

# 145. Wes Flinn: Music Finds a Way

## **Gavin Kelly**

Hey, everybody you're listening to beyond 1894 this is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and our guest for this episode is Dr. Wes Flinn. He's the director of the School of Music here at Louisiana Tech. Wes, thanks for joining us today. So you are relatively new to the quote, unquote, Tech family, talk to us a little bit about, first of all, coming from, where you came from, to be here in Russ and be at Louisiana Tech Talk about that move a little bit for us.

## **Wes Flinn**

Well, as Johnny Cash said, I've been everywhere, man, I am the least likely music theorist you will ever meet. I grew up on a hog farm in southern Indiana. My hometown of pinhook Indiana has 19 people I'm related to 16 of prom was weird, I'm sure, but I did my undergraduate work at Morehead State University in Kentucky, and my master's and doctorate at the University of Cincinnati college Conservatory of Music, I've had gigs in Kentucky, Western Massachusetts, back in Cincinnati for a year, just outside of Atlanta for four years. And most recently, I was up at the University of Minnesota Morris in Morris, Minnesota, which is a liberal arts campus of the University of Minnesota system. And I was up there for 13 years, and just a concatenation of events, as I like to say, in my form and analysis classes led me here. It was the right time to move on to what was next. And I threw some papers out at various institutions and

## **Gavin Kelly**

tech stepped up. Yeah, you haven't been here for quite a full year yet, right? That is correct.

## **Wes Flinn**

I came here. I moved here in June and started working in August 1.

## **Gavin Kelly**

Okay, at the time of recording, today's, if you're listening, today is the first day of our spring quarter, 2026, here on campus. So about to be through, I guess, your first full academic year here. It sounds like too coming from a place as rural as the picture you painted, that Rustin might not be too far of a cry from some of the places you're used to be in, but also you were right. You have been everywhere. So talk to me about kind of what Russ and in Tech have been like, and integrating yourself into the campus, and what that's been like for you over the last few months.

## **Wes Flinn**

It's been a joy, actually, in a lot of ways, okay? And I know it's a very pat answer, and it's, you know, me, you know, trying to curry favor with the folks listening. But it's true. It's true. I've got wonderful colleagues in the School of Music. My fellow school heads in the College of Liberal Arts have been fantastic to work with. President Henderson. I've chatted with him a few times, and he has been a

wonderful help during this process. The move was not the easiest or two variety of things, which I won't go into here. Suffice it to say, the Russian mafia might have been involved with my moving company, but that's a story for another time, maybe told over drinks at utility or something like that. But I've never felt unwelcome, and that is, to me, a hallmark of a good institution and a good location. Certainly, climatologically, this is very different, I bet Minnesota, although we do have some mosquitoes in Minnesota as well, it is land of 10,000 Lakes, which means you get about 10 billion mosquitoes. But I wasn't quite prepared for the pollening that is going on right now. Right now, my car is normally blue, and now it's a healthy yellow green, but certainly after I lived in Georgia for four years, so I know a little bit about that, right? This was on a different level. But you know, certainly I've enjoyed my time here. The work has been good. It's been a lot. I've been telling my colleagues that after about a quarter, I knew what it was I was supposed to be doing, even if I wasn't successfully doing all of it at that point. But I feel very confident with the work we in the school of music are doing, because it's never about me. I teach a couple of courses. I teach some lessons. I sign a lot of paperwork. It's all about creating a situation where the faculty and the students and the staff, where everyone can do their best work, make their best music.

### **Gavin Kelly**

We Yeah, we'll dive into sort of your mission, your vision, the way you see the School of Music. I'm working under your under your leadership, but let's, let's stay on you for a little bit longer. Let's talk about kind of your relationship with music, how that came about. I'm guessing, like most people who have sort of a lifelong career out of music, that it happened in some early formative years for you. But maybe not, maybe. So talk us through kind of. What it was like finding a love for music, and at what point you knew you wanted to make a lifestyle, make a career

### **Wes Flinn**

out of it. The original plan was to be an optometrist.

### **Gavin Kelly**

Okay, that's if I had a nickel, right? I

### **Wes Flinn**

joke about this because I joke that you can tell my career arc by how high I have to count as an optometrist. I figure I don't have to count any higher than two, which is better one or two. And then I decided, well, the story is that I had a bad day. It was probably my first year of high school, so this is 1980 expletive deleted in I had a bad day, and I missed the bus home. So I called mom, who was working at the accounting firm where she worked. And I should also say that my mother was a tremendous musician. She had piano lessons, but she had this she could play anything. She had this incredible vocal range, seeing anything from baritone to coloratura soprano, given whatever needed. Most of the time she spent in the Alto range. She was a wonderful Alto in growing up in a church of Christ, which is comes from an acapella tradition, acapella congregational singing. I was surrounded on four sides by all all the voice, yeah, so I'll hack on back to that in a second. But my freshman year, I missed the bus and had a bad day, so I went down to the band room to practice. I figured I'd wait for mom down there. So I get my horn out. I'm a euphonium player at the time, and after I think about 20 minutes, there's a knock at the door, and it's the band director, use an alternate fingering here. Push

more air through here, and your mom's been waiting outside for 20 minutes. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember what the bad day was about. So I told my mother on the way home, I think I want to be a musician now, until they repaved this stretch about five years ago. If you were to be on US Highway 51 mile east of Bedford, North Lawrence high school, outside of Bedford, Indiana, you would see a set of skid marks in the road. I was there when those skid marks were created, because that is the point where I told my mother, I want to be a musician. Wow, and it was challenging for them, because optometrists tend to make more money than musicians. Sure. You know, I grew up on a farm in the 1980s in the 70s and 80s, and there was this little thing called the farm crisis, and the 80s were not good years for us. And my parents thought that this was going to be a huge risk financially, and they weren't incorrect about that. You know, there were many, many lean years during this process. But to their eternal credit, they never said no. They had a lot of questions. They were never real thrilled about the decision, but they never said no. And the day I got my doctorate, which was several years after I wanted to but again, these things sometimes take time. I think one of the proudest moments was calling home to tell them, and hearing my mother say, Congratulations, Dr Flynn, that Diane was out for a little jog, and I had to kind of sit down after that one and gather myself, of course, that it was a you know, that that kind of background, and then growing up in the tradition I did with The acapella singing, and mom always playing piano at home, and she was tremendously talented. When I went off to college, the plan was to be a high school band director, but I started taking music theory classes, as you have to when you're a musician. And don't forget this, if any of my students are listening, make sure you turn in your homework on time. It's important, because theory is cumulative, but we started four part writing, and I've been thinking in four parts since before I was born, being surrounded, you know, Mom singing alto immediately to my left, my brother singing bass two down, my sister singing lead next to me, my cousin, Harry Lee, directly in front of me, the loudest tenor I have ever heard. And I've heard operatic Wagnerian tenors, and Harry Lee could take them all out easily, and to be just be surrounded, yeah, on all sides by four part harmony. It was as natural to me as breathing, and I was good at it. I felt comfortable doing it. I had started composing a little bit in high school, and after about a year of being a music education major, I had the opportunity to actually meet. College Music theorists, music theory professors, and I decided that's theory comp. That's what I want to do. And then I kind of reoriented my life, and again, my parents were like, Are you sure this is the right choice? Because at least public school education at the time was a fairly steady career path. It wouldn't be one that led to fame and fortune, necessarily, but it was consistent, steady, honorable work. And so within the space of five years, I had gone from respected future optometrist to you're going to try to make a living doing what? Yeah, but again, they never said no, and I'm grateful for that. And even though mom left us about five years ago, dad is still alive at 91 well, and I enjoy getting back up to Indiana two or three times a year to hang out with him for a couple of days. So I'm grateful for that. And I think they got it, yeah, before, before mom died. And I think Dad gets it. Why I had to do this? The best piece of advice I was ever given, and his advice I share now is, do not go into music unless you just can't stay out. I can't stay out. Yeah, well,

### **Gavin Kelly**

it sounds like too that you know, even going from high school band director to wanting to teach theory, that you always knew that your career as a musician was meant to involve teaching in some way, absolutely. Where did that desire to teach? I mean, you mentioned taking that class in college and

knowing you wanted to teach theory, but even before that, you knew you wanted to teach music. So where did that come from?

### **Wes Flinn**

I had a fantastic high school band. Well, even before that, I had a couple of very good piano teachers, and I didn't practice nearly enough, which is a shame, because they were both very good piano teachers, Diane Edwards and then later Diana Gillespie, now Diana Parnell. They were both fantastic piano teachers, and I didn't practice enough because, again, I was going to be an optometrist, right? But my high school band director, a fellow named Paul Hinman, who's over in Missouri now somewhere he's, I think he is retired at this point, because he was about 20 years older than I am, was a real inspiration because I saw that you could demand a level of musicianship and performance from students from whom you would not expect that sort of thing in rural southern Indiana. Yeah, we had a fairly large high school was a county consolidation, but we weren't particularly known for any of our music programs until Paul Hinman came along, and within five years, we were state finalists in marching band and state runner up in concert band, and we had a fantastic jazz program. It was it was a good time. It was exactly what I needed when I needed it. So I saw that education pedagogy could transform lives, because it transformed mine, yeah, and that, to me, is where it all started, seeing Paul Hinman and the other the assistant associate band directors. You know, Steve Scherer, Donald Kluger, Brian Lackey, my choir director, Jim Fitzpatrick, was fantastic musician himself. I think he was in a situation where he didn't necessarily want to be doing that, because I heard from a friend that he would like go to Europe and like hear concerts in Salzburg and go skiing out Aspen and then go to events at the Aspen festival or things like that. But you wouldn't know it from the choir. The choir was a good choir, to be sure, but the band was where it was at. And so, you know, Paul Hinman was such a strong and important influence my life. I went to college and I met folks like Jay Flippin, Chris Gallagher, my euphonium teacher, Earl Louder, Sue Ann Blair, who taught music literature. Just amazing folks. Dave Anderson, the jazz band director, Dick Miles and Frank Trace, who were the band directors. Just remarkable musicians and humans, and I was fortunate to have a lot of role models and a lot of people looking out for me, and I've tried to pay it forward wherever I can. Yeah, now that I'm in a position of leadership at a really good program, I intend on amping that up to 11, as we like to

### **Gavin Kelly**

say, perfectly, into my next question, which is, has teaching and now that you're in a position of leadership, maybe even more so, has teaching been and does it continue to be as rewarding as you'd hoped it would be whenever you decided you were going to take on teaching?

### **Wes Flinn**

I've learned to not like grading. Quite as much, I will say that I enjoy what I enjoy the most about teaching is when someone gets it, oh yeah, and you see it, the room gets brighter because a little light bulb goes on over their head, or they say, Oh, I never thought about that. I am older than I'd like to be, but I'm also the youngest son of a very old family, which meant I have a lot of pop cultural references that are out of date, even by the standards of being a 50 something person in 2026 but I always talk about MERV moments. None of you out there probably have heard of Merv Griffin. He was a talk show host back when that was a thing in the 60s and 70s. And whenever a guest would make an interesting point, he'd kind of cock his head and go, ooh. And I live for the Ooh moments. So yeah, I can't really

call them MERV moments anymore, because nobody knows who the heck Merv Griffin is or was. He's not been with us for a while, but that's what I enjoy the most about it, knowing that somebody walked out of my classroom thinking differently, or having the opportunity to wrestle with some new knowledge, and you don't see the results of that immediately, but down the road, this, this little tidbit, or this little discussion, could have a massive impact on something they're doing, or how they think about something. It's, it's ripples in a pond, you know, right there where the stone hits, the ripples are the width of a quarter, but left over their own devices, they can take up miles. And those are the moments that I appreciate. I still don't like grading all of course, of course. And there you have been changes post covid. Covid was rough on music program at all levels, because so much of the music making, as I always say, Nobody chooses a college music program based on the theory teacher, at least not at the undergraduate level. It's the ensemble experiences, the performing experience, it is your applied lessons that bring you in and covid made the ensemble and lesson situation really challenging, and a lot of programs are either just now digging out from under that or never got the chance to do. So yeah, there are a lot of places where music simply stopped being a thing, and this is at the elementary school level, high school level to college level, and that has required a bit of a reckoning on how we think about things during covid, music went from a communal activity to a zoom activity or to the app, acapella, or whatever people had to find other ways. But the thing is, people found other ways to make music. The human need to make music is as important to us as oxygen and music, like life in the Jurassic Park movies finds a way.

### **Gavin Kelly**

Yeah, good reference it is. I love talking to people who have interests and passions in music, because I would consider myself a weekend musician. I've been playing guitar drums as a hobby for a long time. Was in a few bands in high school, that sort of thing, but I've never taken any serious music classes or lessons. I can't read music, that sort of thing. But it doesn't, you know, when I'm talking to somebody like you, that doesn't matter. I still feel, you know, the connection to to the world of music that you have, and I feel connected to that. So connecting to the world of music is easy to do, no matter what level anyone's on, but we have several levels here at Louisiana Tech, and we've got a lot of good things going on in the school of music. I hope that's a smooth enough segue. Let's talk about now here, coming into the final quarter of your first academic year, kind of your your hopes and dreams, what you've seen out of the school of music that you really like, what you your kind of your vision for it is and and how you just see things going here at Louisiana Tech for the

### **Wes Flinn**

school, it helps that I have some of the most amazing faculty. Certainly are my colleagues are amongst the finest musicians and teachers I've ever had the privilege to know. And I've had the privilege of knowing quite a few our ensembles are our top shelf. I was able to get to all of the ensemble concerts over the past couple quarters, and certainly, it's just amazing to hear that level of music making. It is refreshing. It speaks to the talent again, not only of my colleagues, but of our students, right? And I always want to my vision for. Or the program is always centering students, and you do that by having a world class faculty and giving them the tools they need to get that level out of the students. And it's not just in the ensemble performances when you're dealing with applied lessons, getting good lesson teachers, which we have in there, and giving them the support that they need to take students to things like the National Association of Teachers of singing. We just had some students go to the Louisiana

nats competition over in Monroe a couple of weeks back, and we comported ourselves very well. We do things with music teachers National Association. We had some students go down there in October, I believe. And again, Tech was well represented in the winner circle. Certainly. Our pep band is currently off in Huntsville, Alabama for the conference tournament, and our choirs are performing amazing works. They premiered two new works at their last concert in March, just about a week and a half ago, over at Trinity Methodist work by two of our faculty, Shayla Blake and Jacob grant. Sheila teaches songwriting, collaborative, piano, flute. Jacob is our primary theory professor here, and they both wrote some wonderful pieces of music, and the choir performed them. So certainly, our ensembles, our performance aspect is very strong. And I want to you know our pop ensemble is really grown by leaps and bounds over the past five years, once we brought in music industry, that area is our primary growth area, and our pop ensemble director, by Robert sharp, is really sounding good right now. Wade Dillingham, who directs our jazz band, has got those kids sounding really good, of course, percussion ensemble with Greg Lyons, Chris Heidenreich and the bands, Nathan Trahan and the choirs, fantastic stuff. Our applied teachers are doing wonderful things. As I mentioned earlier. Steel mogul who teaches piano, and Greg Lyon, who Greg Lyons, who teaches percussion. They're some of their students are doing a piece by George Crumb, Major 20th Century American composer on March 31 really neat work, music for a summer's evening. Macro Cosmos three. It was written in the 1970s 1980s so it will have an interesting title, but it's a fascinating and wonderful work by an incredible composer, and our students get to do that, and so my job as the Director of School of Music, I'm not waving the baton in front of the band. I am not teaching the next generation of trombonists or brass players we've got, you know, folks who can do that, Tyler Kaufman and Megan George. I am not fronting the pop ensembles or teaching someone play guitar. That's Robert sharp, that's Kane buds, that's Shayla Blake. That's their job. I'm not teaching voice students, that's why. Why should I? And Brandy estwick, that's their job. My job is to give them the support they need so they can do that. And perhaps this is a pipe dream, perhaps this is a boast, but my goal is nothing less than the finest undergraduate music program in the area, possibly in two or three states. Yeah, it's going to take a lot of work to get there, certainly, because as good as we are, there's always room for improvement. And I want us out there recruiting. I want us doing a bunch of stuff, but I think we can have that. I want to build out, say, our string program a little bit. I want to look at the degrees we're offering and make them better. I'd like to get some new facilities. But I also know that that is an incredible dream. And you know, it's it's great because Howard Auditorium is a wonderful space, and we share that with the School of Theater, and it's a good space historic too. Absolutely historic. And what I love about one of the reasons I took this gig was because Harry Howard, for whom Howard auditorium was named the first graduate of tech in 1897 you know, this was Louisiana Polytechnic at the time, right? Even had some other name. I think I'd have to go back and read the history. But the very first Louisiana Tech graduate was a music major. And with that kind of tradition, you. You can't help but have the ambition to build further on it. Music has been a part of this institution from the get go, and I want to make sure that it is not only continuing to be a part of this institution, but it is one of the parts people talk about when they talk about Louisiana Tech. And ambitious, certainly, but ambition is right in our mission statement as a school of music, tradition and ambition. It's what we do. And as the architect Daniel Burnham said, Make no little plans.

### **Gavin Kelly**

Beautifully said. Beautifully said, Yeah, I think too, that you look at the School of Music, you look at a field of study like music, and it's often easy for an outsider maybe, to look at what qualifies it as being

successful, as just the production of it. How good are the performances? But you know, these students are learning all sorts of things behind the scenes that may not show up on paper, on stage. You know, it's just, it's but despite that, and despite knowing that students who come here and get any type of music degree can do lots of different things with those different degrees, what is something? What's a common thread that all students who graduate with a music degree from Louisiana Tech, what's something you want? Them all? Something you want them all to

### **Wes Flinn**

leave with an incredible work ethic, the ability to work with others. These are the skills that employers say we want graduates to have, and these are the skills that you get by being involved in music, even if you play a solo instrument, on piano or guitar, you still have to collaborate with others. You're going to be working with others, and you have to know how to handle we, not me, and music is a great way to do that. It's a tremendous leveling experience in a lot of ways. You know, there is nothing in my background that would suggest this is what I'm doing. And yet, this kid who grew up on a hog farm in a town of 19 people, whose father only has a high school diploma because he got his GED in the army, I've had works performed in Europe. I've met presidents. I have had this incredible, amazing, nutty life because of music, and part of my goal is to make sure that the next kid on a hog farm in a town of 19 people in southern Indiana can do that. So for me, it's the ability to play well with others. It's the ability to look at a problem and put in the necessary time in the practice room or in the woodshed, as our jazz friends like to say, to solve the problem, this is something I need to be able to do. How do I get there? Well, you think about how you can improve yourself. And then you go into the practice room and you work it out, and then you take it into your ensembles, into your performances, into your lessons, and you hone it further. That's a good skill to have in any situation, whether it involves a tuxedo or not, absolutely. And that is the sort of thing above all else. I want our students to come out with that kind of ability to conquer a problem and to work with others to do it. It's always we not me, great.

### **Gavin Kelly**

I love that very well. Said, again, I'm fired up listening to you talk about the school you gave what I would argue is one of the most complete and robust shout outs of your faculty that anyone's given on this podcast. Yeah, I think you were trying to, and I think you might have, but very good. I appreciate you talking to the School of Music. It's needed. I think, I think anyone in a leadership position on campus can talk, talk about their area of leadership and talk it up. But it's important to do that. It's important to get that out there. So it sounds to me like the School of Music in good hands, and I really appreciate that. So again, thank you, Dr Flynn, for making time for us today, joining us here on the podcast. I always close this out with a Go Dogs. But also, you know, today, southern Indiana go hogs to you know, we

### **Wes Flinn**

stopped raising hogs a few years back that dad has actually retired from farming. But he didn't retire, and he was like,

### **Gavin Kelly**

85 Yeah, I was about to say, if you said a few years back, and you said earlier, he was 91

**Wes Flinn**

so he's, it's been fairly recent and but what's interesting, I'll leave with this note, because dad is a big country music fan, and my first week in town, I had opportunity to meet one of our more famous alum, kick Brook kicks Brooks, yes, and I sent that picture to my siblings and Dad, and think the old man. Started to understand things a little more that day. He thought that was just great. And I'm looking forward to building up some credibility in that area as well, because it's just it is very different than where I saw myself when I started down this path all those years ago. They got to say, I'm pretty happy with where I've ended up. So a robust Go Dogs.

**Gavin Kelly**

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