that there were a couple of ...

AKB: Yes and two of them are students of my former student- Mike Moors was their teacher.

CK: Yes. And he was one of your students?

AKB: He was one of my students. I've had, Mike wasn't one of these, but I've had students who were expelled from school, but never missed a band rehearsal. When they walked in the door, I looked the other way and then I didn't have to say I saw them. And they've all come back to me and thanked me. I'm going to break down a little here. They thanked me for keeping them in school, because of the band. Damn it! Why would you take that away from a student? Even one- let alone a class full? Every- when I went to school at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, it was drilled into us that every child is unique. No one was more unique than the other.

CK: Yes. What you are saying makes so much sense to me. I'm a teacher myself- we all learn differently, we all approach life differently,

AKB: Yes.

CK: And why should, why should, one person have more opportunity than anyone else?

AKB: Yeah, it should be, that's unfair, it's discriminatory. And we've been a discriminatory nation since the beginning. We came in and called the most civilized people in the universe savages...and tried to slaughter 'em all. Ah, I have a thing I like to say when somebody gets in trouble, it is that everybody should be made to play third trombone at least once in there life; because if you take the third trombone out, you don't have a complete band.

CK: Ok.

AKB: Or a last chair clarinet...it has to be challenged, equally, to the first chair clarinet. Every child is unique. That's a thin, wavy, gray line the music instructor or the director has to walk in order to challenge every child in his group- be it vocal or instrumental, and not more than another.

CK: Understood.

AKB: Not different than the math class. There's somebody who's gonna ace everything that math teacher throws at 'em. There's gonna be someone in the background that doesn't understand how to add two and two. It's the teacher's job to get both of them to succeed- to their level. Education tries to categorize and put in little niches students. The famous bell curve thing- well you've got to have this many students succeeding, this many students...well you don't have to have failing students! There's the big failure in that concept. You have to have students who can succeed at their level. I have a grandson who is wired a little different in the brain. And the doctor says, "nothing wrong with that... we just need to figure out how he is wired and he'll succeed." It's been done.

Education is so fascinating if you just remember the one line I was taught in '55..."every child is unique." They each have their own needs and they're not alike.

CK: Jim Hart, told me that when he came to, when you came to Alpena, I don't know who was here first...

AKB: They read in the paper that I was from Drake University. They had left to come here the year before we got to Drake. So when we moved here, we bought, we rented a little house on Lewis Street, and we came from Iowa, my wife is from Iowa.

CK: Also a music teacher.

AKB: Yes, a very fine flautist. And she plays ah, she's played piano for church choirs and accompanied music kids at their festivals. And, ah, she loves to play old pop tunes, because she can remember the melody after she's done. Ah, we rented a house on Lewis Street and the landlady says, "Now don't sleep late on July 4th, you'll miss half of summer."

CK: That's a good one.

AKB: And I thought, "Well, what are we looking forward to here?"

Jim Hart was the first person in the front door. He knocked on the door, and I says, "Come on in!"

He says, "I'm Jim Hart, I'm a Drake graduate."

"Oh, god, I'm glad to see you!"

So from that time on, Jim and I and Jan and Mary Louise, we've been the closest of friends. Mary Louise and Jan talk at least once a month, for at least an hour on the phone. So they were there at the thing, I'm going to try to see them tonight for dinner.

CK: Excellent.

AKB: There are some connections you cannot sever, no matter how long you've been gone. Ah, we're not blood relatives, but we are some kind of relatives.

CK: There is one thing that I was, that I am impressed by now, because I know you've been away here, I think you said 1980?

AKB: 1980.

CK: Thirty-five years?

AKB: Yeah.

CK: And yet, I feel like you are so passionate about something that was almost a former lifetime ago.

AKB: Yeah. It was my life. When I gave my first clarinet lesson to a beginning student, I was smitten. I was trying to explain something about playing the instrument to this little girl who's in fifth grade; she was wearing Kenny braces. And I worked with her for a long time, it was back in Des Moines. When I see the eyes go "hah" ...I'm caught! When the eyes go "blink" ... "I see!" You know the feeling, the thought.

One day in the lesson, I said, "Can you wiggle one of those toes?"

She said, "I don't think so."

And I said, "Well, look down at your big toe, can you make it go up?"

"Oh yeah, I can."

I said, "Can you make it go down?" I said, "You can keep time!"

This is a tearjerker for me. When that girl graduated, she walked across stage without her Kenny sticks, and she came over and says, "Thanks for teaching me to wiggle my toe." *There's* the thrill of being a teacher.

CK: Yeah.

AKB: She was a good clarinet player, because that's *all* she could do. She could compete with everybody else in the school...with what they could do. She was on a level with...before the clarinet she was looked over, bypassed. Before she got the clarinet, she was nothing. With the clarinet, she became something and had pride in herself. She learned how to walk. She learned how to run...in her life. That's, that's-

CK: That is the joy...

AKB: That's what the arts do.

CK: I'm just curious. Did she choose the clarinet?

AKB: She did.

CK: She did.

AKB: She and her father. He came in with her, and the clarinet in the case and said, "Do you think you could teach my daughter to play?"

I said, "She's got two hands, ten fingers- of course. Smile for me." And I looked at her lips and I said, "She's going to have perfect lips for the embouchure. Are you willing to try this?"

"I, I would love..."

And I looked at the little girl and I smiled, "You and I are going to go places." I had her like that (snaps fingers). I can connect with kids, ah...

CK: You have a gift.

AKB: You don't teach someone how to teach you're born with it. Mike Moors is a good example. When he was going to high school, he always looked surly and awfully mad. He looked like he was ready to hit somebody in the mouth. The first time I heard him play clarinet, I thought, "oh my god...this deserves extra care." And I teased him and I insulted him and I kept winking at him; because I wanted the kids to think I was...He picked up on that wink *and he just soared!* It's like taking a bird and putting him out the window and watching him fly. He became such a fine clarinetist- that I compare him to my granddaughter who used to come and play her contest pieces for us. Jan would play the piano accompaniment and I would, she said, "Papa, I want you to listen."

I let her play three or four...I said, "Stop! Three or four notes I'd stop her.

"What'd I do?"

I said, "You didn't tell me anything. Why do you think the composer wrote those first three notes? There must have been a purpose. Find a purpose-make those notes sing. Sing to me."

That got to be our thing. Every time she played a solo I'd look at her and she'd look at me and smile, and she says- I knew what she was thinking- "I'm going to sing to you."

She was in the stage band in a little school in Colorado, she played clarinet very well, she was headed for Julliard, until she heard what music can do to an autistic child. It changed her life. She was in this stage band and then junior year she stood up and took a sax solo, on a tenor sax and I thought, "Oh my god." On that horrible horn, she could play. So when she was a senior, I said, "Are you having a jazz concert this year?"

She says, "Yes."

I said "You've seen my horn."

She says, "Yes."

It's very rare they don't make 'em anymore. Very heavy tenor sax. You can drill holes in the wall of the dance hall. I said, "I'm going to loan you my tenor in perpetuity if you'll play it in the jazz concert. They came to the song, came and stood up and assumed the pose and proceeded to play things that I didn't think she had in her. I was shaken to the core.

And after the concert I said, "Kaitlyn, where did that come from?"

She said, "Papa, I was singing to you!"

CK: Oh, that's great. What a great story.

AKB: But this is the thing I try to do with every student. It's not me, it's not the school- it's the *kid* who deserves the help. You present the material. Let them discover what it really is. You're not teaching. You're allowing discovery. And that is learning.

CK: Now most of the students – music was an elective.

AKB: Yeah, you didn't have to take it.

CK: They didn't have to take it. So were the majority of kids who were in those classes there because they liked music, they played an instrument, their parents wanted them to be in it.

AKB: The parents who wanted them to be in it, those kids, most of them stayed; but a lot of them were being forced. Most of the kids *wanted* to be. Someone in the family was playing an instrument and they would like to. So they started beginning band or beginning orch, which we don't have anymore, beginning orchestra. Ah, and the teachers we had at that time were elementary instrumental teachers who were really good!

CK: Yes.

AKB: They inspired those kids. You can't force a kid to practice, you can inspire them to practice. You can require them to practice, and they won't. But if you can inspire them that's the key word in this whole process. Inspiring discovery. What's behind the door? Have you ever have that feeling?

CK: Mmhuh.

AKB: That's inspirational. Curiosity.

CK: Wanting to go further and know more. Yes.

AKB: So you can't say, "Here's the lesson plan for today and you better get it right." What inspiration is there in that? "Here's another test we are going to have. We better get this right. The school is depending on the money. "

Who benefits? Not the student. It takes more time out of the classroom where he can't make any discoveries. No inspiration occurs taking a test. The joke used to be you'd have a true/false test and just mark them all true, you'd get half of them right. (laughter)

There was a student...ah, Boulder is the home of the Colorado University. And NCAR is there, the National Bureau of Standards is there. They are learning how to make computers, they're learning how to make spaceships, they're learning how to make satellites...Boulder's been getting a lot of press for high-tech stuff. There's a lot of high-tech people in Boulder.

CK: Ok.

AKB: A lot of their kids are really inspired. They're really inspired for something to escape to. It's the music. It's the music. I once attended a rehearsal at the U of M, when a guy who is long gone, named Bill Rivelli, who was fondly referred to as Napoleon. He demanded so much. But he had some genius things. I went to this rehearsal and he turned to the audience and he says, "I want it quiet out there!" Papers were rustling, "I said, I want it quiet out there!" Finally, you could have heard a pin drop. He turned to the band and said, "I want it quiet back here." Finally, it was like you were in an empty room. He turned around and softly said, "the next thing you hear will be music."

CK: Oh that's beautiful.

AKB: That took some thought. But he's absolutely right. Music comes from nowhere. Someone has, and the only perfect sound actually, is the human voice.

CK: I never thought about that.

AKB: First came the drum, and then came the ram's horn and then came violins, and all this stuff...and woodwinds and brass.... all trying to imitate some range of the human voice. My wife sang in a acapella choir in Boulder for several years. They got so good, somebody submitted a CD to Carnegie Hall. They immediately wrote back and said, "We would like Jubilate Sacred Singers to present a concert at Carnegie Hall. One way to get to Carnegie Hall is to sing pretty good in a group. They presented the only all-vocal choir concert ever. At the end of it they got five standing ovations. And it was all without accompaniment. Some of the people in that choir took their first music class in a high school someplace...in a high school choir, or a junior high school choir.

CK: That inspiration came...

AK: So I talked...I was up on stage afterward and they were going to kick me off. And I said, "No, no. no! My wife's in the choir"

"Oh, okay."

"You know what sir? That's the best concert we've ever had here and I've been working here twenty years. The director moved on and the choir's not quite what it was; but what an experience.

CK: What an experience!

AKB: I got to Carnegie Hall, not through my playing; but through my marriage.
(laughs)

CK: So, I want, I want to go back, I want to flip back to when you came...because your background was in curriculum...

AK: Yep, and performance.

CK: Did you...were you responsible for the music curriculum at the high school?

AK: Yes, here.

CK: Was there a set curriculum already ...

AK: No!

CK: ...were you able to just go with it?

AK: I kind of went with it and enlarged it. Ah, at the high school when I got here was beginning band, intermediate band, and orchestra. And so, there was no feeder program. And that's the first thing I worked on- get the music started in the elementary schools. We need general music out there. Not everybody's gonna play a horn, some are going to want to sing. But they need to know what music is, and that they, by gosh, can do it. So we had a cadre of teachers who did the general music classes and another cadre who did the instrumental. And then they came up into the junior high- Besser became two junior highs. Ah, and it was a beautiful thing to watch grow. All my theories worked. Didn't please everybody...I didn't have to do much, I let the kids' performance do the talking.

CK: Mmhuh.

AKB: I was out in the community a lot because like you said earlier, music is an elective- I wanted to be involved in as many things as possible that had to do with music., because I knew people who came to those meetings and those events would always be asking questions. I wanted to answer them. I want to tell you- Cindy- here's what I think a clarinet should know by the time he's a senior if he can. Always followed by if he can or if she can. That's the only way the public can understand. I think that's pretty simple.

CK: Yes, you're kind of doing PR.

AK: Yeah, And, ah, somebody called me legendary the other day- ah that's a bit humbling. I just was having a helluva good time. I said earlier, I was on a white horse on a rose path; because of the quality of students I got.

CK: Well I was going to bring that up today, the legen- no, he called you the Legend- the Legend! And I thought, "Oh my gosh; because that, he, that was not the first time, perhaps it was the first time I heard those words; but in the time that I've been doing this, it's been short, I have heard your name referred to many times as the person who made the difference, and the inspiration that you gave people who continue to play music. And I think, I'm not sure what more can you say than that. It's such a, um, not, it's not just a tribute to you; but it speaks to what you, the insights you had.

AK: I lived my father essentially. I'm going to have to use the "N" word. I'll just say the "N" word. My father played banjo, and he had a little dance band called Kenny Serenaders back in the '20's.

CK: In Iowa?

AKB: In Iowa. And one day when I was about eight years old, I said, "How'd you learn to play the banjo?"

He said, "I rode my horse to town every Saturday." Town is seven miles away. He said, "I took less...listen carefully to what I'm gonna say now. I took lessons from a guy by the name of Freddy Bell. Everybody else called him the "N" word Bell. He had no idea what he taught me with those few words. It didn't matter to him. What mattered to him was he got taught... by a man who wanted to teach. When I finally got to- I went with no prejudicial ideas because there were no blacks in the area- I go to Drake; I had to go early for band rehearsal. They assign me to my room, I'll never forget, room 211 in the Student Union. I open the door with my key and there stands a black man from Nigeria.

"Welcome to my room Ahchee!"

I almost *fainted*. This man was so big. Then he held out his hand. *He accepted me* into his room. It's a complete 180 from most people's experience. As I got known at Drake as a pretty good sax player, and a decent human being, there's a wonderful black man, a piano player, who his span of fingers was an octave and tenth- and octave and two notes. Huge long fingers, he was also a wonderful clarinetist. When school's out in the spring, he would drive to Florida and play on the cruise boats. He came to me one day and he said, "A.K., ah, he took out his watch and said, I'll never get down there with my watch. I'll be stopped by a trooper and he'll say, 'hey boy, where'd you get that watch," and take it. I was trusted, and that was humbling. Somehow or other, my spirit has blessed me... with the ability...to let people see inside...whatever's in there. Ah, I feel very blessed. I feel *very* blessed to have the experiences I've had in my life.

I had the most humbling experience I've ever, maybe this will give you an idea of what went on in the band room. Every year I would say to the kids, "This room is little Switzerland...what goes on in here stays in here, my office door is always open, you can come to me and talk about anything, but we never shut the office door. That's the rule, I'll never change it. "

So, things went on like that every year, I had a lot of good kids graduate, a lot of talks in the office, "Well my mother, well my father..." You get closer to some of those kids than their own parents.

And then, then I left, I started, and I went to Colorado and started a new career, I'm travelling all over the country and parts of the world, talking about fly-tying and fly-fishing. And I was down in Arkansas, Bull Shores - I think it's Arkansas, Bull Shoals Dam to make a discussion and a Power Point presentation about fly-fishing in Colorado. And this guy, tall guy, with a little bit of curly hair, its pretty white, came up and he had a blue yearbook in his hand. And he opened it up and he says, " You know who that drummer is?" and I said, "Yeah, that's Sue Wilson." He said, " You know who that guy standing next to her is? I said, " Oh that's Terry Briggs."

(Extends his hand), "Hi." He said, "I need to come and tell you I did two tours of duty in Vietnam- you saved my life. You made me laugh because when I remember all the dumb stuff you said during rehearsal that kept us alert." He said, "It kept my sanity."

He's a pretty good drummer, not outstanding. But that's another thrill of teaching.

CK: Yes.

AKB: You make, you make impacts that you don't realize and all the sudden, all these years later, I think, "Oh my god, I hope I didn't ruin anybody!" (Laughs) Because there's a yin and a yang in there someplace. I haven't heard that yet...just knock on wood.

It was ah, I would like to go back and do it all over again.

CK: What would you do..

AKB: It's such a good ride.

CK: Would you do anything different?

AKB: No.

CK: No

AKB: No. I worked my way through Drake playing in dance bands. Ah, I travelled all over the state...

CK: And saxophone was you're...

AKB: Saxophone was my state, my horn. Excuse me. I played ballrooms on the edges of the surrounding states, we played the Moose Lodge, the Elk Lodge, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, anybody who would pay the money, we'd play. At one time I played on four different bands out of Des Moines because I could sight read. Put music in front of me, I can play it. Make me stand up and take a jazz course; I'm lost. I learned to read, not to play jazz. So, my only claim to fame as a musician is, the big bands were touring the country playing ballrooms, back in the fifties. In Des Moines at the time, we had a musician's club called the Venetian Room. And, Iowa's still a dry state, you had to go to the liquor store and in front of god and the governor, sign your name that you bought a fifth of whiskey for what. You'd take it to the club; they'd put a paper on it with your number. And then you go to the club and you say I want number 355, and they charged you 25 cents for an ice cube to buy your own whiskey back. So this was the deal in those days. Woody Herman's in town. In the jam sessions after all these dance bands came... there was always a jam session at the Venetian Room afterwards. They'd last 'til five or six o'clock in the morning. And the local musicians would go sit in with the pros. It was wonderful to watch this. I

just glowed. There's hardly anybody left, and I'm there alone, Jan couldn't come, because she had class early or something, anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm sitting at the bar alone, nursing my very last drink, because I know I can't have another, I can't drive home. Woody Herman comes and sits down right next to me! And I almost fainted.

He said, "Are you A.K. Best?"

I said, "Yes, and by the way the band was really tight tonight."

He said, "Well, thank you. Are you A.K. Best?"

I said, "Yes."

"I hear you can sight read."

I said, "Yes I can."

"Do you want a job?"

I almost fainted. And I said, "Mr. Herman..."

"Don't call me...Woody."

"I just got my damned draft notice two weeks ago."

He said, "Well, good luck with that," and left.

And for years I hated the U.S. Government, Army, the U.S. Government and anybody connected with control. You ruined my life. I could have been a big band musician. Until some years later it occurred to me they're all dead. Everybody in that band no longer...I'm still around. They all got into drugs big time.

The kids today think they discovered marijuana. The musicians two hundred thousand years ago discovered it first. They knew it felt good to smoke it. I tried it once, and it was disappointing. My little cigars do more. So...

CK: So do you- do you play at all anymore?

AKB: When I left Alpena, I burned out, I was so burned out. I resigned before the school's over. I finished the year, and put on the best concert of my life called "The Collage." There was a downbeat and a cutoff. That was...everybody sang. I was Mr. Music. We had three performance instrumentals and two performance choirs. I had seventy-two public performances that year, counting all the games. That's a bit much. And I was used up. I couldn't see anything going forward, it was all down hill from there.

CK: Who took your place?

AKB: Jon Nichols. I think he stayed a year. So I couldn't listen to live music for two years. My wife got a job in the middle school teaching instrumental...

CK: In Boulder?

AKB: ... in Boulder and I couldn't go. I used to love to listen to music and fitz around in my shop, working with tools and wood and stuff, tying flies. I couldn't even listen to music doing that.

CK: What kind of music would you listen to?

AKB: I loved jazz and Mozart and Bach, yeah, it's peaceful and expiring, inspiring. Ah, it took two years before I could listen. What fixed it for me though was my daughter Alisha was going to CU at the time, and the CU City Band needed an interim director. And they were having tryouts. Alisha twisted my arm so hard I had to agree. "Dad, do it for me!" (laughter)

So I agreed. And I got over my burnout by conducting the Boulder City Band and they are all music professionals. I got my kicks back.

CK: Well I understand you are kind, you're a legend again in a fly-fishing. You're , you're fairly well known-yes?

AKB: Yeah, I'm a legend in a lot of people's minds.

CK: Well, that's where it begins, yeah.

AKB: I'm a Iowa farm boy who learned how to play the saxophone and then I couldn't afford to buy flies when I came to Alpena, so I taught myself how to tie 'em. Because the one's I could buy didn't look like anything I was seeing on the water.

CK: Did you ever take any of the classes here?

AKB: No.

CK: You did it all by yourself?

AKB: I bought a fly and got a, a razor blade and carefully cut the thread to see how it was made. What goes on first and I soon learned that you start from one end and you work your way to the other. Ah, I was tying flies when I was in Alpena, there's a little Orvis shop down in Oscoda. I was tying flies for myself, because I couldn't afford to buy 'em. The little Orvis shop down in Oscoda, and the guy heard, I stopped... My advertising gimmick was to have a bunch of flies in my car and I'd stop

with all the fly shops and I'd look to see what they were out of. I say, "I see you don't have any number 14 Adams."

"No."

"Would you like to see the ones I have in the car?" Well, what's he gonna say, "No!"

I'd bring 'em and he'd say, "Oh, I'll take those. What about these, are those for sale?"

"Yeah."

New account. He called me one day, and he said "A.K. I went to the Au Sable yesterday and forgot my fly floatant, that's a liquid that you waterproof the fly with. He said..."

CK: Fly what?

AKB: Fly waterproof, fly floatant.

CK: Floatant, okay.

AKB: It's a liquid silicone that you waterproof the fly. He said, "I forgot my damned water... fly floatant- your flies float without it!"

I said, "That's the whole concept." So I was going to, while I was still here, I was going to Boulder, Colorado. I met some guys in Yellowstone from Colorado who were up there for a week of fly-fishing. I was out with my old friend Coke Winter from Detroit. Ah, he and I are the first people who brought the Detroit Symphony to Alpena. We hatched that plan on Hunt Creek. I met Coke, a symphony orchestra conductor, in Detroit. I conducted the local civic, at that time the orchestra, for about a year. And I thought, "Well if I'm going to do this, I should go to the orchestra conductor's convention in Detroit. "

I had my nametag on. Coke came up and said, "Alpena...how's the trout fishing in Alpena?"

I said, "Well I got a good spot."

He says, "Can I come up and camp for a week?" Never mentioned the Symphony. We're camped over in Hunt Creek, talking about strings, music and concerts. He said, ah, "Well I'm the outstate coordinator for the Detroit Symphony. And I book the Symphony's appearances within the state boundaries. Have you ever had the Detroit Symphony in Alpena.

I said, "I don't think so."

He said, "Let's do it." He said, "What we can do is have master classes- players from the Symphony with your students."

I said, "Oh, boy!"

But he said, "The thing is we have to have a group to keep it coordinated, it must be paid for before the doors open- with advance ticket sales." We had a profit before the doors opened that first year. The people, I think it was the Arts Council...

CK: Where did they perform?

AKB: In the auditorium.

CK: At the high school?

AKB: Yeah. Master classes all day with the best musicians in the state. How does it get better than that? The kids ate it up. It was all hatched in a trout stream. So Coke and I became very good friends and he inveigled me to come fish with him in Yellowstone for 10 days one summer and I needed a break and that's where I met the guys from Boulder. And the owner of the shop, Western Angler it was called then, said, "How would you like to tie flies for me?"

And I said, "Ohh boy." I was thinkin' about retirement, right? I didn't think it would come so soon. And ah, so I started tying flies for that shop and then he invited me to come out in the summer and work in the shop and tie flies. So I'd spend my summers in Boulder, Colorado in extended stress management seminars- that's how I defined it. And, ah, did that for two years and then when, the year I lost it, I resigned just before Easter. I won't go into those details. I went home and cried like a baby, cuz I just threw away my entire career. I chucked it out the window. Our doctor came over with a bottle of whiskey and we went down to the river. He said, "Congratulations."

I said, "*What* for?"

He said, "We're all a little concerned about you. I think you just saved your life. "

Perfect thing to say. The next day I get a call from the owner of the fly shop in Boulder. He said, "Well I got good news and bad news."

I said, "Well, what's the bad news, I just quit my teaching job.

He said, "Well the bad news is I sold the shop.

I said, "What's the *good* news?"

He said, "The guy who bought it wants you to come manage it."

Come and manage the shop I used to work for!

CK: How perfect.

AKB: Except it had a major flaw. The guy who bought it was a realtor who had a little pyramid scheme going. Buying and investing, making this thing pay off this thing, making... He didn't know anything about the fly fishing industry, and he put it down the toilet in two years. And I got, I was out of a job. That's when I really learned to tie flies. I had a house payment in Boulder, a house payment in Alpena, a daughter in college and a bridge loan. I'm writing checks like I'm dealing rummy at an eight man table.

CK: And no income...

AKB: I did. I started tying flies full time. Ten dozen flies a day. I was tying 5,000 dozen flies a year. I had it figured out.

CK: How did you sell them? Through...

AKB: Adver...I, stores like I did before. I'd walk in with a box, "Oh you're out of blue winged olives." Never spent a dollar on advertising. Your reputation often times precedes you. Good or bad. Luckily, I've been lucky.

CK: It sure seems that way.

AKB: And ah so, I figured out if I can tie 10 dozen flies a day, I could cover all the bills and still have a day left for fishing- cuz if you're gonna tie flies you've got to keep current. It's like computers. If you want to stay in the business, you better stay current with the technology. And that's, that's what I did and then one day my friend, whose written a ton of books and a local publisher took me to lunch, in 1987.

He said, "AK, ah," this is the publisher talking, Jim Pruitt, "I think you should write a book about fly tying." How many times does it happen that a publisher says, "You should write a book?" I thought, "Oh my god!" I had no computer. I was buying legal pads. I've got a stack of legal pads eight inches high on that first book. It's worth a lot of money now, because no one does it. They do it on a disc. And I decided, okay everybody's written what they think is a consummate fly tying book and they all do the same thing. There's an obligatory chapter on tools. And then there's a chapter on how to tie the Adams, there's a chapter on how to tie the blood knot. They don't really tell you how to tie the fly. And I learned photography in Japan when I was in the Army because they don't do much except take pictures and learn how to develop them. I took the photos. And I insisted on Jim- this is a fly tying book, not a pattern book. When I take a, I want pictures to be 5 x 7's, I want the reader...

CK: The detail...

AKB: ...to see where the thread hangs. I want him to see where the thread last went. That's the tiny details that allow you to tie a fly. And he did it. It went like wi- the Boy Scouts of America were using it as an instruction book in North Carolina for three or four years.

CK: I do have a part I want to go back to, because this is just something I was thinking about. I was thinking about the fact that you came here in the six...

AKB: Early sixties.

CK: I was thinking about what was going on musically. There was, I mean it was that period...

AKB: Rock and roll...

CK: Big band and then it got...

AKB: Big bands were dying...rock and roll. We played- remember Bill Haley and his Comets? We played a battle of the bands in Cedar Rapids, Iowa with Bill Haley and his Vomits. That's what all the current musicians were calling Rock.

CK: Ok.

AKB: Ah, because we didn't think it was really musical. It was rock and roll; it was rhythm and blues. Nothing wrong with rhythm and blues; but rock and roll sort of morphed it into something else. Now, ah, I'm so disappointed, music has gone to rap. What the heck is rap? It's a rant.

CK: It is a rant.

AKB: It's a rant and you can't, it's turned up so loud you can't understand any of the words. There are musicians who then, ah, real musicians who went the other way. There's the Marsalis brothers. My wife and I went down to Denver to hear Branford Marsalis play the tenor sax. We left halfway through the concert. Couldn't recognize a note. I used to tell my kids when I taught 'em, "don't worry about technique." I can teach a chicken how to type. Branford Marsalis tried to see how many notes he could cram into one full four beat measure- to the point of it was almost cacophony.

Listen to Stan Getz- who plays fill-ins on the Girl From Ipanema...and there's the soul of music, his heart comes out! He didn't have a chance to play a whole lot but what he played was exquisite. And all the music- I can't remember the tune of anything written in the last five years, unless it was a Broadway musical. There's music still being written, but that's it.

CK: Did you, did you ever have a ,um, jazz ensemble? Did you ever teach...?

AKB: Yeah. In high school. And that was really fun. Because once again, not, there are kids who want to learn to play that stuff.

CK: Right.

AKB: I did a -I think I did a wonderful thing. I'm going to pat myself on the back here. We got the Stan Kenton band here.

CK: Oh, I didn't know that.

AKB. This was at the new high school. We had a, I bought a Stan Kenton arrangement; well the school bought it. Something I thought the kids could actually play. And they could actually play it. So, I broke some laws. And you're the only person who knows about it now. It can't be proven anymore. I took that Stan Kenton arrangement to the office and I copied it.

CK: Ok.

AKB: I said, "Ok kids, the copy stays in the folder. At the concert tonight, have Stan Kenton sign your page- and you get to keep it."

CK: Beautiful.

AKB: Some things are so valuable they're worth doing. We're not talking about legality here, we're talking about value. And the kids' value comes first, dammit. That's my whole philosophy- the kids come first.

CK: Yes, yeah.

AKB: Yeah, so we had a good time. We opened the concert.

CK: Oh that's wonderful.

AKB: Yeah, we played the Stan Kenton song in front of the Stan Kenton band. And they politely applauded. But I thought that would be another cool experience for the kids.

CK: But they were good too, I think.

AKB: They were, we, we made some recordings. Somebody sent me one... I lost mine. And damned, it was pretty good. We had a good band. All the horses that were in the concert band and the orchestra were also in the stage band. They were going through school soaking up all the music they could possibly...they were in the pit orchestra for the musicals -they couldn't get enough. And now it looks like people are trying to take away everything. How you gonna have a pit orchestra without an

orchestra? How you gonna have a musical without a pit orchestra? It affects- taking away one block in this little block tower is gonna to make the whole damn thing fall down. Everything suffers. It's all hinged on the arts. Nobody seems to understand that.

CK: Is...

AKB: I'll betcha half the people who are deciding to cut music have taken music at one point in their life. It couldn't be avoided.

CK: I'm just wondering if there is anyone around who can, who's willing to take on the fight.

AKB: Well, Bob Buchner is. We had an open house at his place Saturday, for people to come meet and greet the Legend (laughs). Sorry...

CK: I love it.

AKB: I meant it as a joke, ok? Please take it as intended. Ah, and a lot of my former students showed up. Mike Moors is one of them. And he's ramrodding a program to get orchestra back in the high school And Ray Reynolds was there, he's a, teaches here and some other guys I've had for music. Gene Reimann who said, "I was really upset when you left, I have no one to talk to anymore."

Ah, no I said, "You're talking to the choir." You need to find the movers and the shakers. The realtors, the lawyers, the doctors...the people who control the finances in this town are the one's who are gonna apply the pressure to make the board act- because they want to get reelected. And if they start getting pressure from these people they're gonna say, "Oh my gosh- I better do something." These people need to be, these movers and shakers need to be grilled on how important music is to the community.

CK: It's very important to this community. I'm realizing that. It's...

AKB: The school is part of the community dammit! You can't ignore one student, nor one part of the community, or one part of the program. I see this connection, it's like a laser line to the end goal, which you'll never obtain- but it's the trip.

AKB: We need, we need the orchestra back.

CK: Well, do you have any, anything further to say in wrapping this up?

AKB: I should probably shut up before I get in trouble. I was talking to my wife this morning, said, "I'm gonna do this interview. And I'm gonna try to stay out of trouble;

but I'm gonna do a little ranting because the program needs help." And I'm not liable to anybody here anymore, I can say what I damn please.

CK: Ok.

AKB: And I pretty much did. It just depends on if you have gonads enough to make ... I'm sorry , remember I used to be a band musician.

CK: It's been a pleasure talking to you.

AKB: I'm happy to meet you.