



## Denver & the Mile High Orchestra – *THE STORY*

### *A band geek in love...*

Music has been my passion for as long as I can remember. However, my first introduction to the trumpet was in Beginning Band in the sixth grade. It wasn't a difficult choice since my "chubby" lips made trumpet playing come natural to me. As I started listening to great trumpet players, I found the music resounding within the deepest parts of my soul. It didn't take long for the singing of Frank Sinatra, Harry Connick Jr., and Nat "King" Cole to catch my attention. I simply could not get enough. (I even memorized all their hit songs!) I soon realized that I was a band geek in love with music.

Writing music quickly became the next step of my journey. At seventeen I recorded the first song I ever wrote - "Just Believe". The recording studio was an old woodshed on a distant country road in my hometown of Plymouth, Indiana. It was the beginning of a very long, hard, and rewarding journey into the industry of music.

### *Off to Nashville...*

My friends and family continued to recognize and encourage my talent. Believing in my passion and desiring to act on it, I left Indiana and moved to Nashville to major in music at Belmont University. The amazing musicians there both intimidated and inspired me. During my four years at Belmont I gave everything I had to become the best musician I could possibly be.

While playing lead trumpet in the university jazz ensemble I met others who shared my passion for music. They were band geeks too, and soon became some of my best friends. They would later play a major part in my dream come true.

### *Finding my voice...*

Through college I experimented with writing and performing all styles of music, including country, pop, and hip-hop. People would say, "It's good music - it's just not you." Nothing seemed to fit, and by the time my senior year came, I still hadn't found my niche. During my final year in college I took an arranging class and learned to write big band music. It seemed as natural to me as breathing, and took me back to the place in sixth grade when I first learned the name Louis Armstrong and memorized a Nat King Cole lyric.

I began writing big band arrangements of my original melodies and lyrics that had strong personal meaning and inspiration. The influences of edgy contemporary sounds and a love for gospel music added color to my classic big band songs.

My love for playing the trumpet also continued to grow. As I observed the commercial music world, I noticed a lack opportunities for horn players. So when an opportunity presented itself to play some of my songs at a small local concert, I asked my friends in the university jazz ensemble to join me. The audience went nuts - all 25 of them! Finally, I had found my voice.

### *The making of the band...*

In April of 1999, the newly named Denver & the Mile High Orchestra (DMHO) was awarded the opportunity to perform at Belmont's annual university showcase, competing to be the opening band for an upcoming Lee Ann Womack concert. While the judges appreciated DMHO, they felt we weren't the right act to open for a country star - until the crowd of 600 screaming for an encore changed their minds. We had played all the music I had composed, but we gave them an encore anyway. Little did I know that one of the six hundred was a roofing contractor from Wisconsin named Reid Ribble who had come to see his son drum in a different band. Reid, blown away by our performance, was already scheming out how to get our motley crew of musicians to his hometown for a concert. Something special was beginning that night. Two weeks later, opening for Lee Ann Womack, 1,500 people gave DMHO a standing ovation. The very next morning, two record labels left messages on my dorm room answering machine.

It was a very exciting time for big band music. Brian Setzer won four Grammy awards in 1999 with his big band rockabilly sound. Big band swing was making a very fast comeback, even on commercial radio. It was also a very exciting time for me personally. I had just graduated college, hired a lawyer, and was working through a fifty-two page record deal.



(DMHO on stage before Lee Ann Womack concert.)

Over the next couple of months I was wined and dined and promised much. The pressure to sign a contract was mounting. Everything was a blur. After two and a half months of negotiations, my lawyer said the contract was ready for me to sign. The band and I were so excited! We had built many hopes, goals, and dreams around DMHO. Some of the guys changed their post graduation plans. Others dropped out of school. I called the president of the label to tell him the good news that we would sign the contract, but only got a voice mail. I called again a few more times with the same result. This was strange. He did finally call, but his news was devastating. He explained that his label was millions of dollars in debt and was going bankrupt. He was hoping that with the resurgence of swing music, he could turn around some money quickly by producing an album with DMHO. All our band would be left with now were shattered plans and demoralized dreams. I would be saddled with a tremendous legal bill and no income to pay for it.

The "swing craze" left the national music scene as quickly as it came, and no one was interested in Denver & the Mile High Orchestra any more. My lawyer, to whom I owed thousands of dollars, told me to either sing to recorded tracks or find a new profession because I would never succeed with my band.

### *Wanting to quit...*

With no job and nothing to my name except a 1980 Dodge Aspen and an air mattress, I set out to find a cheap place to rent and a job. The only work I could find was a string of temporary jobs at a telemarketing firm, a museum, and a funeral home. Seventy percent of my paychecks went to pay legal fees for our deflated record deal. The other thirty percent paid the rent on my roach-infested, unheated apartment. If sleeping on an air mattress with a hat and a pair of gloves in winter is what it took to keep my band alive, I wanted nothing to do with it. I had given the dream my best shot, but that obviously wasn't enough. At least I wouldn't look back and say I hadn't tried.

I will never forget one cold winter evening sitting at my depressing kitchen table reflecting over dashed dreams and aspirations. As roaches crawled the floor around me, something welled up deep within my soul. I sensed God saying to me, "If I tell you yes, and everyone else in your life tells you no, what will you do?" I sat there reflecting on my life and my story. I was born to sing and play trumpet. More so, I was created to do it. The band gave my life purpose. Bringing joy to others and giving them hope through music were threads knit into the tapestry of my life - a tapestry yet unfinished. If trying to succeed leading a big band fresh out of college were easy, every struggling musician would try it. I remembered what my mother told me growing up: "Denver, the difference between a winner and loser is that the winner decides to get back up one more time than the loser does, because they both fall down - a lot!" That evening I got back up, determined to see this road to the end.

### *The Comeback Kids....*

With newfound determination, DMHO began practicing every Tuesday night. I was in a writing frenzy. We needed more songs - good songs that touched people's hearts. Though rejections from the music industry were piling up, this time there was a difference. The lack of offers didn't faze me and my determination continued to grow. I was hearing criticism such as, "Your sound is not commercial enough"; "There are too many people in the group"; and "We don't know how to market you." However, when we played live, people of all ages would go nuts! They loved the message and the energetic sound. This was something special, and the band knew it. If no one else would help, we would simply have to do it on our own.

As I found the time and money we held recording sessions. One song at a time, and a year and a half later, we had a collection of thirteen songs. We called it "Act the Scat" - with the central theme challenging the listener to walk their talk. Finally, we had produced something that people could hear and help them understand what DMHO is all about.



### *My first record deal...*

The album attracted the attention of the small, independent record label Lion of Zion Entertainment. They loved it and made the commitment to release it. Finally I was working with people that believed in me and in whom I could trust. We sold about 10,000 copies of "Act the Scat". Though that may not sound like much, it was 10,000 more than I ever thought I'd sell in my lifetime.

When it came time to record a follow-up album, I was devastated when I found out that the label had no money for the recordings. Flashbacks of roaches and no heat flooded my mind. The distribution company that sold Lion of Zion's product was deep in debt and went bankrupt, taking with it all the money from DMHO's album sales. Our band had been dealt deception and manipulation. The label had treated us well, but my band was again on the verge of extinction. The need for survival forced us to part ways.

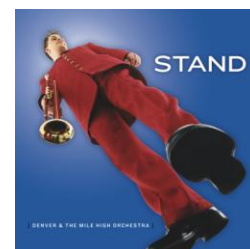
### *Time to take a stand...*



With no money from our record sales, and no other label interested in DMHO, the band determined to press on. We hit the road working hard at playing live shows. Driving in a fifteen-passenger van, we would go to any venue that would open the door to us, often driving through the night to make it on time. People would come not knowing what to expect, but they would leave having been encouraged, their lives touched. Reid Ribble, the roofing contractor who attended at our first show, managed to get us booked in Wisconsin for two shows.

Despite having faced so many obstacles, I still had great passion for DMHO and my vision for what the band could be. During one Wisconsin trip I shared this passion with Reid. The new music I had recently written could produce a higher quality album with better songs could help us achieve the music industry support we needed. But there was no money to make that recording. He and I both understood what a pivotal time this was in the life of DMHO. Believing in me and DMHO, Reid and his wife Deana invested the money to put us back into the studio.

Determined again to succeed, I pitched our new album to several record labels and music industry representatives. Again, there was little or no interest. The music industry seemed uninterested in a contemporary big band sound with a message of inspiration and hope. Reid and Deana Ribble felt differently, so they started their own record label, named it Reel Loud Records, and signed Denver & the Mile High Orchestra as their first artists. The Ribble's had seen first hand the impact DMHO was having on people's lives and were determined that this band would not fail. In June 2002, Reel Loud Records released Denver & the Mile High Orchestra's second album - "Stand". The title track received more radio airplay than all of our other songs combined. For the first time, our vision was expanding from regional to nationwide - from months at a time to years into the future.



With our success gaining momentum, new challenges began to surface. Reid and Deana could only work the record label part time as they continued their previous business ventures. We needed booking help, management help, publishing help - lots of help! And still, the music industry players were not willing to get involved. Determined not to give in to the industry's death sentence on DMHO, players within the band stepped up and assumed responsibilities. Today, our drummer manages all record company operations. One of our saxophone players took control of booking, and since 2003 has saturated our schedule. His success has even resulted in the formation of his own booking agency. My trombone player began caring for our music publication - which has resulted in his own small publishing company.

### *Quit? No way!...*

That cold night freezing at the kitchen table with thoughts of giving up dancing in my head as the roaches danced at my feet is still vivid in my memory. But now my thoughts are strengthened by the combined resolve of an amazing team of people who, regardless of the industry's dire predictions, refused to lie down and die.

But for what gain? So we can be rock stars? No. This is the same group of musicians that united for a concert before of 25 people. One reason we won't quit is because our music brings families together. Parents have often thanked me for featuring a style of music that is inviting to both their children and their parents. When was the last time you went to a concert and saw grandparents enjoying the same music their grandchildren enjoy? The Davis family from Oklahoma with their three boys have seen the band six times. They have even traveled 450 miles one way to come see DMHO. "We love to do things as a family," they said. "There are two things that the entire family enjoys tremendously- Disneyland and Denver and the Mile High Orchestra."

DMHO won't quit because there are a million musicians in high school bands across our country today. Each one of them needs to know that they have a purpose too.

DMHO won't quit because there are many people hurting in the world today. They need to be reminded that their lives matter. We work hard to create and perform music that will spark their imagination and stir their souls.



DMHO won't quit because of people like our friend, Cady Conrad - a ten-year-old leukemia patient whom the entire band visited in the hospital a few years back. She told her parents that she wanted to stay alive so she could go to a DMHO concert scheduled in her area. We're grateful she made it to that concert - and that her leukemia is in remission today.

*The future's looking bright...*

Since the "Stand" album, Reel Loud Records has released four other DMHO CD's and a live DVD. They have signed two other artists and have secured both national and international distribution. DMHO has performed at the 2002 winter and 2004 Summer Olympics games, and has been invited to the 2008 games in Beijing. The band continues to perform approximately 100 shows per year, ranging from internationally televised events to local festivals - and even in small churches. Not only are we working on new musical projects, we are also in the development stages of a family-oriented television show. My passion motivates all of us to improve our craft so we can provide quality entertainment for the whole family. With our "DMHO-U" program we seek to inspire the imaginations of children and adults alike. Through "DMHO-U" we present educational clinics in schools and communities, sharing our knowledge and experience about music and the music industry. Not bad for a bunch of band geeks in love with their horns! The future is looking very bright, and there is still so much left to do!

