

THE HARVARD BAND, 2001: IMPRESSIONS OF A NEW ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

So there I was, flat on my back in the mud, staring up at the September sky, asking myself: “what is this Harvard Band about anyway?”

How, you may ask, does a new staff member, an Officer of the University for goodness’ sake, end up in such a position? Well, it pertains to the unique organization that is the Harvard University Band.

Ask each of the Band’s Senior (student) Staff what the Band is all about and you will hear some variation among responses... but one message comes through loud and clear: “We are here to serve the University with music, spirit, and entertainment.”

And serve they do. The Band is one of the most active organizations on campus, in terms of commitment of time and energy, performing at most (this year, all) football games, both home and away, as well as hockey and basketball games; supporting University and alumni functions (such as the recent President’s Installation and every Commencement) with ceremonial music; participating in parades and other events throughout the greater Boston area; not to mention performing on campus for student enjoyment. But what about the “inside scoop”? What motivates these energetic, passionate, committed musician/entertainers? How do the zany half-time shows come into being, and what is life like inside the Harvard Band?

My first impressions this fall of the Harvard Band occurred during Frosh Week, when a dedicated troop of veteran “Bandies” returned to campus Labor Day weekend to prepare to welcome the new students. They arrived in an array of conditions by every means of transportation imaginable – some bright-eyed and alert in broad daylight by car, others wearily by T from the airport in the late afternoon, and a few blowing in late at night, wild-eyed, by some unknown means of transportation possibly out of a Harry Potter novel. What unified them all was a palpable eagerness, an enthusiasm for the fall season, and an affinity for the Band’s arcane mission... which was still somewhat of a mystery to me at the

time. Their arrival transformed the Band Room from its sleepy summer state to a bustling hive of activity – staff members feverishly organizing music, instruments, and uniforms; others sharing summer adventure stories while putting the finishing



Nat conducts during the installation of President Summers

touches on the new Band handbook; still others trading jokes as they prepared for the Freshman Activities Fair.

The events of September 11 sobered us all and proved a difficult time as the Band struggled to come to terms with the implications. For me, a glimmer of hope was that the Band drew together to console each other – this group is not just a musical group, it is a close-knit family. Not knowing whether the first game of the season against Holy Cross would occur, Staff and Directors alike thought hard about what contribution the Band could make to the recovery and healing process. Members created new arrangements of patriotic songs; staff decided to forego the usual half-time show style in favor of a unifying concert in cooperation with the Holy Cross Band; and all of us asked ourselves and each other what we could do within our sphere to help and make a difference. In the end, appropriately, the game was canceled, and the plans went unrealized, but it was the process that impressed me – looking for ways to make a difference.

A week’s distance from the events saw a new optimism and energy within the Band, and preparations for the Brown game were more festive, though still a bit subdued. It was decided to proceed with a traditionally (for the Harvard Band) humorous show for Brown, in hopes of giving the audience a break, an escape from the tensions of world news. I was asked and accepted an

inside view on this first game in my new position: a spot in the rank and file playing trombone.

Saturdays in the fall are, for the Band, entirely devoted to support of athletics. All rise early (or brave the wrath of their colleagues!) to march through Harvard Square performing Harvard songs en route to the practice field behind Dillon Field House. There, the Drill Master ascends to the “crow’s nest” position from which s/he verbally wrestles, taunts, cajols, and teases the Band into its formations for the day’s performance. (Keep in mind that in order to allow members time for their studies, the Band rehearses only twice per week, learning an entirely new show for each game. Friday

afternoon’s music rehearsal is but a prelude to the Saturday morning excitement when the music is enhanced by the humor and wit created earlier in the week by the Drill Master, in consultation with a team of Band wags.)

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