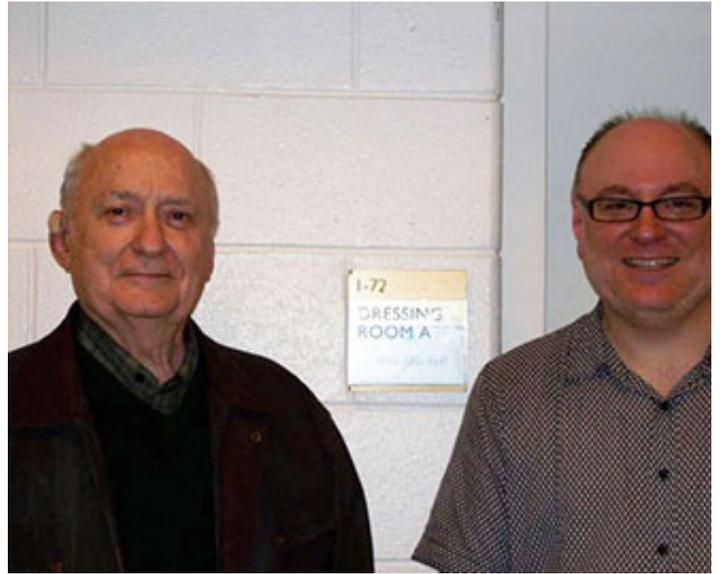


Thursday, June 11, 2015 - Michael A. Mitchell: A Life in Music

by Gillian Ellis

According to his own account, **Dr. Michael A. Mitchell**, professor of music and director of OU's choral activities, is a very lucky man. Throughout his life, *good fortune has shined down* on him; he has been *in the right place at the right time*; and he has had many an *incredible stroke of luck*. Anyone who knows Dr. Mitchell also knows that this is very far from the whole story of his success, but in the one area in which we have no control over our own destiny, the family into which we are born, Dr. Mitchell was undoubtedly lucky.

His parents, **Gary and Joan Mitchell**, always nurtured and supported his musical interests and ambitions. Mike's first musical memories are of singing with his mother, who was a theatre major in college. "I sang always, ever. I sang as long as I can remember. I sat in my mother's lap and sang before I could talk. When I was a kid we listened to records all day and sang songs . . . all sorts of little children's songs and folk songs, and whatever she was a fan of at the time. Dylan, Joni Mitchell. I can distinctly remember that I loved singing along with the soundtrack to the musical "Oklahoma!"



Gary Mitchell was a career officer in the US Air Force and a musician. After finishing his music degree at the University of Iowa, he entered the service and worked as the director of a men's chorus in Biloxi, Mississippi, where Mike was born. The Mitchells moved frequently, as many service families do. Their last posting was San Antonio, Texas. Before this move, which they made when Mike was 16, Gary Mitchell didn't just check up on the school districts. "Before my father bought a house," said Mike, "he went to the school and visited the choir and met the choir director. He basically interviewed him. He came back with photos of the school and the choir director."

In Omaha, Nebraska, where the Mitchells had spent the previous five years, Mike was fully immersed in a musical life. He had started formal piano lessons at age seven and begun to play clarinet in band in fifth grade. In eighth grade he came home one day to find his mother had bought him a used drum set, which allowed him to become, "a rock drummer -- along with a lot of other things." He played tenor saxophone "just for fun" and he said, "There was lots of singing, in the rock band, at church, at school, and with my friends for fun. It was a very singing culture."

He already had a vision of himself as a music teacher and his father made sure his son had what he needed when they moved to Texas. Mike said, "That was really neat parenting and he got it right. The school had a terrific choral program and a wonderful choir director."

His teacher, **Lawrence Burnett**, who is now professor of music and choral director at Carleton College in Minnesota, gave Mike amazing opportunities. "He let me run rehearsals and sectionals and at every concert I conducted several pieces. On the spring concert of my senior year I conducted half the concert. I had more experience leaving high school than most people have when they begin to teach. I owe a lot to him."

Dr. Mitchell completed his bachelor's degree in music at the University of Texas at Austin. He enjoyed the school, the city and the world class performance experiences he had there, but he also relishes the memory of his first church choir which he began to sing in at age 23.

As he was finishing his degree, the job of choir director came open at his old high school in San Antonio. The program had languished a little since Lawrence Burnett had moved on, but the community really wanted a wonderful choral program and he supplied Mike with all the resources needed to build one. By the time Mike left to begin his doctorate six years later, there were more than 300 students in the program, which had a full-time assistant and two part-time voice teachers.

Mike really does consider himself fortunate to have been accepted into the doctoral program at the Conservatory of Music at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where people came from all over the world to study with **Eph Ehly**. "He's a legend," said Mike. "He's one of the greatest living choral directors. We used to say five minutes with him will change your life and it's really true. He's an amazing man, an amazing musician and an amazing teacher and I got to spend every day with him for three years. I thought I was a good teacher and a good musician when I walked in the door, but I learned so much. When you are around someone like that you begin to see how they make it happen and you begin to adapt it to yourself."

Professor Ehly is coming to Oakland University in October to work with our choral students.



Voice program coordinator **Professor John-Paul White** met Mike at Detroit Metro airport when he came for his interview at OU in 1997 and the two found they had an easy rapport from the very beginning. Instrumental program coordinator **Associate Professor Greg Cunningham** was hired that same year, and Mike became close friends immediately. Together they worked on building their respective programs.

“There were good singers here and wonderful voice teachers,” said Mike, “but the choral component needed to be built up. It was a time of building and expansion at OU generally. The development of the choral element within the music program, part of Music, Theatre and Dance, all played a part in the blossoming of the university.”

Dr. Mitchell said that having great colleagues has been of great importance to him. He’s especially happy that the choral and voice programs have always felt they have the same mission: “We all want to give the students the best vocal and musical experiences we can.”

And speaking of experiences: the Oakland University Chorus, which is a nationally known choir, has been invited to perform with the **Rolling Stones** during the Detroit performance of their

Zip Code Tour. There is something of a veil of secrecy around the details, but if you have tickets for July 8 at Comerica Stadium, watch out for Dr. Mitchell and his students. Mike has been a rock music fan all his life; he created and teaches OU’s class on the history of rock music. “The Rolling Stones,” he said, “are as famous as people are ever going to be. This is the kind of experience that will stay with the students forever.”

On August 1, Mike will be promoted officially to Professor of Music. **On his faculty bio** you can see just some of the presentations, guest conducting appearances and tours he has undertaken over the years, both around the country and in Europe. He’s the President Elect of the American Choral Directors Association of Michigan.



On his personal website you will find links to performances by his choirs, and by other choirs performing his compositions. You will also find information about purchasing a composition, or commissioning one. Visit **music.mitchell.com**

It’s one of Mike’s compositions that will ensure his name is forever interwoven with the spirit of the university. He wrote the OU Fight Song and every time it’s played, his place in OU history is reaffirmed. That’s quite a legacy, but if you ask Mike about it, he’ll probably tell you he was just fortunate to be in the right place, at the right time, when a song was needed.

Photos:

- Upper: Gary Mitchell (left) and Michael Mitchell backstage at Orchestra Hall, Detroit, Michigan*
- Center: Professor Eph Ehly (left) and Professor Michael Mitchell*
- Lower: Michael Mitchell and members of the Oakland University Chorus*