

Husky Marching Band Alumni Association

By Doug Morin

It is almost as fun to pronounce the acronym of the Husky Marching Band Alumni Association, HMBAA,¹ as it is for the members to be a part of the organization. Started 50 years ago by an enterprising director and several of his former students, HMBAA today boasts over 800 members. This organization is unique; members volunteer to perform before every home football game and throughout Seattle. In the past half century the organization has grown to over twenty times its initial enrollment and become part of the musical bedrock for Husky Football and beyond.

To understand HMBAA, one must consider the origins. Before a person can be an alumnus they belong to an organization. HMBAA members start in the Husky Marching Band, also referred to as the HMB or Husky Band. The HMB has a long and storied history; it will begin its 88th season in the fall of 2016. Prior to the official formation of the band and hiring of the first director in 1929, some members of the University of Washington ROTC program provided musical entertainment at football games and in parades. While the faculty of the School of Music did not see value in bands or band music, the ASUW Rooters Committee, the press, and those attending football games pushed for the creation of a marching band.² The School of Music bowed to the pressure and hired Walter Welke, a graduate of the vaunted Michigan Band. He constructed the first official Husky Marching Band, aided by a donation of larger, more expensive instruments from the US Government. The band grew to 70 members by 1930, up from the 29 ROTC musicians in 1928. (McDavid)

¹ Pronounced "hum-ba."

² A safe assumption could be made that the entertainment provided by other university bands, especially from the Big Ten, prompted the push for UW to keep pace.

Welke pioneered several innovations during his tenure with the band. He made the band co-ed, first with the addition of a “drum majorette” then with the inclusion of women in the ranks.³ Both of these landmarks happened in the 1930s, prior to World War II. Even after the conclusion of the war, women continued to march with the band.⁴ Welke led the Husky Marching Band for 28 years, stepping aside in 1956, recommending William Cole to take the helm.⁵ (McDavid)

William “Bill” Cole directed the Husky Band from 1957 to 1970. Under his watch, the band grew to over 120 members and made regular appearances up and down the West Coast and across the country.⁶ Cole procured funding for new uniforms. He instituted Bill Moffit’s “squad four” marching system with the Husky Band, a system that stayed in place until the early 1990s. Cole also saw the need to recruit future members so he started a “band day,” inviting local high schools to perform with the Husky Band at halftime. Outside of UW, Cole played in the Seattle Symphony. From this experience he pushed his collegiate ensembles to strive for a deep, polished, and professional sound. (McDavid)

Bill Bissell served as an assistant director for the Husky Band for five years before succeeding Cole as head director in 1971. Bissell started several traditions still seen on the field today, most notably the “flag raising sequence” just prior to the playing of the national anthem. The band grew to 160 members.⁷ The Wave, now a staple at sporting events, was a brain-child

³ The first woman instrumentalist was Jean Montgomery, who played glockenspiel.

⁴ Nearly every nationally renowned band remained all-male until the 1960s, even if they temporarily allowed women to participate during World War II to keep the band from folding.

⁵ Welke continued as a professor in the UW School of Music until his death in 1975.

⁶ The band traveled with the football team to notable away games, including Notre Dame, Michigan, and Ohio State.

⁷ The total number could have grown more, but auditions limited the band to this number.

of Bissell and Robb Weller. The most infamous moment of the Bissell era came when the band transitioned to new uniforms. Instead of just marching onto the field wearing the new uniforms, the band played “The Stripper” while removing the outgoing uniforms during halftime of the first football game of the year.⁸ (Nakayama interview) Bissell turned the reins of the Husky Band over to the current director, Dr. Brad McDavid, in 1993.

Dr. McDavid has enhanced several Husky Marching Band traditions while adapting the ensemble to a more modern style. Drill and formations no longer follow the squad four format, yet the band remains one of the few to incorporate an entirely high-step style of marching. The size of the band continues to grow, with the new limit set at 244 members each year. Additionally, the HMB traveled throughout the United States and across the Pacific Ocean to Australia, Japan, and China.

Needless to say, the experiences of Husky Band leave a lasting impression on the members. Friendships and lasting bonds form through the adventures of each year. Unsurprisingly, these friends continue to meet and spend time with each other after graduation. It’s exactly the atmosphere an alumni organization thrives in.

Prior to the founding of HMBAA, small groups of alumni band members would occasionally play during the Varsity-Alumni football game in May of the late 1950s. Few records of who organized the events can be found; it is however known that the success of the football team led the athletic department to rescind its decision to provide free seats to the alumni band. (McDavid, p. 196) Garry Nakayama, band member from 1960 – 1964, remembers

⁸ The instructions to the band members stated they could wear anything they wished under the uniform, so long as it was tasteful.

that forming an alumni association was the brain-child of Bill Cole.⁹ “Bill worked with (assistant director) Bruce and (his wife) Jo Caldwell.¹⁰ They contacted several people.” (Nakayama interview) Another alumnus, Don Sabo,¹¹ credits the three consecutive trips to the Rose Bowl, from 1960 to 1962, toward galvanizing friendships between the band members. Upon graduation, these close friends desired a way to stay in contact with each other and involved with the Husky Band. (Sabo interview)

The initial meeting for HMBA 4 occurred on January 2, 1966, at the Caldwell’s home.¹² Those attending the meeting adopted an organizational structure and purposes for the association. Bill Cole was deemed “Advisor” and given one of the first Honorary Memberships. Two gatherings were planned, one at the Varsity-Alumni Football game in May and the other after Homecoming in October to honor the 10 years of directorship by Bill Cole. Dues were set at \$1, with a suggested donation of \$1 for the scholarship fund. A short one page newsletter was mailed to all HMB alumni asking for members and advertising the upcoming events. (HMBA 4 Minutes, Jan., 1966)

The letters received an extremely positive reaction. When all of the responses returned 38 founding members, all recent graduates of the Husky Band, paid their dues to join. (McDavid) The initial group of people stayed dedicated to music, the Husky Band, and HMBA 4 for many years. Several founders became successful public school band directors. (Nakayama

⁹ Mr. Nakayama is also a founding member of HMBA 4 and served as HMB Assistant Director from 1971 to 1979.

¹⁰ Both of the Caldwells were alumni of the Husky Band; Bruce graduated in 1964, Jo graduated in 1962.

¹¹ Mr. Sabo also served as an Assistant Director for the Husky Band. He is currently Field Assistant.

¹² The minutes from the first meeting can be found in the HMBA 4 archives. The first “Lyre” included a reprint of the same minutes.

interview) Four members served as Assistant Directors of the Husky Band at various points.¹³ Ken Noreen still serves actively on the HMBAA Board of Directors. Garry Nakayama has photographed the Husky Band for over 30 years. Frazer Cook completed his 55th year as the Announcer for the Husky Band in 2015.¹⁴ All of the founding members of HMBAA participated in the Husky Band under Bill Cole. No person from Walter Welke's bands is included on the roster. (McDavid, p. 193)

The purposes of HMBAA have changed little since that first meeting. The primary objective was to provide a scholarship for a worthy Husky Band member. Additionally, the group planned gatherings to bring alumni from all time periods together. While phrased differently, these core philosophies drive HMBAA activities today. (www.hmbaa.org)

To help accomplish the goal of providing a \$100 scholarship, HMBAA created Associate memberships for \$2 (HMBAA Minutes, March, 1966) and Corporate Memberships for \$5.¹⁵ (HMBAA Minutes, July, 1966) By November of that year, enough money had been raised to hand out not one but two \$100 scholarships. As a point of comparison, tuition in the early 1960s was around \$118 per quarter. (Nakayama interview) The amount of money collected for scholarships increased each of the next two years, with four scholarships handed out in 1967 and five in 1968. This trend of increased scholarships has carried through to today. Nearly

¹³ Bruce Caldwell, Garry Nakayama, Phil Ager, and Bill Bissell.

¹⁴ Mr. Cook is the second longest serving announcer for a band in the United States. He has never missed a performance of the full band, whether home or abroad, in his entire tenure. (www.huskymarchingband.com)

¹⁵ The Board of Directors designated half of the money for these additional types of membership to go toward the scholarship fund.

\$50,000 in honorariums and scholarships were handed to members of the 2015 Husky Marching Band by HMBAA.¹⁶

The HMBAA Board of Directors knew it needed a newsletter to keep in contact with current members. A naming contest was held among supporters with the prize of a free year's membership to HMBAA. Submitted titles included "The Key of A(lums)" and the "Husky Hasbeen Happenings" among many others. The winning name, "HMBAA Lyre," is still used today. The University of Washington Alumni Association pledged help to the fledgling organization by bankrolling the production and mailing of the "Lyre" once a year. HMBAA mailed the first issue in March of 1967; it featured a letter from Bill Cole, introductions of HMBAA officers, notices of upcoming events, reprints of the minutes of the first four meetings, and an update about the lives of 204 alums. (Lyre, March, 1967) It has been published twice a year in March and September ever since. (McDavid)

The first ten years of existence provided only one performance opportunity every twelve months for HMBAA members, the annual Varsity-Alumni football game in May. Bill Bissell wished to enliven the group and have them involved musically, so he engaged the help of Don and Kathy Curtis. "The group was going stale," stated Kathy. "Bill wanted to change that." The Curtis's ran with Bissell's idea, creating the first Alumni Band. (Curtis interview) Husky Athletics provided an ideal venue for performances. In 1977 the "Husky Fever" promotion and "Family Fun Zone" wished to increase fan excitement. Outfitted in matching purple windbreakers, the Alumni Band added the hoped-for pizzazz, playing before each football

¹⁶ HMBAA continues to use the cost of tuition as a guideline for the amounts of each scholarship.

game in exchange for tickets. (McDavid) Members either brought their personal instruments or used the older back-up instruments owned by the Husky Band. (Curtis interview)

The performances were an instant success. At the end of the end of a championship season for Husky Football, the team earned the right to play at the Rose Bowl. Washington's Athletic Director noted the fans' response to the Alumni Band and ask the Rose Bowl Committee to bring the Alumni Band in addition to the Husky Band. The committee denied the request, citing that this would set precedent that other universities would want to follow. No other university had an alumni organization that performed more than once a year. In a sign of respect, the Athletic Department offered members of the Alumni Band the opportunity to purchase tickets for the Rose Bowl as if they held season tickets. (Curtis interview)

Other changes happened as part of Bissell's wish to reenergize the alumni. He found Joan and Kevin Collins to publish the "Lyre" after 3 years of the Band Department disseminating the newsletter. In the process, the Collins discovered that HMBAA neither incorporated nor filed for nonprofit status. Joan and Kevin accomplished both by 1977. Bylaws were written and adopted; HMBAA installed a new structure for their leadership team. (McDavid)

The expanded football schedule instituted by the NCAA in 1971 pushed the first game of the season far ahead of the start of academic classes at the University of Washington.¹⁷ For the first six years Bissell invited high school bands to entertain the crowd during the game. In 1978 the Huskies were scheduled to play the highly ranked UCLA Bruins on national TV the first week

¹⁷ This is much less of a problem for schools on the 16 week semester system. Generally those schools start at the end of August or the first week of September which is approximately the same time the first football game occurs. Members of those bands have already worked out living arrangements and have moved in. Students at UW would have needed to pay for up to four extra weeks of housing if they arrived in time to rehearse for the first football game of the season.

of the season. (Wikipedia.com) The HMB Director did not want to pass up the opportunity for the Husky Band to appear on a national broadcast. “Bissell loved showing off the band,” said Kathy. Bissell talked to the Don and Kathy, inquiring if enough volunteers from HMBAA could be found to combine with returning members¹⁸ to fill out the instrumentation.¹⁹ The HMBAA membership responded enthusiastically and a proud Husky Band composed of current and alumni members marched out that day. Thus was born a tradition carried on to this day. Each year the first home game of the season features the “Varsity-Alumni Band” comprised of undergraduates and graduates who live in the nearby area.²⁰

The uniforms for these events changed over the years. For the first field performance, Bissell had the band wear fashionable clothing of the era – shorts, t-shirts, and knee socks. This received an immediate push back from the alumni, as shorts of the 1978 revealed more leg than many people were comfortable showing. (Curtis interview) Jeans replaced shorts for the next several years, until full uniforms were issued for another national broadcast in the mid-80s. (McDavid) Eventually the hassle of handing out uniforms gave way to the current model of khaki pants, an official purple band polo shirt, and white shoes.

The exposure to the crowd before football games had an unexpected side effect. As the Alumni Band moved around the stadium entertaining people they started to receive requests. Fans asked the band to play for special occasions and celebrations, such as birthdays and anniversaries. The group quickly realized this was an opportunity to help one of HMBAA’s

¹⁸ Auditions for rookie members would not be held until close to the start of the quarter.

¹⁹ Full instrumentation at the time equaled 144 instrumentalists.

²⁰ While everyone with Husky Marching Band experience is invited back, the required rehearsals prior to the Varsity-Alumni Band performance limit the geographic area people travel from to participate.

primary purposes. The band asked for donations for the scholarship fund in exchange for granting these extra wishes. "On a good day we could collect \$200," remembers Kathy. Requests for performances by the Husky Band away from campus expanded to include demands for the Alumni Band. In spite of work and family commitments, members began attending gigs in the evenings. (Curtis interview) The Alumni Band now advertises their services on their website and uses all monies accumulated to provide scholarships. (www.hmbaa.org)

In the summer of 1979 Bissell realized another way to show off the band, even though most undergraduate students left campus. Again working through Don and Kathy, volunteers from HMBAA joined current Husky Band members for the Torchlight Parade through downtown Seattle. In the following years the Alumni Band appeared in the Renton, Mercer Island, and the Bon-Macy Thanksgiving Parades. Under Dr. McDavid, they joined the Husky Band for trips around the United States. The most recent trip happened in July of 2014 when a Varsity-Alumni Band traveled to New Orleans and the Caribbean.

HMBAA plays a wide variety of energetic, popular music. The only rule laid down by Bill Bissell was that a piece could not have been introduced by the Husky Band during the current year. Popular songs early on included "Beer Barrel Polka," "Strike Up the Band," "Hey, Look Me Over," and "Everything is Coming Up Roses."²¹ (Nakayama interview) As new members joined, the band's repertoire updated. "Celebration," "Everybody's Everything," and "Tequila" have stayed so popular that the audiences not only request these songs, they know the band's hand signals. Other songs still on the play list include "Fat Bottom Girls," "Basket Case," and "The Heart of Rock and Roll."

²¹ This piece became especially popular after the numerous trips to the Rose Bowl in the 1960s.

Though HMBAA grew to over 800 members, recruiting future members was never an overt activity. As Mr. Sabo recalls, “Recruitment wasn’t part of the system, members sent in their dues and (attended) activities because they wanted to keep in touch.” Over the years, HMBAA started covering additional expenses previously incurred by the Husky Band. As budgets shrank, HMBAA became involved in the creation of the Husky Band Foundation, an entity dedicated to offsetting travel and operational costs. These sponsorships²² and the accompanying visibility in front of the undergraduates help enlist new members without directly asking anyone to join. (Sabo interview) Alumni must be a current HMBAA member to participate in any performance outside of the Homecoming game.

The only thing that might slow HMBAA’s musical performances or continued growth is the politics of modern college sports. Since the opening of the remodeled Husky Stadium, the Alumni Band does not receive tickets in exchange for providing musical entertainment. Still, a core group of HMBAA members purchases tickets and sits near the Husky Band, come rain or shine.

HMBAA is unique. Most universities only see alumni band members at homecoming. The University of Washington and the Seattle community see HMBAA throughout the year. They are a group of people who love music and comradery to the point they provide opportunities for future generations to experience the same. Simply put, the Husky Marching Band Alumni Association is an organization who love, support, and encourage band.

²² A favorite sponsorship for the undergraduates is “Taco Salad” day. The students usually receive a sandwich and drink between rehearsal and game day. HMBAA brings in taco salads one time a year, a welcome change of pace for the hungry band.

Resources

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Please note – The author is a member of the Husky Marching Band Senior Staff. Several pieces of information state in this report have been obtained through communication with Dr. Brad McDavid (HMB Director), Josh Chan (Band and Spirit Program Coordinator), and numerous staff, alumni, and undergraduate members of the band in the course of performing job duties.