

The Accidental Academic: Or What Can You Do With a BGS Degree?

by Allan J. Ryan, Class of '75

This essay first appeared in *Ecclectica*, Brandon University Online Journal, September 2002

In 1973, I was a struggling singer/songwriter eking out a living in and around Toronto, Ontario. Despite a clutch of favourable stage reviews and a couple of major label recordings under my belt my music career was not igniting. It seemed the material was too eclectic, too hard to classify, and sometimes too funny. (In hindsight, I'm sure it was "postmodern" before its time). The most popular song in my repertoire back then was titled, "I'm Going Back to University When I Die", an uplifting little gospel ditty extolling the virtues of organ donation. While a concert favourite, it did not inspire heavy radio airplay. I felt the need to do something more substantial with my life.

In April of that year I married my wife, Rae. That was a substantial and wise move that precipitated a second wise and substantial move. A chance gift of Dee Brown's now-classic book, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, led us to Brandon where I enrolled in Brandon University's fledgling Bachelor of General Studies program. It was the beginning of a grand adventure that still continues.

I came to Brandon to study Aboriginal culture, and the BGS program allowed me to do just that - no mandatory Psych 101, no PoliSci, just Aboriginal culture. Nice. (This was before the Native Studies program was formally instituted.) Under the guidance of Dr. Samuel Corrigan, Dr. Leigh Syms and other faculty, I immersed myself in Aboriginal ethnography, language, literature, AND ART. It was at BU that I discovered Aboriginal art. What a revelation! The BGS program also allowed me to transfer credits from the Ontario College of Art where I had earned a four year diploma in Advertising Design. I was able to complete my BGS degree in two years. Nice again.

When I first entered Brandon University I considered myself a songwriter taking a short break from the music business. (I still tell people that's what I'm doing. They laugh.) Upon graduation in 1975, I was awarded the Gold Medal in General Studies, the Silver Medal in Anthropology and the John and Catherine Robbins Graduate Scholarship. This was a bit overwhelming for a wayward guitarist from art school! If only my songs had garnered such accolades, I thought. Faculty members began to ask, in all seriousness, where I planned to do graduate studies. GRADUATE STUDIES!? I later told them that after careful consideration Tucson sounded nice. Lots of Native people, lots of Native art, and lots of stately palms and desert cactus encircling the University of Arizona campus. Upon arrival, we found that a new band of musicians called The Eagles was playing a new brand of country-rock that wafted over the airwaves throughout our southwestern sojourn, providing a perfect background score that was in tune with both the

times and the landscape. I earned an MA in Anthropology and Museum Studies in Tucson. Our extended moment in the southern sun was a memorable stop on a journey of learning and discovery that I trace back to the possibilities presented in Brandon's BGS program.

That journey has taken us full circle and then some - back to Toronto, back to Brandon and Thompson, Manitoba, to Paris (briefly), Vancouver, Victoria, and most recently to Ottawa where I now hold the New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art & Culture at Carleton University. Anchored in Canadian Studies this unique position allows me to develop new courses, teach Aboriginal studies and art history, and oversee graduate students pursuing a range of individually-tailored interdisciplinary research projects. The opportunities for creative scholarship are not unlike those afforded students in Brandon's BGS program.

This past summer I was privileged to return to Brandon University to participate in the Summer Institute of Indigenous Humanities. I was invited to teach a course on Aboriginal art, using as a text, my book, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, published in 1999 by UBC Press and the University of Washington Press. Based on my 1995 PhD dissertation from the University of British Columbia, the book had its genesis in Thompson, Manitoba, where I was then teaching for Brandon University. Constructed as an ongoing discourse on the comic and creative spirit infusing contemporary Aboriginal arts, the book seeks to blur the boundaries between anthropology, art history, ethnography and popular culture. This exploration of academic and aesthetic fusion began during my days as a BGS student.

In the year 2000 *The Trickster Shift* was honoured with an American Book Award for its contribution to multicultural literature. It is an award that I hope honours all the Aboriginal artists whose words and works are featured in the book, and by extension, all their relations. To mark the award I was given a number of small round gold seals to affix to the dust jacket of the books. To my eye, they bear an uncanny resemblance to miniature gold records.

What goes around comes around?