

Transcription of TV show: **JMU Today**

Content: Interview of Mike Davis and Bill Posey by David Greenagel

David Greenagel:

Good evening and welcome to JMU Journal. Tonight's program is on the James Madison University Marching Royal Dukes and their director Mike Davis. During his five years at JMU, Davis has built this band into the finest marching band in Virginia and most recently the Marching Bands of America have named the Royal Dukes one of the top twenty bands in the Nation. Davis will be leaving JMU at the end of this year and tonight David Greenagel will talk to Davis and assistant band director Bill Posey about the success of the JMU marching band. Before we get to that interview, let's first listen to the band as they perform during halftime of the JMU/Richmond football game.

[performance is shown]

David Greenagel:

Good evening. We were talking to Mike Davis the band director at James Madison University. Also with Bill Posey the assistant director. Mike we've just seen a clip of the band. I'd like to ask, how did you come to be here at James Madison University? What led you here?

Mike Davis:

Well, again my entire history came back from entertainment from just when I was young but this all started back in Platteville, Wisconsin where I had Dr. Joe Astock as a instructor when I was in graduate school working on my masters degree. And one day I was sitting in my office teaching in the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater. And all of the sudden Joe called up and I had no idea he even moved to Virginia and he said how you doing and I said great. How's it over there in Wisconsin? Up there in Platteville? And he says, I'm in Virginia. So I immediately was well why are you calling me? He said we'd like you to come down and check our program. I moved positions and I'm now the music chairman here. So we talked for awhile and I says, okay, I'll come down and check it out and see what we can do. And the next thing I knew it was more or less of a job interview and he asked me if I was interested in possibly taking the position. And through talking to Dr. Carrier and noticing the obvious steps to want to go forward and being able to set goals and having a budget to work with and things like that. Very attractive. And I said well, this is a career move I just gotta do. So that's basically how I, how it all started. It's amazing how connections start.

David Greenagel:

Yeah. Well, anybody that's seen a marching band in the last ten years is probably has an image in their mind of the typically big ten type of style. The high step and drawing picture out on the field and spelling out Ohio, for example. Anybody that's seen your band knows that it's just a completely different style. Where did you come up with this style? Or how did you develop it? Or what's your philosophy behind what the Jam U band does?

Mike Davis:

Well, I tell you, basically I take any credit. It's not a Mike Davis style. I mean there is certain things that perhaps I'm gonna come up with but core style is basically the system we use at James Madison University. AND we put entertainment first. And the core style is just kind of a name that's given as far as big ten, at a lot of the schools it's more or less associated with a high step. Well, we use more or less of a glide step and we take the music, let the music do it for us and then entertain and get all of the movements coordinated to that movement. Myself, I really can say a team effort between me and the

staff and think this is where we really start coming up with it. And we say what kind of direction we want to go. Well, you never know. You might see us doing a core style but all the sudden you might see us laying back and getting down too. So whatever it takes to get the job done, we're gonna do. What is entertainment? Entertainment is making people watching and you reach up to them. You just don't apply something down here on the field. You reach out to the people.

David Greenagel:

What kind of changes do you guys make when you got here. I know Bill here goes back a few years. He remembers the previous styles. What did, beyond physical changes in the band did you have to change attitudes? Just how did you feel you have to go about this?

Mike Davis:

Okay, well first of all we had to set the goals and I'm sure that anytime you come in you have goals. And I figure well one thing we want to do is develop a style which was the core style type of thing. Then we had to look at uniform and what kind of thing do we want to do here? Do we want to have a sophistication of what we're doing with the Dukes, things like that. So we decided to have a uniform change. So a uniform change. Now that we got a uniform change, how can we take this and apply it? So what we said is, well, I got together with a lot of people and did a lot of research on it and i thought Dukes, how can I take this. Well, I can take the royalty part because I remember seeing some royal robes around every once in a while when we had the bulldog with the. And it was kind of rough to work around that for awhile. And I thought well, we'll go to the royal at the end. So then, in looking at costumes of dukes and things that's how we came up with out uniform and our costumes. So that was one thing we said.

David Greenagel:

You designed the uniform right?

Mike Davis:

Yes, I did. Yes. And the helmet. That's kind of been a signature. We got some ideas from other bands from way back but as far as taking that helmet the way it is right there. They don't really manufacture it that way. We got it more or less like this helmet over here that has a spike on it and then what we had to do was cut it off and kind of crudely put this on it to come up with what we have because they just didn't manufacture it that way.

David Greenagel:

Uh huh.

Mike Davis:

Other than that it's just that we set those goals and the uniform and building the numbers up. That was another thing. We needed to build the numbers up in order to do the job and reach out to as many people as want. The more numbers that you have in the band, the more impressive sound you can get, the more moves you can get and things like this on the field. Of course there's always a diminishing return if you get too many on the field. And we've reached our goal at staying around two hundred and seventy, two hundred and fifty. And uniform wise, budget wise, that seems to work pretty good for us.

David Greenagel:

Well, talking then about the size of the band. You've only got so much field to work with. When you put the show together, is everything just put together at one time? Do groups work independently? So the horns, or the rifles, or the flags, or percussion, how is that put together?

Mike Davis:

Well, I think probably the first thing I should do is say that the basic concept of us putting a show starting, starts with the staff. And myself, I would say that you're nothing without your staff. Bill here has been with me for many years. He was drum major with the band, he marched in the band. He's been a very strong member of the band. I think you were here at the year it started wasn't it.

Bill Posey:

The second year, yeah.

Mike Davis:

Second year it started so he's kind of been and seen it grow. And then of course yourself. This is one reason why when we were asked to do this I thought, man, I got my boys here. We gotta get em in on this. You've been here too and basically what we do with that is we get a unified staff effort. Okay, what can we do What tunes can we do? What do you suggest? What do you suggest? And we come up with a general structure of songs we think will be entertaining. And then what we do is we talk about how we want to stage it. Bill's got some charts here. I noticed that he brought some charts along. And what we do here it we set out, stage the band the way we want to do it. It took us, Bill and I worked together on this on, and it took us probably I'd say two nights. Just sitting around and figuring, how do we even want to start this thing? Once you get a starting point you're fine but it's hard to find a starting point. Before we came up with this concept, which incidentally, this is a drill chart for this Saturday's show. We'd come up with those concepts and it took us a long time but finally I was sitting in the office and I came in and says, I got it! I got it!. We got it! Let's do it! and the next thing I know, we jotted it down and it became the reality. So staff effort. And there's a gentleman that's not here right now that's very, very important caught in our wheel and that would be Mr. Bill Rice.

Bill Posey:

Right. Bill runs percussion.

Mike Davis:

He runs the percussion. He's the percussion instructor and he also has title as assistant marching band director. Bill has been a great asset. Just really need to have him here at JMU. He's going to be an asset to this university all around and its really something. It took me all these years to find him and all the sudden now I gotta leave him. But I'll tell you he's just a super person. I couldn't say enough about his credentials as well as his professionalism.

David Greenagel:

Well, with everything that's involved on the field, you've got so many people. The show designs of course, for a band of this caliber, as I understand Marching Bands of America in Chicago has named the JMU band one of the top twenty in the nation. The complexity of the shows. The numbers involved. You've got four staff people running around screaming all at the same time. Everybody's trying to fix their own parts. There's bound to be mix ups, there's gonna be hassles. What possibly has been the worst thing that could have happened to you, or has happened to you not just at Jim U but in the past, during the show. Say at a game. Has anything completely fallen apart?

Mike Davis:

Well, show business is show business. We've always been able to come out smelling like a rose. I remember yes, a couple times when things, we really pulled it together fast and we sat there and I was conducting. I remember very distinctly one time the band started fighting. We call it phasing. And the

soloist, the trumpet soloist went back singing to this large band and all the sudden I thought how am I gonna get this thing to happen. It seemed like everything was falling apart but people were sitting there clapping. They were right into it. We had plenty of things, what we call masking, in band business where we have other things happening. So people really didn't know it was happening. And the band turned around and I think I gave the biggest down beat in the world. I jumped off the podium and I was wham and here it was. It came through and as a matter of fact people came afterwards and I says I cant believe I pulled this off and that we pulled it off. What do you mean? I thought everything was fine. They had no idea what happened so obviously we must have masked it but I'll always remember that. Very much so.

David Greenagel:

With the commitment that each student, I know, has to make in the band, the amount of time each week in rehearsals, the road trips. I know that most of the students in the band aren't actually music majors. There's a real strong mix within that. We're shooting as professional of an entertainment show as you can. Also then, you're dealing with the education of each student. How they're growing as a person. How do you balance the demands that have to be put on each individual to make this as professional an activity as you can along with the growth and learning experience that has to come by being involved with the university?

Mike Davis:

One thing I think that a lot of people need to really look at and that is you have to always respect people. You have to respect them for what they are and what they have to do. There are times I go above and beyond and I hold them after rehearsal and things like that. Im very guilty of that type of thing and anybody's that's watching this program that's in my band is saying Davis you said it and you're always holding us over but as far as a compromise someplace where I have to set back and I have to say I've got to be very careful and not infringe too much on people's time. And I try to justify that even though at times in order to get the show dome we have to push, push, push. To me I always want to resect what those people have to do. And there are problems with classes and you have to put that first and you have to realize that people in the university are getting ready to train themselves for the rest of their lives. And perhaps it's not band that's important to them. I mean, it's getting themselves ready for their career. But it's more like an outlet for them. So I try to operate on a very high spirited program and I try to always let the students know that I do care about them. And if I ever get in a position where I feel I have to compromise with it, again, I'll come up and I'll say this is where we are and let's talk about it. I hope that each person in my band realizes that. It seems that they do. They know that when they have a problem, I'm only as far as the office. So come on in and let's talk about it. Let's find a compromise. If you've ever seen a band you've seen that we are very, very spirited and very close together. My theme song that I like to have for the band is We'll Never Walk Alone. It's always been. It's always been a song that's lasted and people associate too with a band. It's a very emotional thing with us. And again, it's just saying you'll never walk alone because we got a spirit that's here and we're proud of what we're doing and this type of thing.

David Greenagel:

That's great. I know from watching you work that the band does have that spirit of love. Everybody cares about what they're doing. It's obvious that you care about the kids. Everybody feels important and it shows that you can have a quality program and still be a human being and not have to be a jerk in rehearsals like so many of our colleagues are. For example, Bill. Bill, you've been around forever. You come back after graduating. I believe you even got your degree in voice, didn't you?

Bill Posey:

Yeah I was a vocal major. Not even in education, actually. It was in performance. I came here in '73. After about the first year I started helping Ken Moulton who was the band director at that time. I started helping him teach the drill through that. Then I kept with him through the couple of years he was here as marching band director. When Mike came down I offered him my services which he took. Really helped me a lot. And then I stayed on and did different things with the band. And he has taught me so much. I can say, really, I am where I am today because of the things I learned from him. He's mentioned earlier about connections and he's made connections with me throughout this profession. Keeps bread on the table.

David Greenagel:

Talking about these connections, not only do you have your degree in voice and I've heard you sing and you're just marvelous. Through these connections you're working now for the Marching Bands of America.

Bill Posey:

I work with them on a temporary basis. I do clinics for them. I also work for United Music Enterprises out of Atlanta, Georgia. I send my summers going around teaching high school competition marching bands. We have basically a staff like we have here at the university. It's just that we're more mobile. We send the whole time on the road and spend three days in one place and three day another place and by the time we've left we've taught a full competition show.

David Greenagel:

Keeps you hopping.

Bill Posey:

Yeah, it does. I enjoy it though. You get to meet a lot of people and I think that's probably the best part of this business is the people you get to meet. Seeing the kind of things that high school kids can do. The discipline it takes, the self discipline is probably the best part of the whole marching band business. Cause you have to learn to work with people.

David Greenagel:

Right.

Bill Posey:

That's so much a part of life and it's just invaluable to these kids to get into these programs sometimes.

David Greenagel:

Like we were saying the love in the band builds that loyalty. Also knowing then how to come and deal with other people in your life. I know that's why Bill and I have been hanging around you for the past four or five years. Mike, you're going to Disney World.

Mike Davis:

Yes.

David Greenagel:

Tell us about that.

Mike Davis:

Well, for the last two years I had been the director of the All American College Band which is a

program that we have there. I'll tell you it was a great experience for me. I got down there and I started in show business when I was younger and I had a chance to really see Oh my gosh, I can really do more and more with it. And then the opportunity opened up this summer where they needed a director and they says Mike we know what you can do, we've got confidence in you. What do you think? And as young as I am I figure I might as well give it a shot. Go into professional conducting and I'll be entertaining all the time and things like this. Yes, it's another step in the career and working for Disney productions has got to be it for me, right now. I'm really looking forward to it. I'm missing, I'm already missing JMU but I know I have a career that's ahead and the mouse. We call it working with the mouse. It's fun and believe me there's a lot of exciting things working with top notch starts and all this type of thing. So we have a lot of things to look forward to. My family, there in love with it and my children get to grow up in that atmosphere.

David Greenagel:

Great. Well, Mike, I know we're all gonna miss you here. You've done wonderful things. I know you've turned Bill and my's lives around. Thank you very much for all that you've done. I know the kids are gonna miss you. I know that the whole community is but you've established something here that's really beautiful and I think it's going to continue.

Mike Davis:

I just want to say thanks to everybody here. Cause everybody's been so super and I just can't say enough how much I enjoy all that everybody in this community as well as my staff have done for me.

David Greenagel:

Great. Thanks Mike.

Mike Davis:

Thank you.

David Greenagel:

We've been talking to Mike Davis the band director at James Madison University and Bill Posey, the assistant band director. We thank you very much for joining us the evening. I'm David Greenagel.
Good Night.