

Retro or Relic

“The Mystique of Alumni Drum Corps”

By

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The wisdom that comes with age has taught us, not only to value each other, but also the allegiance which has formed between corps.



MEMORIAL DAY PARADE, HYDE PARK 1952
MATT WOODRICKS
ROY FITZIMMONS RICHIE CARLSON
G'DDIE ANGLON



ALUMNI CARLSON
1955 M.P.B. CARLSONS

Why would anyone, feet firmly planted in middle age, their kids finally launched, holding down a full time job, longing for some of that easy living, strap on a 30lb horn or huge bass drum? Why would they subject themselves to marches that torture their arthritis and practice that would test the endurance of people half their age? A question most people outside drum corps ask us on a daily basis.

Drum Corps was almost a mandatory activity in the 50's and 60's, if you were a “City Kid”. Neighborhoods were defined by the parish you lived in, and usually, by the drum corps or band you marched in. They were simple organizations, generally overseen by the local priest, or some wonderful “crazed” set of parents. People, who until this day, had no idea what the generosity of their dedication would mean to the salvation of some of these kids. They took you off the street, charged \$1.00 a week, (which never got paid), taught you to play an instrument and more importantly, how to be a team. As a former member of “Boston” I marched with kids for whom drum corps was a refuge, and whose only good suit was that red and black uniform. To say that bonds were formed, is an understatement - to this day, I have many of the same friends.

BUT, change is inevitable, as we grew older and more sophisticated, so did drum corps (so they say). John Phillip Sousa was laid to rest, in his place was “Beethoven and his Fifth”, marching was replaced with ballet and “tenement juice”, (a concoction created in somebody's kitchen), graduated to Gatorade. As the new 18 wheelers rolled in, out rolled the patriotic themes and “Old Glory” was relegated to the sidelines.

Somebody out there, “God Bless You”, was having none of it. Slowly, but surely in the early 90’s, alumni drum corps began to emerge. From Boston to Wisconsin, brittle bones were called out of retirement. The mission was clear and launched with vengeance. Preserve the integrity of Drum Corps as we knew it. Bring back the toe-tapping tunes of yesterday, El Cap, South Rampart Street, American Salute.

It doesn’t matter who you are, when that crowd roars you’re right back on the starting line. It is the VFW Nationals and all is at stake. The 20 minutes that you take center stage, you know the audience is not just applauding your performance, but your chutzpah for doing it. The politics, egos, differences of opinion, all fade and you are part of the brotherhood. This produces a level of camaraderie the likes of which exists in almost no other activity.

In discussing the surge of alumni corps with other alumni members, everyone seems to feel the same, junior corps was great, but this has been a far more rewarding experience. The wisdom that comes with age has taught us, not only to value each other, but also the allegiance which has formed between corps. This was unheard of, in the 50’s and 60’s. We are united in our goal to preserve the traditions.

However, make no mistake, when you take the floor to perform, everyone is still competing. A major upside of Alumni Drum Corps is that everyone “in their mind” takes home the Trophy.

SO WHY DO WE DO IT: It is a life that only drum corps people understand. Some people compare it to a cult and that may very well be.

We wouldn’t trade this bizarre mid-life adventure for your golf game, your boat, summer home or that extra hour in the easy chair.

Where else can you step back in time? You board a bus and step away from all the things that make you a grown up. The mortgage, unmowed lawns, ailing parents, unpaid bills will just have to await your return. There isn’t any deep, dark secret to it. It is the ability to laugh until your sides hurts.

It is the knowledge that you have a 110 people to share your sadness and revel in your success. When it comes time for your big sendoff, won’t your neighbors be impressed with the turnout.

So fellow alumni, UNITE. This activity, as we know it, is fading a lot faster than our liver spots. Are we relics? Who’s asking? Our music has stood the test of time. Give me back the era when you could be 15 blocks away and recognize the corps on the field by their style and sound. Keep on trucking! When someone has the audacity to ask you why – keep it simple. Somebody has to?

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