

'Our resident genius': The Tommy Banks Show, the CanCon era, and Edmonton's shot to cultural relevancy

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ABSTRACT: Tommy Banks is popularly considered a founder of the Edmonton arts scene and one item on his long list of accomplishments was a nationally broadcasted television show, filmed out of Edmonton. *The Tommy Banks Show* ran for over a decade, highlighting Canadian talent and bringing world-class acts to Edmonton from 1968 to 1983. During the nation-building and Canadian Content era, this show put Edmonton on a national stage. This paper explores how *The Tommy Banks Show* helped put Edmonton on the map as an up-in-coming, culturally relevant metropolis within Canada. Looking at the dynamics of regionalism, Western exceptionalism, and the commercial success of the show, I explain how Banks' show was used as cultural capital in a successful bid for an independent television station in Edmonton. This is not only an important piece of local history, it is also a way of understanding the Canadian Content era in a prairie context. The legacy of *The Tommy Banks Show* has left its mark on the region in that it enabled talented people to gather in Edmonton and allowed Edmontonians to see the city as a place that was culturally important.

KEYWORDS: Canadian Broadcasting, Edmonton History, Tommy Banks, CBC, ITV, CRTC, Canadian History, Urban History, Local History, Broadcasting History

Introduction

Tommy Banks is remembered as a Juno award-winning jazz musician, Liberal Canadian senator, and television and radio personality. He was a staunch advocate for the arts, involved in the campaign to construct the Francis Winspear Centre for Music in Edmonton.¹ As a musician and bandleader, he performed for the likes of Queen Elizabeth II and President Ronald Reagan and directed ceremonies for the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, and EXPO '86. But most Canadians were first introduced to Banks through his nationally syndicated talk-variety show. *The Tommy Banks Show* ran for over a decade, highlighting Canadian talent and bringing world-class acts to Edmonton from 1968 to 1983.² The show was produced during a period of heightened nationalism, with a focus on producing and preserving Canadian Content.³ During this period, *The Tommy Banks Show* helped to put Edmonton on the map as an up-in-coming, culturally relevant metropolis within Canada. First, this paper will explore how the show's national commercial success interacted with the dynamics of regionalism and Canadian Content requirements in the context of the nation-building era. This will set the stage for exploring how *The Tommy Banks Show* was understood as a Western Canadian cultural product by Banks himself and his fans across the country. Lastly, this paper unveils how the success and local lens of the show was

used as cultural capital in a successful bid for an independent television station in Edmonton. This analysis was conducted using primary sources from the Archives of Alberta, newspaper articles, and literature on Canadian broadcasting.

The timeline of *The Tommy Banks Show* is rather convoluted, with a variety of stations, filming locations, and show names over the course of a decade and a half. Things started at CBC Edmonton, when the station was looking for a host for a one-hour talk show called *Around Town*.⁴ When a host still had not been found with only 24 hours left before airtime, they turned to the bandleader to fill in: Tommy Banks.⁵ Despite having no television experience at the time, he was a natural — and so the role stuck. A year later *Around Town* was renamed to *The Tommy Banks Show*. The format was a talk-variety style show, consisting of a mix of interviews and performances. Guests would perform, Banks would interview them — sometimes interviewing several guests at once — and the band would perform with Banks at the piano. Banks' role as bandleader-host was a unique arrangement that blended well. Banks wasn't just a television personality, but also a veteran musician, bandleader, producer, and agent who knew the business inside and out. In 1974, the show made the switch to ITV, Edmonton's third television station — Banks was instrumental to its

¹ Mackay, "Tommy Banks, 81, Was a Musical Virtuoso, TV Star and Passionate Edmontonian Who Became a Senator."

² The Canadian Press, "Legendary Edmonton Jazz Pianist, Ex-Senator Tommy Banks Dead at 81."

³ Litt, "The Massey Commission, Americanization, and Canadian Cultural Nationalism."

⁴ Mackay, "Tommy Banks, 81, Was a Musical Virtuoso, TV Star and Passionate Edmontonian Who Became a Senator."

⁵ Neufeld, "Restless Creative Spirit: Tommy Banks Remembered."

bid and establishment of the third television station in Edmonton. The show eventually switched back to CBC for its last three years under the name *Tommy Banks Live*.⁶

This research is important, because it is a small slice of largely untold history of a major player in Edmonton's arts scene and the ripple effects this work had. Beyond a local context, it adds to a body of literature on Canadian broadcasting history which remains very small.⁷ The ways that local markets had to compete for television stations and national programming produced outside of Canada's major urban centres tells us about how even during a period of tremendous growth and enthusiasm for Canadian cultural content, doing a show like Banks' outside of Toronto or Montreal was an uphill battle. The show, however, retains a legacy and impact on the collective memory of Edmonton.

The Nation-Building Project, Regionalism, and the Rise of Television

In 1951, the Massey Commission concluded that broadcasting in Canada had contributed to a sense of national unity and warned against the threat of American cultural imperialism.⁸ In other words, it established broadcasting as a matter of national interest and part of an ongoing nation-building project. The Commission emerged in the post-war period during a time of increased nationalism. It sought to lay out a path to protecting and creating distinct Canadian cultural products. As the public broadcaster of Canada, Canadian Content has always been entrenched in CBC's mandate.⁹ However, this was also a period of changing technology with the rise of television. As a result, the CBC's budget was increased to expand into television production.¹⁰ There was a rapid expansion of TV stations across the country from the 1950s to mid-1970s. Hayday describes how during the latter half of this expansion, anxieties about Americanization had grown and alongside those worries came the rollout of the new Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) quotas for television content.¹¹ New stations had to figure out how they would abide by CanCon (Canadian Content) requirements while

also hooking in viewers with popular and expensive American shows like *Sesame Street*.

There has also been some limited scholarship in how this expansion of broadcasting and reinvigorated focus on Canadian contexts manifested itself in different regions of Canada. Ali argues that the strong mandate of creating a national culture in broadcasting came at the expense of localism.¹² Local markets like Edmonton were slow to get stations and had to compete with other cities.¹³ Marquis discusses the 1969 cancellation of one CBC television program broadcast out of Halifax, *Don Messer's Jubilee*, which resulted in a series of protests related to preserving Canadian Content, Maritime regionalism, CBC elitism, and Canadian folk culture among other concerns.¹⁴ The folksy Canadiana show was considered low culture that appealed to increasingly older demographics during a time when broadcasters were trying to capture younger audiences. "By 1968, both the CBC and CTV were planning 'think young' musical variety shows"¹⁵ — and *The Tommy Banks Show* fit the bill. This literature suggests that the creation of Banks' show in 1968 represented a shift in the public broadcaster's focus, but also notes the attachment that could develop between audiences and regional television shows during a time of heightened Canadian nationalism.



Figure 1: Juliette — Canada's "first lady of song" — sings with the Tommy Banks Band. Still taken from "Tommy Banks Show #12," 17 December 1974, PR1993.0378/1957, box V, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

⁶ Mackay, "Tommy Banks, 81, Was a Musical Virtuoso, TV Star and Passionate Edmontonian Who Became a Senator."

⁷ Hayday, "Brought To You by the Letters C, R, T, and C," 100.

⁸ Ali, "A Broadcast System in Whose Interest?" 284.

⁹ Hayday, 118.

¹⁰ Litt, 379.

¹¹ Hayday, 98.

¹² Ali, 283.

¹³ Ali, 290; Stewart and Hull, *Canadian Television Policy and the Board of Broadcast Governors, 1958-1968: Canadian Television Policy and the BBG*, 121.

¹⁴ Marquis, "The Folk Fight Back," 228.

¹⁵ Marquis, 237.

De Sousa argues that this period was not only a time of nation-building, but also one of emerging regionalism.¹⁶ By the end of the 1960s, the CBC was beginning to officially recognize the importance of local and regional representations.¹⁷ Shows that took place in the rural prairie provinces like *Jake and the Kid* could not only capture regional pride, but also nation-wide attention through an enduring “pastoral myth in the Canadian imagination.”¹⁸ While it was not a work of fiction, this raises the question about whether Banks’ show also captured any Western myths or contributed to an imagined community for Edmontonians or Western Canadians.

One episode of *The Tommy Banks Show* examined for this paper demonstrates the nationalistic and regional flavours of Canada.¹⁹ Right off the bat, Canadian acts are highlighted in Banks’ opening remarks. Juliette Cavazzi — a fellow CBC personality known as simply “Juliette” on stage — was introduced as the “biggest star in television that there has ever been in this country” and the “First Lady of Song in Canada.” Later, the DeFranco family — a three-hit-wonder quintet reminiscent of The Jackson 5 and The Osmond Brothers — were introduced as being from Welland, Ontario. During their interview, Banks noted that he thought this was the first time the country had the chance to meet the family on television — who by this time had experienced significant commercial success. The show’s regional aspect is also explored through humour. This is exemplified when comedian Jack Eagle quips about liking Edmonton because it’s full of people who look like him — “little, short, adorable fat guys.” His act also features jokes about how Banff first got its name from a skiing accident and Easterners not knowing what a chinook is. A barrier to more extensive analysis of the show’s content itself is the difficulty in accessing these records. No full episodes exist online — although there is a clip of Banks and Wayne Gretzky playing table hockey on the show.²⁰ More recordings likely exist in CBC and ITV archives; however, scholars have widely noted the inaccessibility and difficulty in accessing these records.²¹

A Nationally Syndicated Western Canadian Product

The Tommy Banks Show was watched across the country, but it was understood as a Western Canadian product (which was far from typical at the time — particularly for the CBC). Newspaper coverage of the show demonstrates that in many ways, the defining characteristic of *The Tommy Banks Show* was that it was filmed in Edmonton. In a special 1971 edition of *Billboard* magazine focused on CanCon, here is how the journalist starts their feature on Banks:

The CBC in Canada has always operated on a fail-safe principle in programming — the consensus being that Toronto and Montreal have the moxy and the manpower to determine TV dinner menu for the country. It was never openly admitted, but the underlying philosophy was simply that network stations and studios outside Canada’s two largest cities only had enough going for them to take care of parochial interests. The giants in the East had a much higher calling. Tommy Banks is doing his damndest to turn things around...in a budding metropolis thousands of miles away from where the action is supposed to be, Edmonton, Alberta.²²

The author applauds the free-form style of the show as well, noting that it is a marked difference from the CBC’s typical “stale” and highly structured format. That same year, *The Edmonton Journal* published a series of reviews of Banks’ show as it expanded to national audiences.²³ They each make a point of noting the anomaly of a national show coming out of Edmonton. A *Toronto Star* reviewer seemed pleasantly surprised with the calibre of the show, noting that it was “at least as good as any existing Toronto-based variety productions and far superior to most.” The *Vancouver Sun* writer had a positive review as well, but hoped Banks would be able to find enough talent to come to Edmonton. And perhaps most striking, a review from *Toronto Telegram*’s Roy Shields expressed great confusion over the show’s location:

¹⁶ De Sousa, “Reconstructing an Imagined Community,” 135.

¹⁷ De Sousa, 137.

¹⁸ De Sousa, 138.

¹⁹ “Tommy Banks Show #12,” 17 December 1974, PR1993.0378/1957, box V, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

²⁰ KidThunder10, YouTube. “Wayne Gretzky Plays Table Hockey with Tommy Banks plus Interview.”

²¹ Nichol, “Canada Lives Here,” 75.

²² “Tommy Banks Aids CBC In Building Pop Shows.”

²³ “Banks Gets Favourable Reviews.”

There is probably a reason for the CBC to bring us a variety-cum-talk show out of Edmonton Saturday nights. But for the moment it escapes me. Let's see? It's cheap? They couldn't think of anything else to do? Tommy needs the work? Edmonton is in Canada too? It's where it's really at?

The answer of course, is that Edmonton was Banks' home, and he was not willing to relocate — but Banks might also say that Edmonton in fact was 'where it's really at.'

The way the show was perceived as Western can also be understood by looking at letters from fans.²⁵ One letter from Mrs. Aikenhead from Melfort, Saskatchewan said that in protest of *The Tommy Banks Show* being discontinued from CBC, she wrote a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau's office.²⁶ She expressed that this letter was written in defence of the West — "It has long been my personal feeling that Westerners should have voice in what CBC beams out at us as a captive audience!" Another letter from a Miss Bellafonte from Pembroke, Ontario showcases the way the show represented Western Canada for Eastern audiences. Bellafonte writes that she once gone "out west" to see her uncle and she would like to move out there because there are "good friendly people in the west" unlike Pembroke.²⁷

In addition to being understood as Western, the show was seen as an asset to Edmonton and a way of bringing stars to the region. It was recognized that Banks had an influence on which artists came to town and that his show was an attractive force for the scene. Mr. Tissen from Leduc, Alberta writes Banks bemoaning that the great Johnny Rodriguez had yet to perform in Edmonton and he was growing bored of seeing the likes of Charlie Pride, Waylon Jennings, and Johnny Cash — adding, "there is nothing wrong with them but it would be nice to see some new artists in the area." Banks was seen as a

representative of the arts, someone with connections and knowledge about how to get "big acts" to come to Edmonton. Comments expressing gratitude for this were common:

Give him the big budget and let him bring in the stars...Chalk me up as a Tommy Banks fan! He has done so much for Edmonton.

I moved to Vancouver from Edmonton two months ago (after nine years) and I wanted you to know how much I have enjoyed your show (and how much I miss it now!)...I hope Edmonton realizes how lucky it is to have such a talented, warm individual such as yourself! I enjoy your program, and am very proud (as are thousands of other Edmontonions, I'm sure) of the talent you bring to our town.

Edmontonians recognized the way the show brought in big names and how uncommon it was to have a successful national program in a city like theirs. These feelings were echoed in the obituaries written in 2018, when Banks passed, and describe the way the show cemented his ongoing reputation as a founder of the Edmonton arts scene.²⁸

²⁴ "Banks Gets Favourable Reviews."

²⁵ "I.T.V. Tommy Banks Show - fan mail", 1975, PR1993.0378/284, box 8, folder 284, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton. Banks kept careful records of his fan mail, with carbon copies of his typed reply attached to each one.

²⁶ The future of the show was also raised in a House of Commons debate in 1973. See "CBC Tommy Banks Show - mentioned in House of Commons Hansard", 1973, PR1993.0378/284, box 8, folder 269, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

²⁷ One potential thing of note from this letter is that Miss Bellafonte identifies herself as Indigenous to Banks, adding that she enjoyed watching some "smart indians" on his show.

²⁸ Faulder, "Tommy Banks."



Figure 2 and 3: Tony DeFranco and the DeFranco Family performing on The Tommy Banks Show Dec 17, 1974. Stills taken from "Tommy Banks Show #12," 17 December 1974, PR1993.0378/1957, box V, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Banks framed this success through a language of Western exceptionalism. In the application to the CRTC for the ITV station, Banks addressed the committee noting how the show has been the product of exceptional effort and the Edmonton arts community shares this hardworking attribute, allowing it to punch above its weight:

[The Tommy Banks Show] didn't happen because somebody in Toronto said 'Hey, let's do a talk-variety show out of Edmonton.' It happened because some people here said 'We think we can do that,' and we did it against sometimes seemingly insurmountable obstacles.²⁹

For Banks, part of the bid was an intention to increase financial investment in the region to help retain talent. He noted that the prairies “produce



Figure 4: A typical multi-person interview set-up on the show. Pictured: Shield and Yarnell, Jack Carter, Freda Payne, Nipsey Russell, and Tommy Banks. “B/W Photograph, T. Banks and television show guest. 8 x 10”, n.d., PR1993.378/2062, box 23, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

a disproportionately high representation of genuinely creative and workmanlike talent”, but that talent has to leave the region “to be heard and seen.”³⁰

While in the United States, everyone has to move to Los Angeles to pursue a career in television, Banks asserted that Canada was trying to do things

differently — with a greater sense of regionalism and decentralization than its American counterpart. Indeed, the CBC’s ongoing challenge is to represent Canada’s diversity and unity — creating programming that is relevant to all Canadians while balancing both regional and national representation.³¹

However, the credit for starting the first nationally syndicated television show out of Edmonton cannot be credited to the CBC’s regional values. In a local interview,³² Banks said that when the CBC decided they wanted the show to make the jump from local to national programming, the expectation was that they pack up and move to Toronto. Banks and his team refused;

We had no interest in moving to Toronto. It’s just not the kind of place I wanted to live. That was beside the point. We had this Quixotic hyper-Canadian Edmonton pride thing going, like Mickey Rooney: We can do it here! So they guffawed and harumphed and said they’d get back to us tomorrow. We were staying across the street. We waited on tenterhooks that night, and the next morning they said, OK, yeah, you can do it.

Indeed, Banks consistently made a choice to stay in Edmonton, despite being presented with opportunities to do great things elsewhere — but he chose to try and do those very same things in Edmonton.³³

Banks, however, would not give himself all the credit for Edmonton’s cultural rise. He asserted that Edmonton had an up-in-coming arts scene in his early career before the show, noting that “there has always been a disproportionately high level of musical activity in Edmonton.”³⁴ Perhaps it can be said that Banks’ success can be attributed to the fact that he saw in Edmonton what others didn’t; the city had an untapped potential to be a cultural hub — Edmonton just needed someone to take a chance on it. By capitalizing on Edmonton’s up-and-coming-ness Banks served as an Edmonton recruiter and arts ambassador.

²⁹“Edmonton Video Ltd - application for third television service in Edmonton”, 1971, PR1993.0378/259, box 7, folder 259, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 37.

³⁰ Edmonton Video Ltd, 32.

³¹ Gatrell and Gatrell, “Comments on Canadian Regionalism and the Media,” 14.

³² Ross, “RIP Tommy Banks.”

Before Banks’ passing, local arts journalist Mike Ross conducted a series of interviews with him for a book about the Edmonton music community. While the book has yet to be published, Ross wrote up an obituary using the interviews on his blog.

³³ Faulder, “Tommy Banks.”; Lefebvre, “Tommy Banks.”

³⁴ Ross, “RIP Tommy Banks.”

Local programming and independent television: the ITV era

Banks switched from CBC to ITV in 1974, allowing his show to go from airing once a week for half an hour, to every weeknight for an hour. The swap allowed Banks to have not only more airtime, but also more creative freedom and opportunity to engage in the business side of the show — as he was also a shareholder and director for the station.³⁵ Indeed, Banks was a key player in the station's development. He was heavily involved in the application process, and *The Tommy Banks Show* was used as cultural capital in the bid for the proposed independent station. It was understood ITV won out over the other proposals for the third television station in Edmonton specifically because of its focus on local programming,³⁶ and Banks' involvement proved that they could find a way to make this commercially viable too.

There was, however, some doubt about the scale to which their proposal planned to balance commercial viability and regional focus. Banks contended that his show's first priority was always marketability — and that the show did not claim to educate the rest of Canada about Western culture.³⁷ Indeed, the talk-variety show showcased talent from across the country, and still contained a sizable portion of American talent to reel in viewership. However, it is clear from the letters and newspaper coverage of the show that it was considered a Western Canadian product — and a commercially successful one at that. This underlying assumption that this show produced in Edmonton was an anomaly or a contradiction plays out in the application hearing. The chairman asks numerous questions about how much of the success of the show can be attributed to Banks' personality.³⁸ He asks how Banks' health is (implying that he as an individual is central to the proposal) and he presses about how the station will make money with a focus on local programming. In response to the last question Banks makes a case for the commercial viability of national and regional content. Despite being a realist in understanding the allure of American talents, Banks reveals himself as a firm believer in the Canadian Content mission:

The reflection of the fabric of the country does very much contain itself in other parts of our



Figure 5: A ticket to ITV's *Tommy Banks Show*, filmed with a live studio audience every weeknight. "Tommy Banks Show Photo," Dec 6, 1974, PR2005.0334/481, box 17, Tommy Banks fonds, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

program application...can we talk about Canada's history? Can we talk about the history of the west? Can we talk about Canadian and western Canadian things and have people enjoy watching them...the answer is absolutely yes.³⁹

The committee must have found these answers convincing or reassuring, because this proposal won out over the others due to this local focus.⁴⁰

The ITV proposal represented more than just a third television station for Edmonton. For the applicants, it represented fulfilling national and regional obligations in the CanCon era and was part of the nation-building project. Wendell Wilks, proposed managing director, said that for him, the application represented an *obligation* to produce quality programs in Western Canada. While many stations were following the Canadian Content regulations, only 50 percent of prime-time television (6 p.m. to midnight) had to be Canadian and peak prime time hours between 8 and 10 p.m. were often filled with American programs. Wilks bemoaned that many Edmontonians could not find a Canadian program when they most watch television and promised to remedy that. For him, this was a way to give the city the local content that it had been denied and fulfilled a regional vision of success: "let me dream a little — maybe we might even develop stars in Western Canada as have our Quebec counterparts."⁴¹ Their ambitious proposal also included addressing the problem of inadequate

³⁵ Elliot, "Tommy Banks Takes a 10-Times Gamble."

³⁶ Butters, "For CITV: Sunday, It's Lights, Camera, ACTION!"

³⁷ Edmonton Video Ltd, 73.

³⁸ Edmonton Video Ltd, 72.

³⁹ Edmonton Video Ltd, 73.

⁴⁰ Butters, "For CITV: Sunday, It's Lights, Camera, ACTION!"

⁴¹ Edmonton Video Ltd, 26.

hardware, noting that there were no camera booms or cranes in the region — a fact he said, that gets laughs when told to folks in Toronto.⁴² In fact, several years later in 1975 the only camera crane in Western Canada was being used on *The Tommy Banks Show*.⁴³ The station and the show were both seen as ways to put Edmonton on the map culturally, and better serve the local community by highlighting existing talent — part of the proposal was also that Banks would produce TV specials highlighting the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra.

Conclusion

The Tommy Banks Show and the man described as Edmonton's "resident genius"⁴⁴ serve as a case study to understand the peak of the CanCon era in a regional prairie context. It's clear from reading through obituaries that Banks and his show represent for many Edmontonians a golden period and a coming-of-age for the city's cultural scene. Understanding the ways this local history fits

into the broader nation-building project and broadcasting policies across Canada shows us the ways in which national and regional dynamics interact. In 1991, the Broadcasting Act was amended to replace the aim of national unity with cultural sovereignty, an objective which Filion argues remains vague.⁴⁵ This was the last time the act was amended. But the commercial viability of producing Canadian Content continues to decline in a world where media can be made anywhere, often for less. The way we consume content has changed also drastically; until recently, no serious attempts to bring CanCon regulations into the world of streaming had been made.⁴⁶ While technology, regulations, and political winds often change, something that remains constant is that the media we consume is closely tied to the way we understand ourselves and connect to one another. The legacy of Banks' show has left its mark on the prairies — in that it enabled talented people to gather in Edmonton, and allowed Edmontonians to see the city as a place that was culturally important.

⁴² Edmonton Video Ltd, 34.

⁴³ Lefebvre, "Tommy Banks."

⁴⁴ Tommy Banks Aids CBC In Building Pop Shows," 46.

⁴⁵ Filion, "Broadcasting and Cultural Identity," 461.

⁴⁶ Pugh, "A New Streaming Bill Is Close to Becoming Law in Canada. Here's How It Works."

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