

Lake Shore Graduate Newsletter

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Daniel Wieloszynski, Class of 1986

Dan Willis rolled into NYC in a loaded-down Dodge Shadow on a crisp fall day in 1992, just days after his 24th birthday. A third generation musician who once ran around his grandfather's music store trying to play ALL of the instruments, Willis arrived armed with a degree from the prestigious Eastman School of Music, a saxophone, an oboe, and an outsized ambition to play with the best musicians in the world. He had honed his musical skills early, sitting in with top Buffalo musicians at twelve years old, playing and working in LA, and touring Japan and Europe. And now he felt ready to earn a seat with the best New York had to offer.



Willis is no stranger to jazz stages all over the world. A regular player with the Birdland Big Band, he has also played with notables like Michael Brecker, Roland Vaszquez, John Hollenback, Kenny Wheeler, and Ted Nash.

At age 21, Willis took the stage at Carnegie Hall for the first time with the Eastman Philharmonia, playing a featured solo on English horn in the final movement of Gustav Mahler's 2nd Symphony "The Resurrection." In 1993, just a few months after moving to NYC, he returned to play tenor sax on that same stage. Carnegie is also the setting for a performance with Issac Perlman and Chita Rivera. Since then, Dan has worked in some of the most revered performance spaces in the country. He's played with the NY Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet, has been a featured jazz soloist with the NY Pops and the Boston Pops, and a featured soloist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. In addition, Willis has performed with Chita Rivera at the Carlyle, a gig that included Stevie Van Zandt as a special guest.

Dan has earned a reputation as one of the most sought after woodwind specialists in the city. He has worked extensively on Broadway and has played on cast recordings for Grammy nominated "Thoroughly Modern Millie," and Grammy winners "West Side Story," "Book of Mormon" and "Kinky Boots." Having a command of a wide range of instruments, Dan is as comfortable playing the oboe and the English horn as he is playing the saxophone, and is as adept with the flute and clarinet as he is with an EWI in his hands. That versatility keeps him in high demand year after year.

Considering Willis' versatility, it's no surprise that he's also been called upon to contribute to a variety of television and film soundtrack projects. Dan has appeared with Barry Manilow on both "Good

Morning America" and "The Rosie O'Donnell Show," with Don Henley on "The Today Show," and with Tori Amos, Renee Fleming, and Martin Short during the final week of "Late Night with David Letterman." In addition, Dan has performed on PBS Masterpiece Theatre and for two PBS Specials: "An Evening with Billy Porter" and a New Year's Eve gala, "An Evening with Audra McDonald and the NY Philharmonic." Bono and the Edge also included Dan in their recording of the musical "Spiderman."

Always a fan of spending time in the studio, Willis has enjoyed a good deal of soundtrack work. The themes for ABC's Monday Night Football, ESPN's "The Roger Maris Story" and "The Price is Right," Nickelodeon's "The Backyardigans," and Disney Channel's "Little Einstein" are among his many credits.

As a composer, Dan has produced his own body of work. Willis' first two CDs, "Quartet" and "Hand to Mouth" focused on pushing more traditional jazz into new territory. As a natural and logical progression, he strived in his next compositions to build a bridge between jazz and classical music. Springboarding off of the work of Parisian Erik Satie, an early 20th century avant-garde composer and pianist, Dan has composed three CDs of ground-breaking work - "Velvet Gentlemen," "Satie I," and "Satie II," which have debuted at NYC hotspots like Birdland and the Cornelia Cafe.

In the works now for Willis is another Satie project, "Velvet Gentlemen: the Underground," in which he revisits Thelonious Monk's album, Criss-cross, to combine it with the work of Satie.

Everybody needs to escape NYC madness from time to time, and what better way to do it than to go on tour with a bunch of world class musicians! Willis has enjoyed touring Japan with Michael Brecker's Quintet, Europe with John Hollenbeck, and Australia with Liza Minnelli. Stateside he's traveled with individual sensations like Chita Rivera, and Don Henley, as well as touring with groups like the NYC Ballet and "West Side Story."

One of Dan's favorite projects was an outreach program that took him and the Tiny Tunes Orchestra to Guatemala, where he and the group presented classical music -in a more simple way -to children.

The idea for the program was influenced by work he'd completed for Disney's Baby Einstein and grew out of Willis' desire to share his love for music with kids.

Dan has performed as principle oboist for a recording of David Chesky's "Area 51," as well as playing on a Philip Glass score for the film, "Mr. Nice."

Willis also loaned his efforts to renown opera soprano, Alyson Cambridge, playing sax and clarinet on her album, "Until Now," an opera to acoustic pop crossover project.

Dan Willis' journey from small town New York to the Big Apple has been an extraordinary one. Since his arrival on the scene, he's received accolades from several of the top music critics in the city. Jeff Dayton-Johnson of "All About Jazz," says, "Willis' saxophone playing echoes the energetic style of the New York '70s loft scene," and describes his sound as "a velvety one, overlaid with sumptuousness." Glen Astarita of "Downbeat" comments that "With an arsenal of conventional and indigenous wood winds at hand, Willis breathes fluency and articulately expressed themes into a set that sustains gobs of interest from start to finish."

And as Willis will tell you himself, he's just getting started.

- **Joan McDonald**

Submitted by Lake Shore Central Teachers & Alumni:
Kevin Schamberger (class of 1992)
Elizabeth Schamberger (class of 1999)