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All National Music and the

Triumphant Robert W. Smith Music Festival

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UpClose

# All National Music and the Triumphant Robert W. Smith Music Festival

## UNIVERSAL



By Mike Lawson

In our July 2021 issue, we profiled Doug Brasell, founder of All National Music, and the Robert W. Smith Music Festival, first announced at Midwest Band Clinic in December 2019. The story detailed how they survived the COVID-19 closures by producing successful online programming with great results, and their plans to hold their first COVID-delayed in-person events.

SBO is delighted to report the first in-person festival happened in Orlando, Florida this past March 30-April 3. We traveled there and saw the Biloxi High School Wind Ensemble, under the direction of Travis Coakley, whose trip was coordinated with Group Travel Network, owned by Justin Schuler, also from Biloxi, Mississippi. We also saw the Charleston County School of the Arts Middle School, under the direction of Suzanne Reed. A local group, The First Academy, under the direction of Gordon Snyder, participated as well, performing and working with All National Music workshops and clinics.

We liked what we saw.

When a student booked this festival trip with All National Music, they got an inclusive package, designed as a *full festival experience*. The four-day, three-night trip included the festival experience and performances, breakfast each day, and the finale event, an awards breakfast. Also included were two-day park-to-park passes for Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure, plus All National Music commissioning a new work by Robert W. Smith for the high-scoring participants. The groups were housed at the Universal Orlando Resorts Dockside Inn, and Surfside Inn. These newer affordable, budget-minded rooms come with full park privileges, and sleep up to six in a room, making the costs bearable for parents and students.

The entire package averaged about \$560 per person without transportation, which of course, varies depending on choices the directors make, how they travel, and additional options for group meals, dinners, lunches, and Universal Orlando Resorts meal cards.

*We spoke with Brasell to get more information on the event, talk about what we saw, and what's coming next for All National Music and the Robert W. Smith Music Festival.*

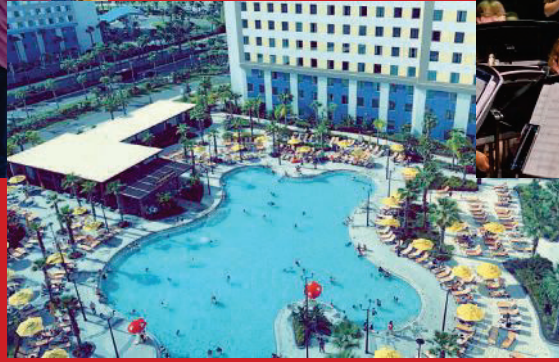
**SBO: Our day started at Universal Studios, where we watched Ms. Reed's students perform a score during our long-time-favorite workshop, "Sound Design and the Art of Foley," with a newer score from Robert W. Smith for *Despicable Me*. It was a great way for SBO to return to Universal Orlando Resorts.**

*DB: Part of the package included this workshop with Robert at Universal Studios on the sound stage. There are so many Universal Orlando Resort Youth Programs offerings that we want to make available for our programs, subject to availability. Robert is Universal Orlando Resort's music consultant and helped design this workshop, and its aligning with the standards from the National Association for Music Education. Students go into this live recording studio soundstage setting where they perform the background music, sound effects, dialog, the Foley experience, and more. Making those connections to the industry is a wonderful experience that kids in a band room or orchestra may not be thinking about. That's what the workshop is designed for, to unleash a new part of that musician's mind, and connect the technology, education, and the industry.*

That is our objective; our festival, plus connecting that workshop



Robert W. Smith leads master class workshop at The First Academy, Orlando, Florida



Smith conducts during the festival at Jones High School, Orlando, Florida

Groups stays at Universal Orlando Resorts' Dockside Inn and Surfside Inn, which each feature similar pools and amenities

with Robert being there. Universal Orlando Resorts Youth Programs have these workshops all year long, but with our group, he got to be standing there live with them and interact. The kids were absolutely on fire the whole workshop and very attentive. Their hands were raised, they were asking questions. They're communicating, everybody's engaged, and in awe of what it takes to be a part of something like this.

**SBO: Tell us about your partnership with Robert W. Smith, and the commissioning of a new work for the festival winners.**

*DB:* I got to talking with Robert when we launched this. "Robert, I want to do something different. Everybody can do a music festival. Many schools go and perform at one. There have been many different versions. I want to do something different where we bring together not only education but technology and the industry and put it all together. I want to do it in Orlando. I want to bring in the theme parks, I want to bring in a composer."

So, we had all these different integrations coming together. I said, "I want to add the icing on top, getting to work with you. I would like to commission a work. Instead of a trophy, we want to award the top-rated ensembles with a commissioned work you would then debut with those schools and directors in that next year. And then that would be premiered at their school then published thereafter worldwide. The festival keeps giving after this one event and then that work gets published and gets delivered back to the school with a printed copy, their name gets published and we get posters on the wall."

**SBO: The first venue you were at, the workshop ended up getting moved to a gymnasium and the beautiful theater suddenly wasn't available the way it was scheduled. Let's talk about the wonderful facility at Jones High School in Orlando, and their director Bruce Green.**

*DB:* We were slated to have all this at The First Academy in Orlando. Gordon Snyder was the fine arts director and band director. All throughout my life, I've tried to make connections. There's an old saying, I guess, make friends before you need them, and you have real connections and honest friendships. Gordon and I have had a good working relationship for a long time. He began to work to replace our venue when we had a last-minute change.

We have other connections there in Orlando. At Timber Creek High School, Devin Hoey goes way back to being one of Robert's students. Gordon's also a professional musician and is in the Main Street Band at The Magic Kingdom of Walt Disney World.

I made a call to Devin. Devin made some phone calls, which led to Bruce Green over at Jones High School. Bruce Green was very willing and ready to help. He had an incredible auditorium. He had the use of the grand piano and all the equipment, and said, "You know, I'm here to help. We want to make this a great experience."

**SBO: Faced with a literal last-minute venue change, you got Jones High School which is beautiful and that auditorium sounds spectacular. The festival participants got a wonderful place to have the first Robert W. Smith Festival.**

*DB:* I think it was fate. This location worked out even better. I appreciate Mr. Green, Jones High School, and Orange County schools for making that happen.

The other thing was everybody had just spent two years of not being able to do any of this. This spring was the very first opportunity, not only for us to bring this to life, but for these schools who had not traveled in two years. They haven't had a performance venue in two years or a regional trip, much less a national trip. There were no issues. It was like we had all rehearsed this. The people that work hard and are passionate and are givers wanted to bring these students remarkable experiences, that's what it was all about. We all had that same kind of heart going in the background no matter who was involved. And so, you know, and we had other tour companies involved that had to make some adaptations as well with busing and directions and everything else. Even one of the other tour operators said, "This festival was second to none."

**SBO: In the face of same-day sudden venue changes, your years of experience brought everything seamlessly into a fabulous festival performance. If I had only shown up for the day of the festival and did not know there was a change of venue, I wouldn't have known. All National Music is a new company, but an experienced company. This venue change could happen to any festival company.**

*DB:* All National Music may be a new company but I'm not a new event director. I'm not a new festival producer. I'm not a new band director. I spent 16 years, not only as a band director but going to these festivals, making connections. I am a former bowl games director and festival director, working for other companies that produce events, and one of Robert W. Smith's former students. The students and the directors, they didn't blink twice at the change. I said, "Hey, we're actually going to perform about 10 minutes away at a different, lovely venue." The directors said, "Okay. Just tell me where to go."

**SBO: Tell our readers about 2023.**



Robert W. Smith conducts during Sound Design and The Art of Foley workshop



Robert W. Smith instructs students from Charleston County School of the Arts



The Biloxi High School Wind Ensemble

**DB:** The Saturday after the event, Robert and I had a meeting and said, “Okay, this was a success. Everybody’s happy. The students had an incredible experience. What’s next?”

It is, of course, the next Robert W. Smith Music Festival. Robert will be back with us as the headliner. It will be March 23-26, 2023 back in Orlando. The first thing was, “Let’s talk about the format. Could we do anything different? Could we do anything better?”

Robert also writes for orchestra, and we wanted to expand this from wind ensembles to concert band, and orchestra at both the middle school and high school levels. What’s the best way to do that? Robert has some wonderful composers writing for RWS Music Company, who are also former students who are world-renowned composers, both domestic and internationally, for other publishers as well. Soon Hee Newbold is one of the top orchestra composers in our world today, from Los Angeles. He taught her at James Madison University. And then there is another composer who also came from James Madison University, Brian Balmages. He is one of the top published composers, both at the middle school and high school level. Of course, Robert W. Smith, is the participating namesake of the festival. We are featuring these composers with great educational merits, not just great writers, but great teachers, so when these students come in, both band and orchestra, they have that same immersive, great educational experience they’ve had with Robert. Now they can also have that with Brian and Soon Hee as well.

As soon as we announced it, schools from ten different states registered. We only have about ten slots left. The remarkable thing is, these directors that are represented are some of the best in music education. They’re state leaders, vice presidents, and directors of state MEAs. One of the groups, from North Carolina, played at Carnegie Hall last year and now wants to do this.

**SBO: Is there a venue selected yet?**

**DB:** We intend to utilize Jones High School. Depending on registrations, we could possibly make some modifications on that, but I was so thrilled and honored at Jones with Mr. Green, we had such a good experience there.

With Universal Orlando Resorts, we have several programs already booked. We also have added another hotel near Disney, which can host the rest of any of the other groups we have. It’s in the Celebration area, right outside of Disney. We have one group that’s coming that has half of their group have a Universal experience and the other half is having a Disney experience, and they

still get to do a performance festival, because our performance is off-site. We’ve got some incredible things happening.

Not only that, the Hard Rock Live will host the culminating awards event in their live music venue theater for all the groups. The Hard Rock has committed to us to be able to host our culminating event in the Hard Rock Live at CityWalk. I’m very excited about that.

**SBO: This all speaks to your experience, dedication, and partnerships that you formed over the years and the people you decided to align yourself with.**

**DB:** We recently brought in a very experienced long-time managing director for a very large travel company, Travel Leaders Student Tours, her name is Debra Smith, from Mobile, Alabama. She is on board as not only one of our consultants but as our premier travel and tour provider. So, when it comes to flight, bus, multiple hotel needs, and venue booking, she has a large network and the ability to take care of all those things very quickly and a large staff that can accommodate that. They are the exclusive travel provider of this next event. I am the festival host and director of the festival performances and event, and she handles all our operations logistically.

**SBO: So, are most of the groups looking to stay on-site at Universal Orlando Resorts again?**

**DB:** Absolutely. We want them to stay at Universal properties. I will tell you; Universal Orlando Resorts have become very popular after many people were not able to travel for so long. They are almost to the point where they’re sold-out in March and April 2023. We have a room block there, but we are almost to capacity on that. That’s why we went ahead and booked that second property down near Disney so we can have other options.

**SBO: If a group wants to be at Universal, when do they need to apply for this?**

**DB:** We may have two slots left that we could fit at Universal. Everybody else will go to Celebration, at The Grand Orlando, an incredible resort totally renovated by Marriott. It’s five minutes outside of Disney’s gate. Our target date is the end of July, that would be the first big deadline. The estimated overflow deadline will be around Labor Day. We need a kind of a deadline and then we will deal with, I guess, fall registrations as space is available after that September point.

**More info at [allnationalmusic.com](http://allnationalmusic.com)**