

A Song, A Season, A Lifetime

Nobody bleeds maroon like current and former members of the Minuteman Marching Band

By Charles Creekmore



Band director George Parks dusts off the Sudler Trophy, the Heisman of marching bands. He hopes someday soon the trophy, and the 350-member Minuteman Marching Band, have a new home on campus.

The best way to capture a lasting image of the high-voltage Minuteman Marching Band (heretofore “the band”) is by eavesdropping on a dress rehearsal. We’re talking about spying on 350 musicians, baton twirlers, drum majors, the color guard—the whole kit and caboodle—as they bob in unison to “Crocodile Rock” and kaleidoscope into dizzying formations.

Members’ stylish Sergeant Pepper uniforms make a whooshing, Technicolor fashion statement and highlight the telescoping patterns. White coats accented by maroon and gold. Maroon sashes with traditional lettering. Black pants with maroon stripes. And the beloved maroon-and-white shakos of old, those stiff, cylindrical, flat-topped military dress hats with their feathered plumes.

And hear that big sound! Drummers form a flying wedge of backbeat that comes on like a musical charge of the Light Brigade. Dozens of horns glisten in the sun, their sound crashing down the field in a rush of wind. The strains of so many synchronized instruments seem driven by the rifles and batons and flags propelling again and again into the liquid blue sky.

As the song reaches a crescendo, the whole fluid formation at last solidifies on the 50-yard line into one, gargantuan, block-letter M. Overall, the impact of this fast and furious performance evokes the Greatest Show on Earth, only in this instance, it’s a Circus Maximus that could never be staged in three measly rings.

And this is just rehearsal. Every band performance casts the same infectious spell. Spectators of these dazzling and boisterous shows feel an almost overpowering urge to join in the fun and follow the crowd. Every audience everywhere seems compelled by our 350 musical prodigies in much the same way that the children of Hamelin must have been charmed by their own irresistible Pied Piper.

Pied Piper in Chief

The Pied Piper of the band is director George Parks. His influence rubs off on his charges with every message—metaphorical, metaphysical, megaphonal—that he conveys.

“Our goal is a big one,” he tells the performers gathered at summer Band Camp, an annual preseason tradition. “You guys come here for one reason. And that is to be part of the best college band in the nation.”

Being the best is no idle boast. In 1998, the John Philip Sousa Foundation awarded the band the Sudler Trophy, to honor ours as the finest marching ensemble in the country.

“For now and ever more,” said Massachusetts State Senator and former tuba player Stan Rosenberg ‘77 at the presentation ceremony, “you are part of one of the greatest marching bands of all time.”

This Heisman Trophy of marching bands is currently gathering dust in Parks’s temporary office at the defunct University Apartments on the edge of campus. It sits in Parks’s cluttered quarters among numerous awards, mementoes, and honorary paraphernalia, the relics of his 30-year career as director.

In one of those twists of fate that accompany all belt-tightening, the band has been without a home since the very year the Sudler Trophy was awarded. From 1960 until 1997, the Old Chapel was the beloved residence of the band. How fitting, indeed, that the most *audible* emblem of UMass Amherst made its home within our most visible symbol. Its entrance was graced by these momentous words: “Through these doors walk the Power and Class of New England.”

But in 1998 budget shortfalls and deferred maintenance struck a fatal blow. That year the structure of the Old Chapel was no longer safe to use, turning the band into 350 displaced persons.

“The thought of the band members without a home, a center of operations they can call their own, is heartbreaking,” says former trumpet player Tanya Carlino ‘97. “Walking into the Old Chapel always gave me the intangible feeling of being at home at UMass Amherst.”

The band is now scattered to the wind. The percussion instruments, for instance, are housed at the old Grinnell Arena. The band’s changing room is located in the parking lot outside Grinnell. And all those wonderful uniforms are stowed away in a facility five miles away.

“It’s time to build a new facility that meets all the band’s needs in a state-of-the-art way,” says Parks.

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- [Band Building Campaign](#)
 - [Minuteman Marching Band](#)
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Through These Doors

But the band's dislocation doesn't mar its storied past. It began in 1873 with an 11-member drum corps, according to the organization's recently published official history *Through These Doors* by former drum major Kerstin H. Becker '96. In 1932 the Massachusetts State College Band gained permanent legitimacy, after the Academic Activities Board gave it official status.

The band became a national force to be reckoned with in 1963, 16 years after the college was officially upgraded to a university. President John W. Lederle brought the famed "Michigan Influence" to campus by hiring former University of Michigan cornet player John A. Jenkins as band director. Known then to band members simply as "Dad," Jenkins is said to have imbued in the band "a combination of terror and musicianship," along with the mythical "high step" that was so fundamental to the Michigan style. Jenkins also initiated a rite of summer that has characterized the marching band and its success for more than 40 years: the weeklong basic training course of drilling, instrumentation, formations, and intense school spirit known with fear and affection as Band Camp.

"I earnestly agree," noted Jenkins, "that our marching band should and will become the best sounding and marching band that devoted and enthusiastic leadership, vitally interested students, and the full support of the administration at the university can make possible."

The statement foreshadowed the hiring of George Parks in 1977, then a 24-year-old former West Chester University drum major. Parks's mentor at West Chester once characterized his protégé this way: "On the field he is a real ham, a showman with a real ego. But off the field, he is one of the most unassuming people you could ever meet."

Coming from his drum-corps background, Parks brought with him revolutionary ideas about marching, conducting, and drill writing that differed wildly from the Michigan paradigm. One good example was the "glide step," a graceful marching style that kept more than 600 feet tripping the light fantastic in unison, thus allowing the band to belt out its big sound in a velvety, harmonious fashion.

Parks also brought pop music to the performances, over the years introducing every contemporary style from Broadway ("A Chorus Line") and movie themes ("Star Wars" and "Rocky") to rock (The Beatles) and jazz ("Birdland").

Among his other innovations, Parks's all-encompassing approach to the band experience had lasting effects on its members. Color guard member Colleen Giaimo Snodgrass '97 credits her fellow "bandos" with pulling her out of a long depression. "The Minuteman Band basically saved my life," she says succinctly.

In a similar feel-good story, clarinetist Angelique Szeman Castro '93C found a community of comrades when she came to campus after growing up in a rough part of south central Los Angeles. "When I arrived on the Peter Pan bus with a suitcase and a history of adversity, I felt different," she recalls. "But I wasn't. I had 300 friends."

Many other new arrivals on campus found that it takes a whole village to raise a bando. Percussionist Dotty Hayes '72 '76G, recalls how her entire life on campus focused on her participation in the marching band. For her it amounted to "a small village of close friends and supporters" nourishing her within the big-campus atmosphere of a major state university.

Crashing the Stands

The relationship between Parks and band members has always been intense and at times rambunctious and prankish, as illustrated by the so-called "Great Pumpkin Caper" of the mid-1980s, when several band members deposited what Parks described as "a sea of pumpkins" on his front lawn.

This impish give-and-take between director and band has typified Parks's three decades at the baton. The result has been many lasting rituals, including the "Cold Duck Champagne Toast," an annual farewell to senior band members; the tradition of band members sleeping on gym floors during overnight trips; and the custom of "crashing the stands" in a headlong rush toward the audience in the surrounding stadium.

Accomplishment also defines the Parks era. Parks is the recipient of the Massachusetts Conductor of the Year Award, the University of Massachusetts Distinguished Teaching Award, and the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Service. In 1993, Parks was inducted into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame. Then his band won the Sudler Trophy in 1998. Finally, as a fitting climax to his celebrated career, he was recently elected to the Bands of America Hall of Fame in Indianapolis.

But the true marks of success are the members themselves—past, present, and future— who consider the band a way of life. As saxophonist Micki Salek '01 says, "You eat, breathe, and live band." Of all the ingredients it takes to create the rich and complex education at UMass Amherst, the band is the extracurricular activity that perhaps best epitomizes the melding of peoples, cultures, majors, experiences, skills, and ideals symbolized by any great university.

"Band has the power to touch people's lives and hearts in an indescribably profound way," says flautist Madeline Scheintaub '04, "whether for the duration of a song, a season, or a lifetime."