Jody Genessy:

This is Connect Canyons, and you've been listening to the smooth sounds of Randal Clark's New Day, the first single off of his critically acclaimed debut album, Imaginary World. Now in his 25th year of teaching, including the past eight and a half years at Corner Canyon High School, Randal Clark released his first contemporary jazz album earlier this year to some rave reviews. It's been called astounding and a superb production. One reviewer remarked, "Randal Clark's Imaginary World stretches beyond the conscious boundaries and illuminates the dark corners." Randal Clark and Imaginary World have even been nominated for Grammy Award consideration.

Jody Genessy:

While Dr. Clark, who earned a doctorate in instrumental conducting from The University of Utah, has excelled in his teaching and directorial role at Corner Canyon and previously at Jordan High, he's also considered one of the top saxophone players around. He was named the Salt Lake City Jazz Artist of the Week earlier in 2021. He's also earned the prestigious Sorenson Legacy Award, been named the Utah Music Educators' Associations' outstanding high school director, and recognized with multiple honors from the National Band Association. Clark has performed on TV, movie and video game soundtracks, and is a featured soloist with the Cannonball Saxophone Band. He's accomplished quite a bit since beginning to play saxophone at age nine after listening to his mom's Dave Brubeck records and falling for the sound. It's our honor to have the talented musician and overall cool human being, Randal Clark, on our podcast. What is it about teaching that kind of draws you in and keeps you going?

Randal Clark:

I don't know. But it's fun to start something with kids, especially this age group, I particularly like, and watch them grow it into something that you wouldn't expect could've been possible when it started. That's kind of fun for me.

Jody Genessy:

Yeah. You said you got a full-ride scholarship for music. At what point did you ... At which school? And was it then that you decided, I want to make this my career?

Randal Clark:

Yeah. So my junior high band director was one of these really impressive people, and also a very good band director. And I remember liking him so much, even in eighth grade I was thinking, "Man, maybe I'd like to teach band one day." I wasn't thinking about having a professional career as a saxophone player. I just wanted to teach band and be like my junior high band director. And then I had a really great high school experience too, and my band director in high school was really cool. And so when I got to college, that was just the natural thing to do, was to do music education, and so I did.

Randal Clark:

And two years into it, I became sure that I was doing the wrong thing. Yeah, so I went into music ed and got my first job at Joel P. Jensen Middle School. And after that first year of teaching, I was sure I didn't want to teach band. It was really challenging teaching middle school students that first year for me. Some people probably take right to it, but I struggled a little bit, and went actually that summer looking for other jobs. But I really couldn't find anything that was going to work for me job wise. And I'm like, "Well, I'll give it another year and see how it goes." And the second year I taught middle school was probably the best year that I've had teaching, one of the best that I've had teaching. I loved it. It went from literally the worst year ever to the best year. And at that point, it was like, "Yeah. I think this is for me," and it's just been that way ever since.

Jody Genessy:

What caused the transition or the change?

Randal Clark:

I don't know.

Jody Genessy:

Just it clicked.

Randal Clark:

Maybe I just got better at the job. I got better at dealing with the younger kids.

Jody Genessy:

Maybe the kids just got better.

Randal Clark:

Maybe, I don't know.

Jody Genessy:

At what point did your professional musician career take off?

Randal Clark:

So throughout that whole time, the school money wasn't quite as much as I hoped it was, and I needed something to supplement that with. And so I would play jobs on the side, as a lot of musicians do. They go and they play at weddings, or at a club, or something at night. And you walk home at that time with 75 or 100 bucks, which was pretty cool. You go spend a night, you make 100 bucks. That's pretty cool. So I was doing that a couple times a week and that was helping to supplement things. But also, I had a lot of friendships that were made in college, and even in high school before that. And all of these friendships were people that played music. And so they're always looking for a sax player. They might be looking for a bass player. So the people you know are the people that you call, and so I just continually would work because of the friends that I had.

Randal Clark:

And so that was nice because it isn't just going out and working and playing music. You're also going out and hanging out with your friends and you're playing music, which is really cool. So I'd been doing that ever since, and at one point and time, I thought, "Man, I really would like to make an album one day. I'd like to do that." And even in high school, I was recording in my basement and making these kind of fake records. I mean, I guess they were real records, but they were all produced by me. And I remember playing my saxophone into a tape deck, and then I'd record piano into a tape deck, and then I'd record the piano recording into another tape deck because I didn't have a multi track recorder, so I was just figuring out how to shoestring the whole process together to make a record. And I just thought that was really, really fun. And so I'd make these little tapes and I'd hand them out to my friends and stuff like that, and they weren't very good.

Randal Clark:

But I've always kind of had that in the back of my mind of something that I wanted to do. And then teaching is such a demanding and time consuming job. I just have never had time to do it. And so it was 20, over 20 years before I really said, "You know what, if I'm ever going to do this, I need to do it now because time's running out to really make a good go of this." So that's what I did. And I actually have, again, who you know is so important and making friendship with people. And as they say, be a cool person because the cooler person you are, the more people are going to be around you who like you. And you never know which of those people are going to have a connection here or a connection there.

Randal Clark:

And one of my friends that I had, had a connection with a very famous bassist. His name's Jimmy Haslip. And Jimmy Haslip was the bass player and founding member of a really famous jazz group called The Yellowjackets. And if you're into jazz, you probably know who they are. And if you're not, maybe you don't. But in terms of jazz, I mean, Jimmy Haslip is about as big a name as they get. Well, he was friends with Jimmy and put me in touch with him. And I sent Jimmy just a little sample of me playing. And he said, "Yeah, I'd love to work with you." And from there, I got to use all of his connections. So he brought in probably the most famous contemporary jazz keyboardist named Jeff Lorber, Grammy winning composer and keyboardist. And he brought him in to help me write some songs and to collaborate in the band as a pianist.

Randal Clark:

And other people I got to play on the record, like Sonny Emory from Earth, Wind, and Fire. He's the drummer. This really famous trumpeter, Randy Brecker, so just basically by utilizing these connections that I got through my friend, I was able to not just make a record, which I could've just done, I could've just made a record by myself, and it probably would've been fine, and I would've fulfilled my goal. But because of this connection, I was able to make this record with really famous and outstanding people, which was just so much fun because you have to sit there sometimes and just be like, "Is this really happening? Am I recording a record with Randy Brecker and Jimmy Haslip and these guys?" Yeah. And it was also great to have them because they're so good at making records. Obviously, Grammy winning musicians, they're good at this. The final product ended up being probably 10 times better than what I had expected it would ever be.

Jody Genessy:

I tuned into Spotify last night, listened to New Day. It was fantastic. It's really, really good. You have the experience that you tuned into the radio and all of a sudden, you're hearing yourself play on the radio. That must've been pretty awesome.

Randal Clark:

Yeah. In the genre I'm in, in the jazz and specifically contemporary jazz, there aren't as many radio stations as there used to be. Times are changing. Like you said, you logged into Spotify, and that's where most people are getting their music is online streaming, YouTube, or Apple Music, or something like that. But around the country, there still are radio stations that people listen to in different places. There's one in Las Vegas. But I think we're down to about 15 or so radio stations that play contemporary jazz. And so I was able to get one, actually, I have two tracks now on the radio. And what you hope is that you get on XM Satellite Radio. That's the one you want to get on, and I was lucky enough to get both of the two singles that I put out on XM Radio. And I don't actually even subscribe to XM Radio, but I bought my wife a new car and they come with it. You get it for a month or whatever.

Jody Genessy:

Speaking of your wife, also an accomplished musician.

Randal Clark:

She is. She's a French horn player. She plays down in the orchestra at Temple Square.

Jody Genessy:

She's fantastic.

Randal Clark:

Yeah. Real musical family. All my kids play. I got two trumpet players and two saxophone players and a flute, flutist. And all five of my kids were able to play on the record in the horn section too.

Jody Genessy:

Oh, that's really neat. Yeah, that's really cool. Where did you record the album?

Randal Clark:

So I think what most people think happens when you record a record is you rent a studio and everybody gets together and you go down there and you record all together. And that certainly is one way to do it, and people do do that. However, this all happened during the pandemic, and nobody was getting together. And so I never had the experience of getting everybody together all at one time, which in some ways was a blessing because I was able to get so many different famous people on the record, whether otherwise I might've only maybe been able to do a couple people because you're getting all together.

Randal Clark:

But what I'd do is we'd get the arrangement and the tracks all made, and then we'd send the samples out to the drummer. And the drummer would just play his drums on top of what you sent them, and now you've got Sonny Emory playing drums. Or we'd send it to the bass player, and the bass player would just replace what bass was on the sample track with their bass. And then it would come back to me, and I'd lay my saxophone on it at home by myself. And then you send it out to a mixing engineer that can put it all together. It's a really interesting and sometimes complex process to do it that way, but it was just great because I was able to use so many people that I wouldn't have been able to use.

Jody Genessy:

And your record's getting some really rave reviews as well I've seen out there. That must be really gratifying.

Randal Clark:

Yeah, I hope so. There've been a few good reviews. It was submitted for a Grammy.

Jody Genessy:

I saw that. That's really exciting.

Randal Clark:

Yeah. I mean, those are super hard to come by. Of course, I don't expect that, or even a nomination. But it was cool that someone thought high enough of the record to submit it.

Jody Genessy:

So I used to cover the Utah Jazz for the Deseret News as a sports writer before getting this job with the District. And when I'd go to New Orleans where the Jazz originated, New Orleans Jazz, some of the fans would start chanting, "There ain't no jazz in Utah." They're really upset that the Jazz took the name to Utah with them, so they want to be the New Orleans Jazz, and they're (singing), which was a pretty funny line. What's the state of jazz? And we're not talking about Donovan Mitchell and Rudy Gobert, but the state of jazz in Utah.

Randal Clark:

We have a pretty strong jazz scene in Utah, actually, so we don't have a lot of venues like where people go to hear jazz, but there are two or three. And the musicians that are here are very strong. As a matter of fact, I had a couple musicians locally that I used on the record just because they're so strong. But yeah, it's alive and well, and the jazz education world is extremely strong here in Utah too with the thanks of Brigham Young University and the U of U and some other colleges around really waving the flag for that. But if you want to be a jazz musician, this is a great place to live and work, and a great place to learn jazz, so just about as good as anywhere, I would say, with the exception of we have fewer places that you can actually go listen to it on a nightly basis.

Randal Clark:

I think almost every high school probably has a jazz band. I'd say probably half of our middle schools in the state have one. And a lot of great music educators in the state that are doing a great job promoting that art form. It's a different thing. It's not pep band, it's not concert band. It's this own thing with this own distinct language and its own history that is fascinating to learn about and perform.

Jody Genessy:

Are you a Utah Jazz fan?

Randal Clark:

Of course.

Jody Genessy:

Right answer. So what's the future look like for you? You're a busy man. You said you have five kids. You're a music director at high school, got your own record.

Randal Clark:

Yeah. Primarily, it's holding steady with the music ed thing and teaching here at the high school, and hopefully making the students that I have under my care as good as they can be. It gives me a lot of pleasure to watch these kids get better and better, and some of them move on into college with scholarships, and then even beyond that, professionally. I've had many who have, so that's been great. I am going to keep working. I'm starting a new record as we speak, but it simmers on the backseat. But now I have the right people around me because of those connections that it makes it a lot easier to do that stuff.

Randal Clark:

It does make it hard to be a touring musician. I don't know if that's something I really want to do anyway. I did just play at the Catalina Island Jazz Festival though this last weekend, which was a lot of fun. So occasionally traveling around and performing with some cool people is awesome, but making another record and teaching band at the high school, that's where it's at.

Jody Genessy:

And you're one of the best saxophone players in Utah and the nation. Is it difficult to teach players who aren't as good as you? Is it hard to be patient with them? And do you have to kind of put earplugs in sometimes?

Randal Clark:

I've never put earplugs in yet. But definitely, there are sounds you hear sometimes that are tough to hear. But no, it never ... Everybody's different. Not everybody is meant to be a basketball player, but it doesn't mean they shouldn't play basketball. And not everybody's meant to be a professional musician, but it doesn't mean they shouldn't have a music experience. And so the kids that show potential for being that way are fun and exciting, and that's great. But primarily, I always just have to tell myself my job isn't to make professional musicians. My job is to give everybody as high quality music experience as I can. And they're just going to bring to the table their own talent and their hard work, what they bring with them. You know what I mean?

Randal Clark:

So what they end up being is completely up to them. And of course, being the head of the program here, we want everything still to sound good. So it's not like we just say, "You're okay, and that's all right." No, if you're going to be here, you're going to be great. No matter what, I'm going to break my back making sure that you're great. But even those kids, you can make them sound great, but it doesn't mean that they're going to be able to exist at that top level later on, and that's totally okay.

Jody Genessy:

What is your pitch to high school students, or middle school students, about learning an instrument, or playing in a band, or an orchestra? Why is music important do you think to the youth?

Randal Clark:

So music, specifically, and singing in a choir, or singing in a ... Or playing an instrument in a concert band, or a jazz band, I think it's really important to be involved in something like that for a couple reasons. One is that like I said, you make associations with people that you are not likely to make in your history class. You might know the person next to you or something like that, but in general, they're just passing people in your life. When you play in a band, even a big concert band, these are people that you hang out with more often than usual. You're hanging out in small groups. You're having socials. You're involved in a group project that culminates into hopefully something amazing. And that experience brings people together. Right?

Randal Clark:

So there's something that's really important just from a social aspect. But also, playing music is hard. And we don't tell people that like, "Hey, everybody. Welcome to band today. This is hard." But it is because if you take a math test and you miss, out of 100 questions you miss 10 questions, you still have an A. Right? In band, if you got 100 notes and you miss 10 of them, and you're in a group where everybody else is missing 10 others at the same time, where individually everyone in the room might be getting an A, the overall project is terrible. You know what I mean? And so it's very difficult, number one, to play your own part at an A level, but then to have everybody else… You really can't afford to have mistakes if you want to have the overall product be an A.

Randal Clark:

So in that regard, band is extremely difficult. Choir is difficult. Orchestra, it's difficult because the level at which you have to perform is so high. The stakes are so high. So with those two things together, the friendships you make, and then just the demand to be excellent all the time, not unlike a sports team, that is extremely satisfying and it's extremely I think helpful to teenagers. They're going to learn about hard work. They're going to learn how to be cool with people and that kind of thing. And the side benefit is they learn some really cool music along the way.

Jody Genessy:

How many instruments do you actually play?

Randal Clark:

I play saxophone, flute, clarinet, a little violin, and piano. I can play the others, but you wouldn't want to hear it.

Jody Genessy:

That's how I am with the cello now, unfortunately. Started trying the ukulele, that was kind of fun. All right, Randal, thank you so much, and wish you the best.

Randal Clark:

Thank you.

Jody Genessy:

Thanks for your time.

Randal Clark:

Yeah.

Jody Genessy:

You've been listening to Connect Canyons. I'm your host for this episode, Jody Genessy. Thanks again to Randal Clark for participating in this podcast and for granting us permission to play his fantastic music. You can find his debut album, Imaginary World, on all music streaming services, including Spotify, Amazon Music, Apple Music, and iTunes, as well as on his YouTube channel, Randal Clark Music, and at randalclarkmusic.com. Remember, that's Randal with one L. Thank you for joining us. Now hit it, Randal.