



Artist as Leader: Bland Simpson

Author, songwriter and musician Bland Simpson is a North Carolina treasure with a decades-long national and international profile. As the long-time pianist for the string band [The Red Clay Ramblers](#), he has performed on stages throughout the world, whether in concert or in a theatrical event or both simultaneously.

An award-winning author, Simpson has published a number of books chronicling the history of coastal North Carolina, where he grew up, and advocating for its preservation. His alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he has been teaching creative writing since the early 1980s, has formally recognized his excellence as an educator several times. And the State of North Carolina itself has thanked him for his service to the state not once but twice, awarding him the state's highest civilian honor, the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts, in 2005 and the N.C. Humanities Council's John Tyler Caldwell Award in the Humanities in 2017.

Rob Kramer sat down with Bland in the classroom where the professor had just concluded teaching his class in writing for the musical theater. In this interview, Bland recollects the personal qualities and the many gifted collaborators who helped shape his singular career as an artist leader.

Rob Kramer: I'd like to start from the very beginning. What was your upbringing like, and how did that in any way inform how you got involved in creativity or the arts?

Bland Simpson: I turned out at a very early age to be a good mimic of voices, not by intention, just because we humans are mimetic creatures. So there I was sitting watching the evening news—I barely remember this—and one of the newscasters was [John Cameron Swayze](#) and I

liked the way he said his name. And so I was sitting in front of the television set and said, “I’m John Cameron Swayze.” My parents thought this was pretty funny, and they reinforced that. But I grew up with lots of records, and I played them until the grooves were not groovy anymore.

Rob: What type of music was influencing you?

Bland: The songs from Disney cartoons. For some reason, there were a bunch of Tex Ritter records, singing cowboy stuff. Roy Rogers’ “Happy Trails to You” and “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” and all those things. Those were on the TV, and that kind of thing was on the shorts when you’d go to the Saturday matinee movies. There’d be a movie set in the jungle. There’d be one or two out West, there might be a space thing, and they all had music.

But the cowboy thing ... I lived in Elizabeth City, in the swamps of east Carolina, which I absolutely love. When I was little, I didn’t know how much I loved them, and I thought I wanted to live out where there are cactus plants and be a lone rider and all that Sam Shepard kind of stuff. But I loved to sing along with those songs, and I did that a lot.

And the first theater I remember doing was an Easter show. I remember the thrill in the wing of feeling I’m part of this big thing that’s happening. I’m a small part of it, and I’m really excited. I loved being backstage, watching the line shorten as each kid went out and did his or her thing. Then doing my thing and feeling just as exhilarated before the fact as during and after the fact. I didn’t get to the other side of the stage right wing and think, “I want to be a man of the theater,” but I remember that very clearly.

Rob: You currently teach budding artists. Were there key people that helped or encouraged your growth towards exploring the arts as a career?

Bland: First of all, I had some very theatrical teachers here.

Rob: At UNC?

Bland: Yeah. They weren’t teachers in theater — I wasn’t doing any theater during my undergraduate time — but Lou Lipsitz in Political Science, Tom Stumpf in English, Ruel Tyson ... in very different ways they were very theatrical in the way they structured the classes and the classroom and the way they moved. Walter Spearman in Journalism. Walter used something that I’ve seen politicians — Old South politicians, not modern-day — use. He used cigarettes as a way to help keep focused. The unfiltered cigarettes, if you held your hand still, the ash would just grow out

Herbert Bonner, who was our first district congressmen for many, many years from 1940 until he died in the late ’60s, he did that. Walter Spearman would sit on a desk and light a cigarette and he’d almost never take a puff of it, but you would watch him and you would watch that ash. It was essentially guaranteed that you couldn’t take your eyes off that focal point. So, in various ways ... theater.

And those men were very keen and encouraging in the music I started to write and develop after college. All of them have been friends right on through.

Rob: When did you see yourself transitioning from artist to taking more leadership responsibilities? When was that tipping point for you?

Bland: Well, I saw myself as a songwriter. I went to New York as songwriter under contract for Albert Grossman who at that time managed Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, The Band, and maybe Janis Joplin. He had a pretty strong core and I had a contract for not all that long before I got shifted to Columbia. I came back down here to keep working at it. I got to working with Jim Wann, who had done some theater with John Haber. We were all classmates. At one point, Jim and I had a band, and a lot of our songs were kind of western, not country-and-western but had western, Americana themes.

Jim said, “We need for our band to do a show.” So I said, “what kind of show?” And he said, “You know, like theater.” I said, “Jim, we sound as much like Broadway as a fence post does.” He said, “No, I don’t mean that style of music, but do it being theatrical with what *we* have.”

Out of that grew our first show called “[Diamond Studs: The Life of Jesse James](#),” and we put our band together with the then Red Clay Ramblers. We had two bands, and the bands were the performers.

Rob: Were you performing for Red Clay at this point?

Bland: No, it was years later, in December 1986, that I became a member. So there were these two different bands. Ours was two guitars, bass, drums, piano. Theirs at that time was banjo, guitar, fiddle and piano. We were not really actors, but role players. So it was like a minstrel telling a story except the minstrel was fragmented among all these folks. We had some other singers involved. That is what grew into this first musicians’ theater.

It really was Jim’s idea, John Haber came in to direct, and we brought in choreographer Pat Birch. We staged the show here in Chapel Hill in October of 1974, we were in rehearsal in New York in December, and we opened in mid-January and had a hit at the Westside Theatre on West 43rd Street. It was a big deal. It happened so fast that one of our takeaways was, “You can write a show during the summer, stage it in the fall, be in New York in January!”

Rob: [laughing] Just so our readers know, that’s not the norm!

Bland: No! And we found out fairly quickly that we’d had beginner’s luck and that we had stumbled into something. But we kept trying, and we’ve had any number of shows in the City and also out in the regionals over all the decades since then. We found out that it doesn’t happen quite so quickly and that there are all kinds of ways to do it. There’s no one clear path.

Rob: So when you’re in the midst of it, how do you engage other artists to keep moving forward if there are setbacks? How do you gather and lead artists?

I love the idea of building an edifice, a machine, a community. If you've built that thing right — both in terms of the stagecraft and in terms of the community that's delivering, that's putting the human element there and making it come to life — [you] know whether they're going to laugh, whether they're going to gasp, whether you're going to bond that audience and you're going to give them an evening. Together.

Bland: I'm pretty soft-spoken and I'm also optimistic, which is a good thing to be in the theater. I also love the collaborative nature of it. I love the idea of building an edifice, a machine, a community. If you've built that thing right — both in terms of the stagecraft and in terms of the community that's delivering, that's putting the human element there and making it come to life — if you've done those things right, when the baton drops you know what the effect is going to be on that audience. You know whether they're going to laugh, whether they're going to gasp, whether you're going to bond that audience and you're going to give them an evening. Together. It's the thing that we do in the theater that is very different from what happens in a movie theater where you've got an objective thing that is the same every time you spin the disc or view the film. As you know, it's always a little different from night to night, but it's the same basic thing. If it worked on the Sunday matinee, it's going to work at the Tuesday night start of the week. That's just great.

Rob: It's iterative, and it grows. It gets richer and richer as long as the artists are continuing to build upon their process. How do you assemble a team when you're putting on a project, developing a play for Broadway or putting a band together for a recording studio session?

Bland: Well, in the last several years the Ramblers have done a couple of pieces that are more social commentary than not about the state of affairs in the state of North Carolina. Since 2014, we've brought in not just our ensemble but also an extra singer, and we did something similar to that in the fall after the terrible events up in Charlottesville in 2017. We brought in the same gospel singer, Toshia Swinson, that we'd worked with in "Big River" at Playmakers back in 2011.

We brought in several people, some by design and a couple by accident. We were looking to put an organ part on. We were out at Jerry Brown's Rubber Room studio here on the north side of town and we weren't getting anywhere with what we had, and Jerry said: "You know, there's this guy I know. He's driving an Uber around town. But he's toured with The Four Tops." I said, "Call him up!" And at 10 o'clock that night, the guy said, "Yeah, I'll come over. Let me drop this fare off." He came in there and boom, it was gospel organ time!

Rob: **You know lots of people at this point in your career. How do you decide who are the right people for a project?**

Bland: I've got excellent counsel. Very often I'm planning things with Jack Herrick from the Ramblers, our artistic director, who is very imaginative and very shrewd. Working with good people is the main thing.

And the other ensemble that I've worked with a lot over the last 30 years in addition to the Ramblers has been what we call The Coastal Cohorts from "[King Mackerel & The Blues Are](#)

[Running](#)” [by Simpson & Wann, with Don Dixon & J.L. Mills]. Don Dixon, who’s produced probably, I don’t know, 150, 200 albums at this point, he’s got an extraordinary feel, understands how to deal with any situation in the recording realm, how to get the best result with the smoothest steps. And Jim Wann, who was my first collaborator in “Diamond Studs.” Jim and Don and I are in that trio, so over there and with the Ramblers I’ve just had excellent brothers in arms.

Rob: It sounds like you enjoy more collaborative partnerships in your work. Is that something you sought out?

I’ve always been more comfortable in collaborative settings than not. I was less interested in putting myself forward as a solo artist.

Bland: I sought it very early on. I’ve always been more comfortable in collaborative settings than not. I was less interested in putting myself forward as a solo artist.

Rob: When you’re you’re really in the flow, what kind of skills do you think you are using as the artist leader?

Bland: Collaborative sensibility: “That’s great; how about if we try this?” The ability to transpose from key to key. You know, from playing in bands all those years, if I know what the progression is, I can put a song in any key immediately. We can find the right key for the singer, and he or she is going to sound good instead of saying, “Well, I’ll go work on that, and in two days from now we’ll do it again.” And also using those moments to teach guitar and piano players in the musical-writing classes at UNC Chapel Hill to think in numbers and not in the letter of the key, to get the progression so you can adjust it at will. You might want to modulate up a step, you might want to change the actual key for a singer or for a group of singers. That’s very helpful. You know, just the on-your-feet stuff.

And I remember very clearly a moment when Pat Birch — she had at that time two Tonys, I think, and this was maybe two weeks before we’re supposed to start previews — said to three of the women in “Diamond Studs,” “I need to see you up on top of the piano.” It was an upright piano that we used for everything. We used it as a bank, we used it to hide behind, I sat up on its keys when I was the governor of Missouri. She wanted to see the women up there for some reason. One of them said, “No. I’m not going to do that. I don’t like that.” Pat said, “What?” One of the other women said, “We’re not going to sit up on top of the piano.”

I remember I was sitting out there, I remember her going up and putting her foot on the lip of the stage and saying, “Ladies, I need to see you up there. I hear that you don’t like it. But I need to see you up there. I’m making pictures; that’s what I do. If I can’t see you up there, I don’t know if that picture’s the one we need or not, but I need you to help me stage this play. And, if you’re going to stand here and say, ‘No, I don’t do that,’ we can’t stage this for the audience that’s supposed to be here in two weeks and two hours. So you’re either going to help me stage it or you’re going to stand there and say no. And that’s where we are.” And they grudgingly got up on the piano, and the number got done or partially done. And she said, “No, I don’t like it, so come

on down. I won't send you up there again." But she thanked them. She said, "I couldn't have seen that just in my imagination. I had to see it." That's the way the theater works.

I learned a lot in that moment. "If you don't help, we can't do a show." And one of the ways you collaborate with the choreographer is you make a picture.

Rob: What I love about that story is that she was persistent without becoming obnoxious to get them to go on the piano, and in the end she thanked them and helped give context as to why it was important and helpful.

Bland: Absolutely.

Rob: So, it kept them engaged, I imagine, rather than feeling marginalized in the end. How do we get other artists to do that, to step up and lead like that? What do you think it would take to get other artists to start putting themselves forward?

The key word is let's. Let us. It's the joy of helping people pull together and do something that not one of them or not half of them can do as effectively divided.

Bland: The key word is *let's. Let us*. It's the joy of helping people pull together and do something that not one of them or not half of them can do as effectively divided. That's all theater is. Clawing together, collaborating to make something unexpected work.

Rob: That's great. When you first started noticing yourself moving into more leadership responsibilities, what advice do you wish you would have heard at that point in your career?

Bland: Well, that would be when I first started teaching because that's a very different role than being a co-leader of a musical ensemble or even a staged play because that's not going to be around but for so long. Although *Jersey Boys* is going to be around forever [they both laugh]. But if you are committing to teaching, that's a new role for anybody.

When Max Steele hired me mid-year to fill in for someone who was stepping out of the lineup, I said, "What's your advice?" He said, "Use the books that have already been ordered." I said, "Max, I mean in the classroom." He kind of looked away and said, "It'll come to you." And it did, though not as quickly as I might have wished.

I very quickly found out how theatrical the classroom was and needed to be because, as you well know, if the energy of the company onstage is only equal to the energy of the audience, you don't have a show. You just have a bunch of people in something called a theater.

I went with Jack Herrick one time to see a show that was perfectly good, but it wasn't highly energetic, and it let its meaning kind of fall into trivial humor. Jack said, "That show doesn't really succeed. It has a lot of fun moments, but it doesn't really succeed because it doesn't insist upon its own importance." That was very wise of Jack to observe and say. He wasn't talking

about somebody's ego or egotistical importance. He was talking about delivering the goods to the people in the audience.

A show has to insist that it's important. In the classroom, the energy behind the topic has to be significant enough for you all who are here as students to get into. So yes, the theater of it, has been important to me, to say the least.

One other thing I remember from my early days in the theater (I think it was the first Tony awards I watched): Up for an award in scenic design was Boris Aronson, who's a legend. At that point, he was an older man, about 80. He had eight or nine Tonys. He goes up to get his 10th Tony, the applause goes down, and he says, "I want to say something to you all, my fellow artists of the theater. This morning, a number of people called me, and almost all of them said, 'Boris, I'd say good luck, but you don't need it.'" He said, "What I want to say tonight is we all, all of us," — he's grasping the Tony — "all of us need good luck. We all need good luck because success in the theater is a miracle." That was from one of the grand gentlemen of the theater of that day, of any day. And I heard that, just like I internalized Pat Birch's lesson of the reluctant trio.

To me, it has been about collaboration and the "Let's see what we can make and put on and push forward." And believing that the whole is better than sum of the parts. That's my life story.

What he really meant ... Tennessee Williams says it beautifully at the end of "A Streetcar Named Success," that essay about what it means to be an artist, that you have to commit yourself to it and that everything you do is in opposition to the ticking clock. He says, "Every tick is loss, loss, loss," and the only thing that defeats that, that stanches it, is the passion of your heart. To me, it has been about collaboration and the "Let's see what we can make and put on and push forward." And believing that the whole is better than sum of the parts. That's my life story.

Rob: Thanks, Bland. Really appreciate it.

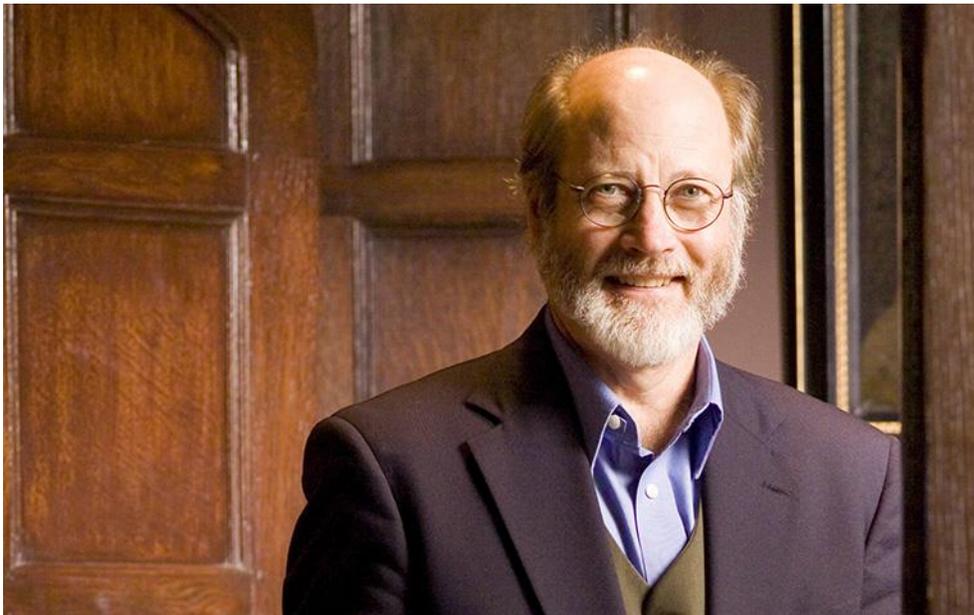
Bland: Sure.

Epilogue

Soft-spoken yet powerful, Bland Simpson shows us that charismatic and bold leadership can come in the form of good listening and gentle conversation. Takeaways we have from our conversation with Bland include:

- **Remember community.** Arts and leadership both exist through collaboration. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, and the generative nature of progress occurs in groups. Build effective teams that have a shared passion to succeed.
- **Share the why.** As leader, you will be highly effective if you explain the purpose or reasoning for your decisions. Context helps move people to action and become willing followers.

- **Deliver the goods.** People want to be inspired, and brought into something positive. It's easier to pull people into joy than push them to do something they don't want to do.
- **Choose your team wisely.** Collaboration can be the natural result of the people around you. Other times it takes thoughtful intention to determine who will work best together for each individual project, because no two situations are the same. Understanding that reality is an important leadership skill for building good teams.
- **Appreciate timing and good luck.** Sometimes success happens because of thoughtful preparation and planning. Other times it's because the taxi driver you bump into is a legendary artist. Expect greatness from the start, and be on the lookout for unexpected opportunities.



Bland Simpson

Musician & Author

Bland Simpson is Kenan Distinguished Professor of English & Creative Writing at UNC Chapel Hill and longtime pianist/songwriter for the Tony Award-winning Red Clay Ramblers. Author of nine books, including *Into the Sound Country*, *Ghost Ship of Diamond Shoals*, *The Coasts of Carolina*, and *Little Rivers & Waterway Tales*, he has collaborated on the musicals *Diamond Studs* (with Jim Wann) and *King Mackerel & The Blues Are Running* (with Jim Wann, Don Dixon, and J.L. Mills), with Jack Herrick, on *Cool Spring*, *Tar Heel Voices*, *Kudzu*, and the three-time Broadway hit *Fool Moon*, as well as – also with Mr. Herrick and the Ramblers – on the ballets *Ramblin' Suite* (Diane Coburn-Bruning, Atlanta Ballet, 2002; Milwaukee Ballet, 2011) and *Carolina Jamboree* (Lynn Taylor-Corbett, Carolina Ballet, 2005, 2008, 2013). In 2005, Simpson was given the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts, the state's highest civilian honor, and in 2017 the N.C. Humanities Council gave him the John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities. In October 2018, Simpson received the Edward Kidder Graham Award for Faculty Service from UNC Chapel Hill.