



Please take this ...
by Gregory Bruce

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Gregory Bruce contributed the following story about St. Rita's Brassmen, one of the most successful corps of a few decades ago. It is an expansion of his "**A Look Back, A Step Forward**" from Dec. 9, 2005, a column that generated much comment from those who remember the corps with fondness. It turns out I unwittingly sent in the column prior to his having really finished it, for which I apologize. The following is the complete article, run appropriately on this weekend that eastern drum corps fans gather in Allentown.

Please take this, if you will ... and begin by suspending your judgment and disbelief just as you would while entering a movie complex before sitting down to watch the newest blockbuster. In the years prior to Drum Corps International, the world for a drum corps participant was a much different place than it is today. So different that it's practically unbelievable. Picture a Friday night on a very busy Atlantic avenue in Brooklyn, N.Y. It is just about 7 p.m., it's August, and the year is 1969.

Angle the camera down on that broad avenue bisected by a median under which runs the famed "A" train. You will see figures on the sidewalks in silhouette, backlit by a White Castle hamburger franchise on one corner and a Carvel Ice Cream stand on the opposite corner.

Two-by-two, four in a group and even eight or more ... all somehow ignoring the traffic and crossing that avenue with one destination: The big green doors of St. Rita's Youth Center. Many wear similar lightweight red jackets emblazoned with vertical black and white stripes. They are white and black and Hispanic; they are young men and women who represent virtually every area of the economic, social and ethnic spectrum that could be found in New York City at that time. They are members of the St. Rita's Brassmen Drum and Bugle Corps.

Most of the youngsters have known each other for at least two or three years. Most in the horn line began learning how to play their respective instruments perhaps just months before that—the same with the drummers. Most everything back then and the years before was learned on the fly. Very few corps members could read a score. The portable technology available was limited to the mostly monophonic cassette player.

Scores and repertoires were learned by rote. Because our horn line was so small, there were no real “section captains,” and discipline was maintained by two rules of law that went by one name. His name was Carmen Cluna.

Much has been written and spoken about this singular individual. For me, a rebellious, smart-mouthed know-it-all, the most difficult thing I ever did was learn how to listen to Carmen. After seeing with my own eyes how he could take what could only be called a ragtag group of boys and girls, dress them down during hours and hours of nothing but repetitive motion, then dress them up in spectacular scarlet, black and white and without hesitation spirit them off to a distant town like Kenosha, Wis., and set them loose against some of the country’s best corps at the time, I knew that this guy was the best.

But this is about a time in drum corps history, and what a time it was. (Kids, you might want to ask your parents about the mid-to-late 1960s in America. I don’t think they teach the real history of that time in most schools these days.) Unrest brewed on so many levels all over the country. But at that time during the summers, rented Trailways and Greyhound buses cruised the interstates filled with boys and girls, followed closely by chaperones and quartermasters.

The only enemy we—or any drum corps—faced was the weather and the judges. Sure, there were some rivalries, real and imagined. Some corps really didn’t like us. I personally really didn’t like some corps. They rubbed me the wrong way, and they didn’t have the “class” that we so studiously exhibited. But we were sheltered from the outside world. Our world was drum corps. We ate it, slept it and drank it.

Inside the spacious rehearsal hall, early arrivals can be heard warming up or doing their pre-rehearsal ritual on that always overly warm New York August night: A lone mellophone player can be heard testing himself with the familiar opening notes of Gershwin’s “Concerto in F.”

The clipped slap of leather-against-palm of the rifle team echoed off the high windows. There’s the occasional high-pitched call from one of the color guard to the other as they enter and spy each other. Add to that the laughter and an ease of camaraderie that belies the fact that these young people have just returned days before from a 2,500 mile round trip to the nation’s heartland. They had met and held their own against a contingent of corps most had only heard on recordings from that company once called Fleetwood. (Again, kids ask your parents about “recordings.”) There was no evident fatigue. Instead, there was a sense of urgency of the job to come. The World Open Championship was less than a week away and there was work to be done.

Now if this were a movie, this would be the perfect time for a flash back: Dissolve the above scene to show a much smaller hall and a much smaller group of individuals. They are the St. Joseph Patron Cadets of just a year before. After a near meteoric rise from their small beginnings in 1963, this small corps had taken the New York Metropolitan area by storm, capturing the Greater New York Circuit Championship in 1965 and placing 11th at the World Open Championship prelims that same year.

At that time, The World Open was still a new venue for competition. The way I remember it, most corps in our area belonged to what were called “circuits.” In the Tri-State area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, there was about fifty corps. These were organizations whose roots were based out of V.F.W. or American Legion posts. Some others belonged to the CYO, but still had ties to those venerable military-based groups.

The basis of everything began at the neighborhood level. Kids from Garfield Cadets were actually kids from Garfield, N.J., and it was that way for most corps. Whether it was for lack of money or just lack of time, each area had a group of corps who regularly competed against each other in their respective circuits and only traveled for special shows.

Living and growing up in New York City with small organizations like St. Rocco's Cadets (who were the horn line to beat during their day) and the Bronx Kingsmen (the Big Apple's version of the Muchachos who wore beautifully designed uniforms and played nickel-plated horns that had to cost a fortune). There also was the O.L.P.H. Ridgemen, the O.L.C. Ramblers, Cater Cadets, St. Lucy's, the Manhattanaires, Scarlet Lancers, Wynn Center Toppers, CCMC Warriors and the Staten Island Lawmen, among others. But when you looked to the west, the competition was stunning during the mid-to-late sixties. To us, it was New Jersey who fielded "The Big Guns," with Garfield Cadets and Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights among them.

One really big competition was the V.F.W. Nationals. The CYO Nationals was the other. I know New York State always had an American Legion Championship. The New York Daily News would sponsor a show every year and a few years before during the 1964 World's Fair, I witnessed a huge competition where I saw for the first time Troopers and the Cavaliers.

I joined St. Joe's after witnessing their performance at the New York State American Legion Championship the summer before. Their verve attracted me like no other.

I was a member of the Queenaires at the time. We were what was known as that time as a class "B" drum corps, having been two years on the field and with no real future. We were way too under-funded, and even clad in the cast-off uniforms of the once great Queensmen, we couldn't pull ourselves out of their shadow. We scored a dismal 50 points or so at that show and placed somewhere like 19th.

St. Joe's, on the other hand, came in third or fourth and even with that, the way they carried themselves shouted an unmistakable need to succeed. I knew I wanted to be part of whatever it was they were. Making my wishes known to other members of the Queenaires proved to be a test in itself. Kids are mean and I was not treated well. However, I recall that period as more of a segue than as a call for pity.

I read letters and entreaties from young people these days that require vast sums of money and almost professional pre-training to even be considered as a member of a corps. It wasn't that way in 1967. I simply learned where St. Joe's was, showed up on a Friday night during their regular rehearsal and asked if I might join. I was directed to a giant of a man (who I later found out was much more than just tall) named Hy Dreitzer. He asked which horn I played, thrust one in my hands and listened as I played a simple scale. Later, Carmen watched me march, correcting me all the while. There was a brief consultation and an introduction to the rest of the corps and I was in.

Then the routine set in. Its regularity could have driven less focused individuals nuts, but it was that routine that gave us the discipline many of us really needed. During the winter months (the off-season) we practiced music on Fridays at the corps hall and drill on Sunday evenings at a place we knew as the Armory, a military facility that housed trucks and weaponry and was not easy to get to. I would have to explain all the various methods of public and private travel in New York City available to corps members, but the NYC transportation system is a book chore in itself!

Needless to say, with five boroughs (counties to you) separating most members, travel time to and from rehearsals could add up to as many as three to four hours. No kidding! If any ensemble section competed in singles or quartet competitions during those months, they rehearsed on their own.

We all took our instruments home with us and most were quite diligent about practicing at home, to the dismay of most parents, family members, neighbors and friends. During the winter, we went to school and in the summer many of us worked part-time jobs. Late spring found us outside and our rehearsals moved to Wednesday evenings for drill and Fridays to hone the repertoire.

1968 was a pretty good year for St. Joe's, but we were beset by a problem all corps of that time

faced. The specter was poverty. The neighborhood surrounding the church was a cloistered one and had been for generations. The people of the parish began having more and more a problem with supporting an organization when so many of its members were not from “the neighborhood.”

Winning, it seemed wasn't everything. We were asked to leave and except for the dedication and strength of the men and women, instructors and mentors, mothers and fathers, we would have ceased to be. But we were saved. Some weeks later, we arrived on the corner of Shepherd and Atlantic Avenues in the heart of Brooklyn, USA. Carman Cluna himself greeted each and every one of us at the door and introduced us to our new moderator, the one and only Father Dominick Schiraldi, a man whose devotion to life and youth should be the stuff we see on the news more than the negative images of late.

We now had a new home with a moderator and parish committed to our success. For many of us, our schedule and commitment to the corps was broadened to include Thursday nights, during which we ran bingo to raise money for the corps. I believe we were the first drum corps to institute this practice.

The money raised that first winter outfitted the corps from top to bottom with new uniforms, new horns (in “G,” thank you very much) from Olds, new drums by Ludwig; including tympani and Zildjian cymbals. Rifles, flags and poles, harnesses, sticks, a truck— well, you get my drift.

Then, to really “seal the deal” and truly establish St. Rita's as the competitive drum and bugle corps we wanted to be, we acquired a new drum instructor/arranger. With the addition of Eric Perrilloux to our roster of instructors, the “Pure Eastern Drum Corps Team” that made the Skyliners the force that they'd become: Cluna, Dreitzer and Perrilloux, were united once again and the transformation from St. Joe's to St. Rita's was complete. Hence the sobriquet: “THE CINDERELLA CORPS FROM BROOKLYN, NEW YORK,” as the famed Wes Hobby would introduce us.

With that background, we will move forward in time to the week before the World Open. Our rehearsals that week were nothing less than spectacular. We had a very tough repertoire and an even tougher marching program that covered an enormous expanse of the field. This is important to the “tick” style judging of the time for a number of reasons. (The “tick,” by the way, was and remains in my estimation the fairest system of judging a competitive drum corps show.) A “tick” was worth one-tenth of a point and was deducted along the way by various field judges—two each for Drums, Horns and Marching and Maneuvering. The General Effect judge scored his overall feelings from some high point in the grandstand. I believe the breakdown was 30 points for M&M, 20 each for Drums and Bugles and 30 for GE. When you consider the time on the field divided by seven judges, a score of 75 to 80 or better was pretty darn good and that's just about what the best corps were receiving.

We had a small horn line even by eastern standards and downright tiny by western standards of the time, and when you spread a small group of players out, it becomes easier to single out perhaps the weakest 2nd soprano player in the line and then just wait for him to make mistakes. It is unfortunate to note that there were judges like that. I'm not grousing or making excuses, because no matter how good a corps was, there were at least one or two players who had a tendency to “crack” on certain notes or let the drill get in front of the playing. But if you had 50 horns versus a corps with 32, the weaker players would be harder to find. I'm speaking as a horn player here, but I'm sure that thinking crossed the minds of drummers and color guard as well. Three snares are easier to follow than six, and so forth.

Please understand that during the late 60s and early 70s, many corps fielded youngsters 12 or 13 years old. The fact that they could even remember all there was for them to do during an 11-and-a-half minute show was a testament to their time and dedication.

Be that as it may, we were proud of our growth and during the Midwestern tour, we did show our

mettle. We'd started the season extremely well and when Carmen Cluna told us that our off-the-line would mirror the famed company front "patented" by the Troopers, we did believe that it would be the hardest 48 steps of our lives. To pull that stunt off in "Trooper Territory" was a massive ego boost.

Here's another thing unthinkable today. If I mention phrases like "off-the-line," "color presentation," "concert," or "exit," those were parts of a total show and by the rules had to be included. To me a show is anathema without the presentation of the colors with a piece of music that in some way represents America and the martial aspect of the drum corps' history, one of the reasons there are corps that still bare names like "Cadets," "Scouts," "Regiment," "Lancers" and "Troopers," to name a few.

I've alluded to the length of our shows—up to twelve minutes of marching from one end of a football field from left to right from the spectator's perspective. And we all marched. Even everyone in the drum section marched, including tympani and any other percussive instrument the corps used. "The Pit" was something you sounded like on a bad day.

We thought we were good enough to compete big time after that trip. You could see that Carman and Hy and Eric knew it, too. Of course, the judges never really thought so. St. Rita's was really too small for the all-important and subjective GE scores. Later, Carman would devise shows that broke that mold. We were the first to run on the field, the very first to stage "shows" and to use theatrical gimmicks. It was thrilling to know we were changing history. But that was in our future.

Our horn line was so good that during the Midwest tour we stunned onlookers by playing our show atop an Ohio Howard Johnson's parking lot on kazoos! We took the audiences in Kenosha and Racine by surprise, too. Great orchestration and placement created an amazingly large sound. And even with all the travel, we were a composed group on the field for those competitions.

Our rehearsals that week before Aug. 14, 1969, were the absolute best. They weren't perfect, but they were the controlled chaos that made us smile inwardly and left us with none of the exhaustion that sometimes came during the hot, humid New York summers.

We'd peaked and we knew it.

To be perfectly honest, Carman, Hy and Eric were just like great football coaches. Time and time again, the idea of show time was diverted from our heads. Just do it like you did it in practice—execute, execute. It was easier said than done.

The World Open was a tortuous two-day affair that involved preparing for and putting on two shows—one seven-minute production for the prelims and then a full show for the finals. In the heat of August during these shows, many ambulances were filled with young people who had passed out due more to stress, nervousness and the anxiety of both than to mere exertion.

The bus ride up to Lynn, Mass., began ...

August 14 World Open —Class A Prelims: 7th place, 75.30.

August 15 World Open—Class A Finals: 7th place, 69.05.

(Placements for all Class A Finals: 1st-Troopers, 2nd-Boston Crusaders, 3rd-Anaheim Kingsmen, 4th-Des Plaines Vanguard, 5th-St. Paul Scouts, 6th-27th Lancers, 7th-St. Rita's Brassmen, 8th-De LaSalle Oaklands, 9th-Santa Clara Vanguard, 10th-CMCC Warriors.)