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## **Walter Bryant: He has a musical way with TV ads**

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH

Composing melodies in his basement studio, Walter Bryant becomes a modern-day Bach.

Like Bach, his main instrument is a piano. But a 21st century one with 88 keys that can morph with a flick of a switch into anything from a herd of violins to a muted trumpet to the soft tinkling of a child's music box.

Bryant's studio is a blur of electronics: Towers of monitors and mixers that can slow down or speed up a melody, gadgets to change the attack of notes or their duration. Recorders. Pitch dials and volume controls. Click tracks (a device that keeps time). Computer programs that display an entire score, and one fuzzy microphone that hangs over the keyboard waiting to collect the sound of a human voice.

Like Bach, Bryant is prolific. His music is heard by people across the globe — basically anyone who has watched television commercials the last 25 years.

Thirty seconds of musical brilliance tickling the ears, and pulling the heartstrings, of millions.

Yet few people know his name.

Fewer still know that the music was composed not in New York or Los Angeles, but in Kansas City, a place where the name Bryant is certainly famous, but not for making music.

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Bryant grins when he talks about how often people slip up and call him Arthur.

“I think of it as an honor,” he says with a little nod. “I love barbecue.”

Bryant also has diverse musical taste. Music on his iPod ranges from a wind ensemble to a country song by Garth Brooks to a Beatles classic to something from Stan Freberg. “(Freberg's) insight into parodies are classic,” he says.

Freberg also was a voice actor for Warner Bros. cartoons, which Bryant loves. Bryant even sports a tattoo on his right ankle of the Warner Bros.' Michigan J. Frog, a character who sings pop music, ragtime, and Tin Pan Alley hits — always struttin' in a top hat and tails.

Looking around his music room, Bryant apologizes for the disarray. Scraps of score paper cover one table. Some are dog-eared, with a few chords scrawled across the page. On one are the handwritten words, “30 Seconds” that loom like a headline.

This particular sheet of music is a souvenir of his latest work. In November, he flew to Chicago to help record and mix his composition, a song for Southwest Airlines.

It's the commercial where employees, not actors, sing a cappella and dance on the sidewalk, praising travel on Southwest. The spot was finished and aired even before his plane landed back in Kansas City. He watched it that night, while munching on a late-night sandwich.

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Bryant was born and raised in Kansas City. He grew up in the Rosedale area, learning organ, violin and piano (which he first hated) in grade school before switching to the bass.

“I was lazy, and didn't like taking my instrument home everyday,” he remembers about the upright bass. A bigger instrument meant he could leave it at school. “And part of the problem with the piano at home was that we had a rotten instrument, with broken wires.”

He played in the school orchestra but kept eyeing a tuba on a nearby stand. “Pep band was way cooler than orchestra,” he says and laughs. So, he learned how to play the tuba, too.

All of these instruments helped expand his musical knowledge. Learning bass lines, then chords and harmonies on the piano gave him the fundamental tools he needed to become an arranger and a composer.

What fascinated him most were movie and television scores. For years, he says, he couldn't talk about one Christmas episode on “The Andy Griffith Show” without tearing up. It was written by Earle Hagen, the Emmy-award winning composer of classic television theme songs. “The music is still so perfect, with these light motives in minor keys representing one of the characters. ... And then ever so softly at the end, you can hear it again in the background as the character starts to open up. ...It's television writing at its finest.” Hagen died in 2008.

Bryant studied music at the University of Missouri - Kansas City conservatory, earning a music education degree. From then on jobs in music came his way. “I was very lucky that people called me.”

One of his very first music jobs was as a pianist, then assistant conductor and eventually director of music at Worlds of Fun, arranging and conducting the live shows, something he still does as a freelancer.

He was music director of the Kansas City Kings until the basketball team left for Sacramento in 1985. Bryant played organ and arranged music for the Kingsmen, a band he put together and named. He conducted the Chiefs band for five years, as well.

He's even played his tuba in circus bands in Kansas City. Once, a wayward rocket zipped near the band, causing him to throw his instrument to get out of its path.

He still has the dent in his Miraphone tuba to prove it.

Bryant has been married to Julie Hunter for 25 years, and they have three children: daughters Alex, 24; Audrey, 22; and a son, Parker, 20. Julie likes to tease their children — all big basketball fans — and say that their dad used to play for the Kansas City Kings. “Well, he did,” she says, grinning.

Julie Bryant also enjoys Christmastime, when so many of their friends and family put out their decorations, including a Hallmark snowman from a few years ago. It plays a Dixieland version of Christmas carols on a miniature piano.

“I love to tell them, ‘That’s Walter.’ He’d never tell people himself,” she says.

Yes, Bryant also is the musician-behind-the-scenes on several animated Hallmark Christmas decorations. He shrugs, a little embarrassed. Bryant has recorded dozens of the Wal-Mart commercials with the bouncing yellow smiley faces flying across the screen as they roll back prices.

In one spot, the smiley face whistles a slightly different version of “Put on a Happy Face.”

That piece was a tribute to Hagen, who composed “The Andy Griffith Show” theme song. Bryant did the whistling himself, just like Hagen did on the Griffith show.

Another spot shows the smiley face wearing a cowboy hat and lassoing price numbers. The music is an adaptation of “Rawhide.” The whip-cracking sounds and the “Ya-a-a-w!” at the end is Bryant’s.

And in yet another commercial, the smiley faces bounce around to a variation of the “Secret Agent Man” song. Bryant used a strong bass line, adding a dash of whimsy, and always ending with some kind of low baritone, growly finish.

He loves the challenges and creative process of writing for commercials.

“They’re so fun to do,” he says.

Thirty seconds of joy.

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“Commercials are supposed to make people feel good. That’s their job,” says Jim Wheeler, owner of Wheeler Audio in the Crossroads. Wheeler has worked with Bryant for 28 years.

“Walter has mastery over damn near every musical style there is,” Wheeler says. “Rock, blues, hip-hop, jazz, country, R&B ...” Wheeler was so impressed that he bought the same electric piano — a Kurzweil PC88 — that Bryant uses at home for Wheeler’s own studio so that his friend doesn’t have to haul his there for every job.

Wheeler considered it an investment. When Bryant is the composer behind the commercial, Wheeler says, it’s always a hit, making everyone happy: producers, clients, musicians.

Bryant wrote the music and Wheeler was the sound engineer for five Commerce Bank commercials. In one, there’s a man and a younger woman. The man looks like he’s her dad, but he turns to the camera and says that he’s her bank.

Another spot features an older woman in a car with a younger woman. “I’m not her mother; I’m her bank,” she tells the camera.

In all the Commerce spots the music is a happy, upbeat, stride-like piano.

And it’s Bryant playing.

But Wheeler’s favorite of those spots is of a man smiling at a toddler. The man tells the camera he’ll watch the girl grow up. The music is the same theme as the others, but much softer than a piano. Although still carrying the shuffle beat, it now sounds like a tiny music box. The change was Bryant’s idea and the client loved it, Wheeler remembers.

“It can almost make you tear up,” he says. “Walter makes the notes leap off the page. And it’s not just that his execution is impeccable, but he’s keenly connected to the vibe and the emotion of what the client wants.”

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On the 15th floor at Bernstein-Rein, an advertising agency that has created commercials for some of the largest companies in the world, the elevator doors open to a view of the Kansas City skyline. In the corner of the room is a coffee bar within view of a big-screen television that plays one commercial again and again: the Bayer Advantage spot from the 90’s to sell flea medicine for pets.

The spot opens with a litter of roly-poly Dalmatian puppies, then a singing Australian shepherd puppy that bumps into two white kittens and one very fat gray tabby. They all look into the camera, singing in their best childish, squeaky-like voices about keeping fleas away. (The melody sounds a lot like “If You’re Happy and You Know It.”)

Bryant, who had been hired to create the music, wanted that child-like sound. One morning he woke up his children an hour before school and had them sing into the microphone in his basement studio.

Producers liked it and hired professional voice actors for the final version. But the professional recording lost some of its innocence. So they asked Bryant to mix his children's voices back into it. Years later, Bryant's younger daughter used the money from that commercial to buy her first car.

Bryant's musical reputation for commercials is known nationwide, says Mark Miller, vice president and creative team leader for Bernstein-Rein.

"Commercials are a tough business," says Miller, who worked on the Wal-Mart campaigns for two decades. "Music is so subjective and everyone has an opinion about the 'finished' product: the clients, the writers, the producers."

Miller stops for a moment, then smiles.

"We have a private joke about Walter: He is so incredibly talented, it's just too bad he's not easier to work with. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, you know," he adds.

Miller tells horror stories of being in a hot, crowded recording studio, listening to a track again and again, waiting for a client to approve the music. It's not uncommon for someone to ask to change this measure or that ending, or add a bass line, or something else. Sometimes, a client will hate the entire thing.

Bryant doesn't get upset. He lives by the philosophy that the client is always right.

Miller has watched Bryant nod his head in agreement, take out a pencil and rewrite an entire score in an hour, pleasing everyone. "Every time some campaign falls short on a deadline, and we need the music fast, we call Walter," he says. "More than once, he's pulled our you-know-whats out of the fire.

"And clients adore him. They'll ask, 'You're gonna have Walter do it, aren't you?'

"In this business, it's all about confidence. ...Gosh, if I needed something Aaron Copland-like, Walter could give that to us. We've asked him to duplicate a song, changing it just enough so we don't have copyright issues. Walter has often given us a better version than the original."

Miller shakes his head, remembering some moment with Bryant. He's hired him for nearly 25 years and he struggles trying to compound all those experiences into words.

"I don't think there's anyone I respect more for their talent and how I feel about them as a person. ...He's a genuinely good person. He's a virtuoso on piano and as a composer, arranger, songwriter and a master of the technology.

“He’s a one-man band.”

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One of Bryant’s music jobs is directing the Wesleyan Choir at Platte Woods United Methodist Church, a group of 40 to 50 singers, depending on who makes it to church that morning. On this day, before the first worship service, they have a half-hour rehearsal and one last chance to fix a section in the piece.

Sitting at an upright piano, Bryant lays down a strong bass line with his left hand while playing all four harmonic parts with his right. On some lines he plays the alto part a little stronger to encourage the singers to sing stronger on their counterpoint melody.

“Pretty good. Not bad at all,” he says, waving them to stop. The singers beam. These singers aren’t professionals, and like any church choir they’re here to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” the best they can. This week’s hymn piece is appropriate: “Hold Us Together.” Bryant does exactly that.

For the next three hours he conducts the choir, plays softly behind spoken prayers in the service and even sings himself as the collection plate works around the room. He is a tenor, free of vibrato, and right on pitch. An honest voice. It’s not fancy or schooled, but perfect for these solemn moments.

The congregation applauds when he’s done.

Soprano Chris Evans has been a member of the choir for nearly 24 years. Bryant became the official paid director at his church about seven years ago, she says, but he’d been working with the choir on a volunteer basis since the mid-’80s.

“Walter makes us better as a group than we are as individuals. I love it when we’re rehearsing something really sacred, and we’ve been working hard and it’s come together and just before we go out to sing he’ll say, ‘Let’s go rock one.’

“He makes us laugh. It’s so Walter.”

Throughout this performance the choir watches for his tiny grin or grimace. “Walter is so honest with his feelings,” says another singer.

They all want to please him. They all respect him.

And they already know who Bryant will credit as his biggest influence. .

Although he’s not an overtly religious man, he is a man who believes.

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It's Friday night at Danny's Big Easy restaurant, with its red walls and low yellow lights and a standing-room-only crowd. The audience is loud, some a little tipsy, and definitely ready to be entertained.

Bryant's back is against a picture window that frames a neon sign advertising for the Blue Room, which is across the street. Bryant plays his electric piano and Jürgen Welge is on drums. As Dave Stephens, the featured singer, banter with the crowd, Bryant lobs music jokes. Welge answers him in that ba-da-boom drum response.

When Stephens talks about the gigs the group has in the next few weeks, Bryant answers by splashing out a little "Powerhouse," the famous assembly-line music from the Warner Bros. cartoons. When Stephens praises the catfish he ate at Danny's, Bryant flicks a switch on his electric piano to play a few measures of zydeco music. When trumpeter Lonnie McFadden arrives, a little late, Bryant teases him with the tick-tock theme from "Jeopardy."

Stephens begins crooning into the microphone, singing through a trombone mute and sounding like a nasal-twang recording. Then he launches into a Duke Ellington standard, his white spats swinging as he jitterbugs on the wood floor. Before some dancing couples come out to join him, a burlesque dancer jumps in front of the band.

She grinds her hips and hoists her petticoated skirt, almost directly in front of Bryant. The audience cheers.

And there is, perhaps, just the tiniest of grins on Bryant's face.

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Bryant is doing what he loves, whether it's performing with local jazz groups like the Beach Nuts or Red Onion Jazz Babies, conducting a church choir or composing a snippet of music to make people feel good.

After so many years of 30-second recordings many of them are a blur to Bryant himself. But the business isn't what it was like even three years ago, he says with a hint of sadness showing. Times are especially difficult during the recession, he says. Commercials pay less and the clients want more from each composition.

"I try to hire live musicians when I can but more often the clients aren't paying enough," he says. Instead, he often must disappear into his basement studio, set up his equipment and play the individual parts himself.

Bryant is ready for just about any job he's called for. Sometimes, he says, he's even written music in his dreams. And Bryant doesn't mind that he's unknown to most. But he smiles wide in an aw-shucks kind of way when someone learns that the music for a commercial they've seen so many times is one of his.

“My life is pretty simple,” he says. “I’ve made my living doing something I’m very blessed to do.

“Play music. I hope I can do it a long time.”

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## **SAMPLES**

To hear five minutes of Walter Bryant’s music go to [www.walterbryantmusic.com](http://www.walterbryantmusic.com).

Here are links to the Commerce Bank Commercials, from engineer Jim Wheeler.

[www.wheeleraudio.com/video/lunch.mov](http://www.wheeleraudio.com/video/lunch.mov)

[www.wheeleraudio.com/video/amazing.mov](http://www.wheeleraudio.com/video/amazing.mov)

[www.wheeleraudio.com/video/waiter.mov](http://www.wheeleraudio.com/video/waiter.mov)

[www.wheeleraudio.com/video/bff.mov](http://www.wheeleraudio.com/video/bff.mov)

[www.wheeleraudio.com/video/tree.mov](http://www.wheeleraudio.com/video/tree.mov)

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