

## **Interview with Issac Lanier 13 April 2018 Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama**

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:00:03] Great. Thank you for being with us Mr. Lanier. We're just going to get a sort of background of where you came from, where you grew up, what got you interested and what got you to the place you are currently as band director of Robert C. Hatch High School. So won't you tell us when and where you were born?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:00:32] My name is Issac Lanier the third. I'm 26 years old. I was born on October 20th 1991 to Cassandra Bonnor and Issac Lanier Jr. in Albany New York Army Medical Center. And some unfortunate situations occurred where I had to be relocated down south with more and more immediate family. My great grandfather Paul Revere Bonnor, World War II vet. He's actually still living 96 years old. Going on 97. No health problems or anything like that. So he was a lot younger than when I was a child so I actually lived with him when I first got to Alabama relocated from Albany to Selma. My mother had me her first year in college. So she's always been a constant reminder of hard work pays off because unfortunately I didn't have a childhood like I would have liked to. You know we never go to all the parties and things like that because I always had to be with her wherever she had to work. You know and so we made do. And now I'm a collegiate grad band director. I think I'm somewhat successful.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:01:46] I went to Concordia College at first, where I then transferred to Alabama State University under the direction of Dr. James B. Oliver and Talabani Hall. I learned a lot from Dr. Mr. Isaac Bill who's my lower brass instructor, excellent trombone player. The Bristols-- Catarina Bristol, Doug Bristol, Ms. Johnson. A lot of people helped musically cultivate me to where I am so I can't just say that one particular school is responsible for my outcome. But I went to Alabama State from 2010 to 2012 where I transferred to Talladega College under the director of Miguel Bonds. And I graduated from Talladega Bachelor of Music in 2016. But along that way every summer pretty much any time I could get into anything I would. You know, even if we was vacationing. If I couldn't sneak to nobody's bandroom on vacation I wouldn't go. So I was introduced to different people. I spent one summer in Memphis Tennessee where I was mentee under Kellen Christian, Michael Cowans, James Thomas. A lot of great high school band directors because I knew I wanted to be a high school band director and they were very successful in what they were doing. My high school band director Brandon Williams as well as Bailey Dawson former director of Alabama State, Selma High School, Francis Marion High School, and Concordia College. Even Clarence Gibson from Texas Southern University, he helped out a lot when in undergrad. When it's time to do composing and arranging he loves to write music and you know loves to help out. So I can't just say that one person is responsible for my musical upbringing. And I'm kind of happy for it because I'm not stuck to one particular style when I'm teaching my students no matter where we're at.

[00:03:54] You know we'll be able to, they'll be able to adapt, you know what to do with marching band, concert band, any type of ensemble. If it's theory, anything, they'll be able to do it and I'm happy for that and appreciative. Hope I answered your question.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:04:11] Is this your first position as a teacher out of college?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:04:15] No sir. My first position was actually at Greensboro High School in Greensboro Alabama. But I only stayed there one year and now I'm here, Robert C. Hatch High School, go Bobcats!

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:04:31] You've been here for how long?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:04:33] I was hired a week before school started. I was supposed to be relocating to Memphis but it was kind of hectic to just pack up and leave. From state to state you know in two weeks when you just graduated from college you just drug everything home, now you have to drag everything into an apartment so to keep from rushing and possibly potentially making a mistake, you know I just waited and I got a call and I accepted. And ever since I've been here it's been up and down. But I mean that comes with the territory and you know nothing is going to be completely perfect exactly how you want, what you want all the time. But what I can say is I have an excellent group of kids that work very hard because I had to completely rebuild a band when I got to the school. I had to spend a lot of my money. Not that I'm complaining about it because they worked. I had to buy some instruments. I bought sousaphones, trombones, trumpets, even a couple of drums, you know, to make it go because they were coming to practice and doing everything I asked them to do.

[00:05:45] And as a band director teacher mentor parent whatever you want to label me as long as the child is coming, being honest, trying hard, giving their all. I mean either they got it or they don't. But at the same time how can you get rid of a kid like that. They doing absolutely everything you say and trying their hardest so we've been working hard since September. I spent the whole month of August recruiting. Got a nice amount of students and taught them how to march and keep in mind this is still actual football season going on so we're set out to perform at games, and we'll talk. OK look it's going to be OK. We just got to work on standing on the right foot. You know one thing led to another we start marching together. We started chanting together. Once we started seeing other different bands that we battled. So my high school, Southside High School, Aliceville, other schools that was in our area and in our district and we've seen them at parades and football games. I just thought it was amazing because still to this day a lot of people can't believe the kids have only been playing six months. They just started playing in September. You have people who play two or three years that is not producing this type of quality. Not to sound arrogant, because we do work very hard day in day out 3:30 to potentially anywhere between 5:00 to 7:30, you know, just to make sure and ensure that it's right and I have ranges of fourth and fifth grade all the way to twelfth grade and everybody plays and knows exactly the same, so can't ask any more.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:07:25] You were talking about your mother and her work ethic, and I think I can see a similar work ethic in you and what you've done with these kids, so I'm really impressed. Could you talk a little bit about some of your earliest musical memories?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:07:56] Oh, man. Early musical memories. I don't like to mention this story too much. This is kind of what kick-started me to really being serious about band because me being from New York I mean we have orchestras and symphonic bands and other ensembles but the way we do marching band in the south is not a comparison at all. You know the North might as well not even have it. And so you know it was a joke when I first got here. You know I was a kid from New York. You know I thought I was a little bit better than everybody you know, knew more. Go to a football game, I'm like wow, it's halftime, let's go to a concession stand. They're like no, no, no, no, the band is about to start. I'm like, so? They're like, Dude, do you know where you at? Just stay right here. You'll see why nobody's moving. And that was my first time seeing a halftime show, by Selma High School, it was in about 2004. I was in middle school. I'll never forget it. My cousin she was a dancer and she danced at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta Georgia. After she graduated boy we all went to support her and the crowd went crazy. It was a euphoric feeling you know. I had never experienced anything like that because the football game I was going to if the crowd weren't cheering, I mean you could throw a couple of tumbleweeds out there and get it going more than anything that you would hear. So to see the crowd roaring the way they did for this band. You know I could, I never understood it. You know I'm just like band stuff, you know, little band geeks. And then I met someone that I just couldn't keep my eyes off of. Turns out she was in the marching band, and because I liked her I changed the complete perspective on a marching band and she

happened to play baritone. And I said well I want to spend time with you. You know what she told me? If you want to spend time with me you have to get in the band because I'm going to be at practice every day and I'm not missing. I proceeded the next morning to ask to go to the restroom and I snuck to the bandroom and I said, Do you have another opening? I want to play baritone. And I think he was surprised, Mr. Williams was surprised, because at 2003 2004 the baritone euphonium especially in marching band wasn't a very popular instrument. And I said OK I'm gonna do this. And let's get back for a present day. We had the performance and it was me and another guy she ended up having to miss the performance. Got to the battle with Jefferson Davis High School in Montgomery, Alabama. Cramton Bowl. I'll never forget it. That's when Facebook was just getting popular. We got on Facebook and you know they typed to me. OK. We'll know we're going out. Do you guys you know I'm like No you're not. You know I'm on the line you know defending for my city because nobody was social on the internet like that. And turns out the guy that played baritone for the other school, his name is Thomas Perry.

[00:10:50] He's a band director currently. We're all band directors; we're all stuck with it. He's currently the band director at Fairly High School in Memphis Tennessee. And he graduated a year before me in high school. So he's kind of always been like a big brother to me. Been an excellent player. You know he's very modest and humble and that's a quality that I admire so you know once I met him it's kind of like meeting your match. I was like wow he plays better than me. You know he can talk trash pretty good too. Like I can't beat him right now. You know and they just really had me just mentally messed up. You know the rest of the game you know going to try as hard as you can. You've got somebody laughing at you. It's only going to make you even more upset. So I stuck with it until that day. I knew I was going to be one of the best baritone players in Alabama or if I wasn't going to be the best you would definitely remember me and everybody would know who I was. And here in 2018 from 2005 I think we made that nationally known on the East Coast.

[00:11:51] I play for many ensembles: Selma High School, Alabama State University, Talladega College, Memphis Mass Band, Memphis Alumni Band, Mississippi Alumni All-Star Band, [00:12:03] Ellaline [0.5] Louisiana Leadership Institute, a bunch of different ensembles just to take and kind of cultivate myself with different areas to adapt myself to be able to do different styles of play not only being able to compete myself with Alabama baritone players but I could go sit in any bandroom and do just as well as anybody. That was my ultimate goal. You know not to ultimately be the best but be one of the greats one of the legends and be remembered. So now I've reached that, it's time to pass it on to the kids and you know make a couple more me's and hopefully to be better than me.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:12:37] So the baritone was what you essentially cut your teeth on with learning music.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:12:43] Yes sir.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:12:43] Did you get to have a teacher, you just learned through the band program, the band director?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:12:49] My band director, he--he's very old school. He showed me I was young and naive. So of course I didn't listen but he told me some things and he set them in place and set me up and said You got to practice. It's like riding a bike you know once you got it you got it. You know might not ride it for a while. But it's nothing to pick it back up. And so I kept that in mind. He always had this phrase blow, and when you can't blow, blow some more. That has to do with stamina and endurance. I never really had a personal instructor per se other than Mr. Isaac Bell at Alabama State University. Had another guy, [00:13:33] Kevin Darlington, [0.8] he's the former baritone section leader at Alabama State. And also I always used to watch a lot of videos of Mr.

Thurman Demondrae Thurman. He was the euphonium teacher at Alabama State University, and left the year before I got there. So I've just been watching and just learned. I'm a vicarious learner.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:13:56] I listen I watch and I'll just practice until I get it. You know unless I, until I have it figured out, you got to show me. I'm not going to let you do anything else until you show me.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:14:07] I see you using that practice of watching and listening with your students. You're always encouraging them to pay attention to what they see.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:14:17] The reason I do that is when I did education classes in undergrad, one thing that was always taught is that you as a teacher have--you have to stay creative because everybody's not the same and everybody doesn't learn the same. I can take and give you a sheet of paper and say OK follow these instructions and you can do it. You on the other hand, I have to take and physically show you, and then you say, Ok, that's all you're doing? Everything translates different to everybody so I make sure I have multiple methods on deck and at any time to make sure the result is the same because it's not about how you get there, it's about how you end up.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:14:54] I'm interested in the community band that you've started. Can you tell us more about that?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:15:00] In 2011 I took a semester off from school. So I'm Alabama and central Alabama area. People who refer to it as the Black Belt of Alabama because of Highway 80, it just kind of goes straight across the wasteland of Alabama. And so to say I don't want to say I got bored. But it was kind of there and I was working on the unity thing.

[00:15:21] I just kind of sat down with some friends one day I was like, man, what if we got all the people from Selma High School and Southside because it's not unified you know a lot of violence and stuff like that going on so I'll say Man, what if I can take and find a way to fuse these bands together because it's never been done before. I have to take somebody that is well known on both ends. Everybody from my band know me and I had a lot of relatives in the rival band. First cousin actually played the same instrument that I played. And so we just kind of hung out for a summer and we brainstormed on it. And so it was really I can't say it was on me. We all kind of came up with the idea, but I went to school and you know I ran with it I'd say Mr. Williams man look I have an idea. What do you think? And mentoring just like here at Samford your students sat down and played with mine, boost the confidence levels and skill level. I took and had summer students from Concordia which is right across the way to come over and sit in with those practices and they can help cultivate those skills. They said man, we sound good. Let's just try this song out. Sound good. And we had a guy graduate from a school called Dallas County High School, Michael Johnson. He's in the NFL now and he does an annual camp every year to come back and give back to the community and help kids with football. He brings some of his NFL friends out in a different kind of camp showing different drills to just kind of improve all their skills all the way around on the football field and it just so happened we needed an event to play at.

[00:17:02] And I was able to reach his mom and we were performed for Michael Johnson's camp and it ended up on Michelle Obama's website because she had a campaign about obesity and losing weight and stuff. And so I mean it was just a blessing you know me just being a kid thinking man what if we put these bands together you know to stop some beef or you know some of the violence, you know maybe they see OK, we all in it for the same reason we just looking at it differently. Then maybe it will solve some of the problems because communication is the main part of it all. So it just happened and there was born a Black Belt United Mass Band. This year we're hoping to do it again now that some years have passed, I've graduated, I've had friends that graduated, a couple of people

that graduated from Selma High as well as me have graduated and we all have marching bands that can work and are strong year round, so hopefully to pull those together, [00:17:55] in half the whole. [2.2] Now almost 200 people combined with four high schools, four or five schools, started small but the faith of a mustard seed will get you going.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:18:09] You told me the last time I was down at your high school that the band director at Francis Marion High School was a very good friend of yours.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:18:20] Yes sir. We started in the band together at Alabama State University. His name is Tony DeVaughn, one of the best trombone players I know personally. And it's just crazy that we kind of started school together and we kind of finished around the same time and we got placed in a county where there are only two high schools, so it's just like me versus him you know. So it's competitive and it's fun and all in the same sense because we still have to help each other because we all we got and so.

[00:18:46] But at the end of the day you're going to have orange and blue and we'll have on purple and gold. Excellent. He's one of the schools will also be participating in the All-Star band.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:18:58] That's so great. You're talking about how music can help address some of the problems in society and some of the challenges in society. Tell me more about how you think that happens.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:19:09] I just think it happens because music breaks the human down to the simplest form. I mean music doesn't have a color, it doesn't have an identity, you know it doesn't have a race, it doesn't have a gender. It's for everybody. And once they start playing it's either going to make you feel a couple of ways: happy, sad, excited, you know. But either way music is one of the only things in the world that can completely hack into a human and control everything without even trying to. And so with that being said I just try to push the music you know so so much because a lot of people don't even know how much regular life in everyday things relates to band. You know analogies like we talk about tempo. Tempo is in everything. You can go fast in a car or you can go fast walking on your feet. You know dynamic contrast you know you can talk loud and it would affect the way a conversation dictates with somebody rather than you approaching them like this. You know different things and I use all kinds of life situations in the classroom like that to try to make great analogies to help them understand the way music makes me feel and why I'm so excited about it. You know anytime anything happens let's cut on some music let's let's you know let's do something musical.

[00:20:28] And once, I feel like once you know they get that feeling they'll eternally--not essentially--eternally be on the right path.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:20:40] I have a question that probably should be towards the end but I know this is an oral history sort of interview, but I want to know where you see yourself and this program in, say, five to ten years? Where is this moving towards with you?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:20:58] Five to 10 years?

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:21:00] Or even in a year?

**Issac Lanier:** [00:21:02] I'm going to be honest. Within another year or two as long as God keeps blessing and we keep working hard. I've gathered my band instruments. I've got my band stands through DonorsChoose.org. My next step hopefully is to get a bandroom set of chairs. You know to help with posture and playing posture. You know a bunch of small things like that, you know

technical skills that paints the bigger picture. I want to get bandroom chairs. I would like to --I would love to get uniforms from my school. That's one thing I'm really really working towards. You know because certain events we go through I don't mention it too much. But at the same time I do observe everything. And sometimes when somebody is not properly attired for a performance but at the same time if that's all you have then that's the only thing you can do. But I notice how my kids react sometimes when they see a band stepping out with clean spats and shakos and you know the capes swinging when they do the horns swinging. We're going to have uniforms in, in about two years. I'm going to say two minimum. Within five to ten years?

[00:22:12] I hope to have one student that has clung to me enough to come take over the program. I would love to move to the collegiate level but I want to stay on the high school level for at least three four or five more years. Because everybody don't need to be on a collegiate level. If you have everybody playing NBA, who's going to teach the high school people? Essentially you will have no recruits. So I want to stay on the high school level for a little while and just cultivate, teach, plant some seeds, where e ver God takes me it what it is. Like I say I thought I was going to be in Memphis and I'm in Uniontown so I don't argue.

**Beth McGinnis:** And Uniontown's not Memphis; Memphis is not Uniontown. What do you think are some of the great things that you like about being in Uniontown, and what are some of the challenges?

**Issac Lanier:** Uniontown has a sense of pride like no other. Man, and I say pride, like the city bands together for the day when it comes to [00:23:16] those sports [0.9] as long as you're doing something. One thing, now, let's just scratch everything. Let's say this. This is my first year working in Uniontown and what I'm almost double sure is if you're in the community and you're doing something positive for their children doing something right, keeping them out of trouble, being a great example, the people will rally together and do whatever they need to do to make it happen for those kids. That's what I love about Uniontown. Some of the challenges I face is--some of the challenges pretty much affect the other schools. The culture is trying to die out, so you have to keep them influenced and tell them why it's important, show them why it's important. And I think essentially at this school I've never had a school that didn't have any instruments. So that was kind of heartbreaking. Left me broke for a little while but now you see why I work so hard and I don't let the money go to waste. But I think that was the biggest challenge, not having inventory. Everything else, I think I could I could I could stomach it.

**Beth McGinnis:** Tell us more about your friendship with Mr. Tony DeVaughn and how your two schools relate.

**Issac Lanier:** My friendship with Tony DeVaughn. At Alabama State we were the freshman section leaders. Of course you have like a head section leader that's over the entire section but you'll have a designated person to be over the first years. And he was designated first year of the trombones and I was the same on Baritone Euphonium so it was always like a consistent battle. You know I'm going to be better. You're going to get better. You know I was always like that and even in 2012 you know in our fourth year he was head leader and I was too, you know. He had 40 trombones and I had 32 baritones. You know, Alabama State had a very large band in 2012, about 350 members, a majority brass, like 60 trumpets that's... Yeah Yeah I see your faces now. You are excited about what you're hearing down there. Yes. It would be just amazing you know but to see all those people playing in sync together all the same hand motions all the same phrases like. And now when I got the call that you know he was going to be a Francis man, I was like Oh man here we go again. Just like the old days you know. Except I ... the trombones, I think the trombones, were a little better than us at Alabama State than the baritones, but I don't think that's going to be the case with Hatch and Francis.

What else would you like to tell us about your experience as a band director or as a musician.

I'll say it so much, it may seem that I'm doubling back and saying some of the same things. Just being a band director man, people,... I'm going to leave y'all with this. People think being a band director you know if you're not hard working, diligent, dedicated band director, then it's not the job you want. You know people say you so, you so cool. My bad, I just saw my kids scavenging. You know people watch me they man and they see you waving your hands, and man how can I do that you know. And you know sometimes people go about stuff for the wrong reason you know it be some days where I might have three four or five people that practice because of something else completely going on. You know you have to roll with the punches. A lot of people don't make it to the end, the end being the performance day. You know it's so much work. You know when you're only one person and you got to teach 30 40 kids how to completely play from scratch. Wow. Making sure you can have a positive look and feel so you know people being information where they need to, no slip notes hanging over anything like that, it's a lot.

[00:27:33] You talk more sleepless nights you know. So essentially, eternally, man, I'm just grateful to have some kids that like band like I do. You know hopefully it's on the verge of love but they like it like I do and we'll see what the future holds.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:27:53] There's a band director here in Birmingham, Jerrell Horton at Vestavia Hills High School. I've heard him say before that he knows that most of his band students will not be professional musicians but he thinks that all of them will end up being professional people. And he believes that band teaches them that, and it seems like that's what you're doing.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:28:17] I'm a firm believer, because if you can matriculate through my band program--and I have very strict rules--if you can matriculate through my band program you'll be excellent because A, you'll know how to talk to people. You'll know there's a certain time and place to do and say certain things and certain things that won't be allowed. And that's not acceptable. And you have to have discipline because if you have chaos, there's just going to be a lot of friction. So I am I'm in agreeance with him. I do have agree I'll have a couple that will go out and be band directors but just like I'll tell them and my students, regular students, band students, all: I'm just teaching you how to think. Not what to think, how to think and how to be able to matriculate through life. You're not going to have to depend on anybody; you'll be able to fend for yourself.

[00:29:08] You know I said everybody that's in the band don't get out to be band directors. How do you think we were able to get the band going? Some people taking graduate and go own restaurants. Now I know somebody who graduated now and they own branches of Chick Fillet. You know some people have clothing lines and some people have media teams, you know different things like that. Everybody doesn't graduate and be a band director. And so that's what I'm wanting to do. I want to just make it strong and everybody, everybody knows that. I'm not trying to make you be a band director, I just want you to be a great person. So you can be able to appreciate stuff and know what it takes to earn and work hard to deserve something and enjoy yourself and life.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:29:50] Well you're doing such wonderful work with these kids, and this whole community. I really appreciate you being willing to talk with us and tell us these stories today and for this partnership. I'm really excited.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:30:03] I'm thankful more than you could ever know because of everything that I don't see y'all do. And y'all help me pick up a lot of slack so I'm very appreciative and I'm pretty sure the kids are too. They've already mentioned how good the food was and man, Mr. Lanier, can we play that song he wrote. So we'll see if we can get Kevin down to our bandroom and do some work and we'll get it going.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:30:26] Great. That sounds wonderful. Well we better catch up with your kids finishing up the scavenger hunt.

**Kenny Lewis:** [00:30:32] Thank you so much.

**Beth McGinnis:** [00:30:34] Thank you.

**Issac Lanier:** [00:30:34] Thank you.