



PRIDE TO PASADENA

{ JANUARY 1, 2011 }





Hitting the High Notes

By TERESA KILLIAN TATE



Band members worked and played in California, performing in the Tournament of Roses Bandfest (above) at Pasadena City College and enjoying themselves at the landmark Santa Monica Pier (opposite).

Although brief, the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band's TV appearance in the Rose Parade on Jan. 1 was long enough to keep a promise to rock the world. As more than 1 billion people watched from 200-plus countries and territories, the band marched through Pasadena, Calif., performing "You" by California horn-band Suburban Legends, the WCU fight song and the Ozzy Osbourne hit "I Don't Wanna Stop." About 1 million spectators lined the streets along the 5.5-mile parade route, creating what band members described as a sea of humanity.

"You could hear them yelling for us," said Rachel Rimmer, a senior band staff coordinator from Siler City majoring in music education. "When we were allowed to take a break, our drumline was high-fiving kids, and we were talking to people in the crowd." At one point, a WCU percussionist lent his drumsticks to a spectator, and the boy's drumming won applause not only from the band but also from the crowd. Within days, more than 77,000 votes were cast at KTLA.com for WCU as the favorite band in the parade, and the Pride won the poll. (See related story on special section page 8.)

“When I would wave, as many as 70 people might wave back,” said **Bob Buckner ’67**, director of the band. “And even though we were 2,500 miles from Cullowhee, when we played the fight song, people chanted ‘Go Western.’ I got pretty emotional. I was just so proud about being from WCU.”

A Tradition of Innovation

When halftime announcer **Ryan Hipps ’00** surprised everyone at E.J. Whitmire Stadium on Oct. 24, 2009, with news of the Rose Parade invitation, band members struggled to stay at attention. “The Pride of the Mountains has been selected, invited and is going to represent Western Carolina University and the great state of North Carolina in the 2011 Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California!” said Hipps.

Based on musical talent, entertainment value, performance skill and directorship, the invitation to march in the parade was one of two extended to U.S. collegiate bands not accompanying teams to the Rose Bowl. The announcement came during the presentation to WCU of the nation’s ultimate honor for college and university bands, the Sudler Trophy, considered the “Heisman Trophy” of the marching band world.

Under the direction of Buckner, **Matt Henley ’93 MA ’95** and **Jon Henson ’05 MA ’07**, the Pride had earned the nickname the “world’s largest funk-rock band.” Its high-energy marching band shows are anything but traditional, featuring electric guitars, synthesizers and vocalists. For the most recent show, “Rock U,” freshman Ezra G. Byrd played bagpipes to open Kid Rock’s song “Bawitdaba.” Later, sophomore Whitney Collins sang AC/DC’s “Rock and Roll Ain’t Noise Pollution” while standing on a life-sized prop shaped like the letter “U.” “It’s like a rush of energy,” said Collins.

For music arranger Bill Locklear, the Pride’s instrumentation gives the music a completely different dimension, and the band’s musicianship is impressive. “Anything that I can write, it doesn’t matter how difficult it is, these kids can play,” he said. When Locklear saw the Pride perform in the fall during its fifth appearance at the Bands of America Super Regional Championship in Atlanta, he was taken by surprise. “It sounded so fresh that it took awhile for it to come back that I had written some of that,” he said.

Henley said trying new things is just part of the band’s tradition. “Our tradition is innovation and we’re not slowing down,” he said. “Our foot is squarely on the gas pedal.”

Stepping It Up

Although the band had performed at a range of prestigious regional and national events, the Rose Parade presented more physical and logistical challenges than ever before. Physically, bandsmen had to have the endurance to perform the field show and, two days later, march nearly 6 miles. To chart their progress as they stepped up their physical activity, students wore pedometers for 10 weeks in the fall and logged more than 260 million steps. The mellophone section alone racked up an average of 108,099 footsteps per member in the 10th week, and one member, Cole Watkins, lost 65 pounds after he started running to build up his stamina. “In the parade, endurance is a big factor,” said Watkins.

For sophomore trumpeter Kirby Blackwelder, increasing her stretching routine in preparation was critical because of muscle weakness as a result of having mild cerebral palsy. “Last year, I was not sure I was going to make it through the entire season,” said Blackwelder. “It was much more intense than I was used to in high school, but the challenge made every football game and every performance more special.” The band even practiced marching the length of the parade on a closed stretch of Highway 107 near campus on a Sunday afternoon in December.

Logistically, the trip required flying band members to California and transporting luggage, instruments and equipment across the country in addition to handling lodging, meals and busing in and around the congested Los Angeles area. To raise money for the nearly \$640,000 trip, students “passed the hat” at home football games; sold



golf shirts, T-shirts, lapel pins, wristbands and other items; and solicited contributions from friends and family members.

The band also raised money by offering donors at the level of \$1,000 or more the opportunity to direct a performance or receive a photo of the band forming the donor’s name on the field. In two hours on Dec. 17, in near-freezing temperatures, the band spelled and photographed the names of 24 major sponsors whose gifts totaled about





The day before visiting Santa Monica (above left, top and bottom), band members spotted a big green celebrity in Hollywood.

\$60,000. (See the video at magazine.wcu.edu.) Among the sponsors were businesses such as AT&T, which was the largest private contributor, and supporters, fans and alumni such as **Pat Blanton Kaemmerling '71** and husband David Kaemmerling, who said they recognized the band's hard work and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity the trip offered students. "This type of experience can open a student's mind to new horizons and can be a turning point in a student's life," she said.

Others such as Jimmy Crocker donated their time and talents. Crocker, a band parent as well as the son of one of Buckner's high school band directors, volunteered and recruited other volunteers to drive three trucks of the band's equipment, luggage and instruments across the country and back – a move that saved an estimated \$40,000 in baggage fees. Their journey began earlier than planned when snow blanketed Western North Carolina, and drivers spent Christmas Day morning putting chains on the tires and coordinating with snowplows to move the trucks for what would be a slow, snowy start the following morning to their three-day journey west. "We couldn't even get to the trucks when we first got there," said Crocker.

For the Love of Marching Band

Jeff Throop, Tournament of Roses president, predicted during a September visit to WCU

that the Pride was going to "blow everybody away" at the event's Bandfest. Indeed, on Dec. 30, the Pride's performance of "Rock U" received a standing ovation as well as high praise from strangers-become-friends – the family and former band director of the late Ryan Dallas Cook.

WCU's band directors never met Cook, who was a 23-year-old trombone player in the high-energy California ska band Suburban Legends when he died in a 2005 traffic accident. They had only heard about him and how Suburban Legends held a concert in his honor to benefit Cook's high school marching band because of how much marching band had contributed to Cook's love of music. Moved, WCU directors sought and received permission to perform a song Cook co-wrote in the Rose Parade. "We were excited to get to play 'You' in Dallas' memory and send the message of a love for marching band from coast to coast," said Henley.

They also reached out to build a friendship with Suburban Legends, Cook's high school marching band director and his family, and invited them to Bandfest. After all, the parade's theme for 2011 was "Building Dreams, Friendships and Memories." After the show, the band presented the Cooks with a WCU clock, and Cook's father, Carlton, said his son would have loved seeing the Pride perform. "It was so moving and very powerful," said Cook. "It was really nice they were last, because no band would want to follow that. When they came on – the

mere size – they blew everybody away with just the intensity of the music and how well the sound came out. It's hard to get good sound when you are moving around. They just did it so wonderfully."

Two days later, the sight of so many people at the parade, especially as the band turned the sharp, 110-degree turn onto Colorado Boulevard, was incredible, members said. Whitney Hinceman, a senior piccolo player from Mooresville, described the excitement and the interaction – how parade-goers would run out to take pictures with the band or kids would warn them not to step in horse droppings. Every member of the Pride who started the Rose Parade finished, still fired up, said Buckner.

Betty Allen '68, president of the WCU Alumni Association, said the Pride's performance in the parade exceeded her high expectations. "I was just in awe," said Allen, who later joined friends, alumni and family lining the hallway at the band's hotel to greet members with a welcome worthy of champions. Richard Huffman, a senior trombone player from Hickory, described the entire experience as an amazing way to finish his marching band career. "It's been really emotional, seeing everyone clapping when we got back," said Huffman. "We're always going to be able to say 'I was in the Rose Parade. I remember that corner. I remember seeing those people.' I will always have that."

NO.1 Fan

Band supporter
keeps string alive
with California
performances



Phil Honsinger, with daughter Lauren Honsinger '07 in Los Angeles, calls the band's Rose Parade performance 'the time of my life.' Photo courtesy of Jimmy Honsinger

By TERESA KILLIAN TATE

Wet to the bone, Hayesville resident Phil Honsinger climbed to the top of the west-side stands of E.J. Whitmire Stadium after a rainy, windy football game to record the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band's last show in 2006. "I was shaking as I filmed," said Honsinger, who felt the real blow later when someone else was introduced as the band's "No. 1 fan." "I thought, 'Wait a minute, I'm the No. 1 fan.' After all, this was my 68th consecutive videotaping of the Pride of the Mountains," he said.

Honsinger first saw the Pride perform in 1996 at his son's high school band competition. "You would have thought Hayesville's band had just won the Super Bowl the way they reacted when the horns from the Pride of the Mountains let it rip," said Honsinger. "Man, what a show." When daughter **Lauren Honsinger '07** joined the Pride, his fandom escalated into an obsession that continues today, he said. He made a point to attend shows – big or small, planned or last-minute, near or far. Honsinger went to exhibitions in Indianapolis, as well as to Pride performances at high schools throughout the region. At a special weeknight performance planned

for a few dozen guests from the University of North Carolina Board of Governors in 2008, assistant director **Matt Henley '93 MA '95** walked in the dark, mostly empty stadium to prepare when he was surprised by a shadowy figure. "It scared me, and I stopped in my tracks," said Henley. "Then I heard Phil say, 'Hey Matt.' I just laughed out loud. I said, 'You really are the No. 1 fan.' It's extremely cool to have people like Phil who are so dedicated to the band."

A dedicated Honsinger traveled to California with family for the Tournament of Roses Bandfest – a show he worried he might miss because of a bus breakdown. He calmly told tour company officials that he was the Pride's No. 1 fan (although he admits there are other obsessed Pride fans, too.) "I asked them, 'Do you know how one gets to be the No. 1 fan?' They just looked at me with blank faces. I told them about the 137 consecutive marching band shows and about how today was going to be the 138th show. I asked them if the bus would be coming in time to keep the string going. I said, 'I know there will come a time when I will not make it to watch the Pride of the Mountains shows. I know

there will be a time when my string will end.'" The tour company manager replied, "Not on my watch will you miss a show," said Honsinger, who made it to Bandfest in time.

Two days later, he faced a 3 a.m. wake-up call, packed crowds and scarce bathrooms to get to the stands at the Rose Parade. The cheering for the Pride had never been louder, and the group had never looked quite as bold as they did that day, he said. "The gold was gleaming in the sunlight and their instruments were polished to a sparkling shine," said Honsinger. "When our band marched by, it was such a climax to the season, and it was over far too quickly. It was the time of my life."



PARADE REST

After success at the Tournament of Roses, WCU's longtime band director surveys his career

By TERESA KILLIAN TATE



Summer music camp at Western Carolina in the 1960s captivated a high school-aged **Bob Buckner '67**, confirming his belief that his decision to play football instead of joining the band in seventh grade was a huge mistake. Fortunately, for the thousands of students who would someday march under Buckner's direction, and for the band that has achieved national prestige under his leadership, he remedied the situation at the first opportunity. "They needed someone big enough to carry the bass drum in the Canton Labor Day Parade, and my friends drafted me," said Buckner, a native of Waynesville. "By the time I was in 10th grade, I loved the sounds I was hearing when I walked in the band room. I loved the atmosphere and the people."

When Buckner enrolled at Western Carolina, he was intent on becoming a band director. Classmates and friends such as **John Anderson '67 MAEd '71**, who played in jazz band and marching band with Buckner, had no doubt that he would – and that he would succeed. As a musician, Buckner had the skill to "triple-tongue" a tuba, Anderson said. As a student, Buckner asked in-depth

questions about even the smallest markings in the music. As a friend, he was fun and serious – the kind not only to joke around but also to have long conversations about life.

Even before graduation, Buckner landed his first job as a band director when he was asked to fill in temporarily at Sylva-Webster High School. He had 12 students on the first day, and three dropped out after Buckner shared his vision for the group – a vision that one student told him seemed a lot like work. For **Catherine Dillard '87**, one of his first students, it was work but also a life-defining experience, she said. When Dillard graduated, the band had grown to about 50 members. Marching band styles were changing, and Buckner introduced a less traditional, more artistic style to the group. Six years after he took the helm, the band claimed honors in a Festival of States competition. Seven years after that, it became the smallest group to be named the nation's best at a Bands of America competition.

Buckner left Sylva-Webster to work full time at his band design and consulting firm, United Music Enterprises. He worked across



the nation and in Canada and Europe as a drill designer, guest conductor or clinician. Clients ranged from the Marine Drum and Bugle Corps to the Walt Disney Co. He served the Bands of America organization – judging competitions, helping develop national events and competition formats, and serving as symposium faculty and member of a range of committees. “Bob’s fingerprints are all over Bands of America,” said Scott McCormick from BOA in recognizing Buckner in 2005 during his induction to the organization’s Hall of Fame.

In 1991, WCU offered him a job directing the marching band, but Buckner had already committed to a job at East Tennessee State University. He thought he would have to say no, but as he and wife Donna examined practice and performance times, they realized that the ETSU and WCU schedules did not overlap. So Buckner, a father of five, directed both – maintaining a hectic working and commuting schedule, one not necessarily unwelcome as he coped with the grief of losing son Michael to a fatal heart attack.

Among Buckner’s goals was to build on the family atmosphere he had come to love as a member of Western Carolina’s band in the 1960s, and that’s what it’s like today, said Billie Jeanne Curns, a senior music education major from Hayesville. “He knows people in band by first name, which is huge because there are 400 of us,” said Curns, part of a student leadership program so strong Buckner occasionally jokes he’s not sure the group needs directors. “No matter how hard a practice is, we know he’s there for us. He has an open-door policy, and students come in just to talk to him.”

Another goal was to transform the band into a sophisticated rock ‘n’ roll group. “My idea was to develop a band that everyone is going to relate to in some way – with a lot of movement, choreography and really good arrangements of music people will recognize,” said Buckner. The group incorporated nontraditional marching band elements, such as electric guitars and

vocalists, and earned a reputation as “the world’s largest funk-rock band.”

Membership grew in two decades from fewer than 90 members to more than 400, thanks to tremendous support from fans such as Chancellor John W. Bardo. The chancellor, who was instrumental in changing the group’s name from the Marching Cats to the Pride of the Mountains, would conclude his band pep talks by asking, “What band is this?,” prompting the response “The best damn band anywhere!” “And don’t you forget it!” Bardo would say.

Prior to the 2011 Rose Parade, the band had performed five times at Bands of America regional championships at the Georgia Dome and three times at BOA Grand Nationals in Indianapolis. It has played at halftime at an Atlanta Falcons game and its drumline took the stage with country music’s Keith Urban. In 2009, the band received the Sudler Trophy, which the Sousa Foundation says it awards to “collegiate marching bands of particular excellence that have made outstanding contributions to the American way of life.” Meanwhile for Buckner, MENC: The National Association for Music Education in 2005 honored him as a Lowell Mason Fellow, and Drum Corps International and MENC in 2009 presented him with the Excellence in Marching Music Education Award.

With retirement in July, Buckner is looking forward to devoting more time to other interests, particularly his six grandchildren (although some of them are sad this is the last year “Bobbo” will have his own band). For Buckner, the sense of so many “lasts” – the last football game, the last rehearsal, the last field show, the last performance – did not sink in until the Rose Parade.

“I remember looking at the memorial flag we carried in the parade and being so glad we had done that – that we carried the memory of those students with us,” said Buckner of the band’s purple-and-white flag with one star each for the five students who have died while members of the band. “I remember

looking across the street and seeing Donna walking on the other side, and thinking how special it was that we got to share that and how much she has contributed to the band, much that only members of our staff and color guard would ever know. (Assistant band directors) **Matt Henley ’93 MA ’95** and **Jon Henson ’05 MA ’07** and I tried to keep eye contact through the parade, and I remember thinking how incredible it was that we had such a great team of people who care like I do, who really have invested themselves in the university and in the students. I remember thinking about my high school directors and my college band director and thinking how cool they would have thought this was, and how they had contributed to my life.”

At the band banquet just hours after the parade, students shared how Buckner had contributed to theirs. Keith Marwitz, a senior tenor saxophone player from Indian Trail, remembered his talk with Buckner after showing up late. “I have never been late again,” Marwitz said. Drum major Amy Shuford from Waynesville recalled how she was rehearsing years before she came to WCU when Buckner approached and said he wanted her in his band. “I just want to let you know I still have your business card in my wallet,” said Shuford. Band alumna **Kate Murphy ’06**, who works at WCU and instructs the color guard, read a letter she wrote to Buckner in which she said the band makes her heart explode with purple and gold. “You make nonband people fall in love with us,” said Murphy.

From left, Bob Buckner '67 and band member Lizzie Morantz '10, who came to WCU from Illinois to work with Buckner, share a laugh during a 2008 band rehearsal; Buckner takes the stand during a Catamount football halftime show; and Buckner celebrates the band's 2009 Sudler Trophy with assistant band directors Matt Henley '93 MA '95 and Jon Henson '05 MA '07. Just a couple of softies, Buckner and Paws (opposite page) share a cuddle.



Original photo courtesy of Jolesch Photography

Viewer's Choice

Social media helps Pride of Mountains claim 'best band' title

By CHRISTY MARTIN '71 MA '78

The Tournament of Roses Parade crowds dispersed and traffic resumed on Pasadena's Colorado Boulevard shortly before noon New Year's Day. Spirited marching along the parade route was over, but a virtual battle of the bands was about to begin online.

Within the hour, television station KTLA of Los Angeles was inviting visitors to its website to choose their favorite Rose Parade band from the roster of 23 units from across the nation that had performed. Anyone with Internet access and a computer, cell phone or other digital device could click and cast a vote.

KTLA hosted online voting for best float in previous years, but this was the first favorite band competition. "We wanted to create something fun for the bands, especially because the floats usually grab most of the attention," said Jeremy D. Horowitz, senior producer for digital media at KTLA-TV.

The poll's popularity far exceeded expectations of the station, which kept it open for three days and received a total of 178,721 votes. WCU's Pride of the Mountains claimed an early lead – and 40 percent of the total votes – despite gains by All-Birdsville ISD Marching Band of Haltom, Texas, in

the suspenseful final hours before the poll was closed and WCU's band declared best in the parade.

"WCU had more than 72,000 votes. That's more than the total votes cast in any of our previous float polls. I know Texas boasts about making things big, but clearly some things in Cullowhee are even bigger," said Horowitz.

Moments after the poll opened, WCU's public relations staff members posted links to KTLA's poll on social media websites, including Facebook and Twitter, and roseparade.wcu.edu, a university Web page created to host band updates and news. They also alerted regional news media, including the Asheville Citizen-Times, Smoky Mountain News and WLOS-TV in Asheville, which in turn posted links on their own websites taking visitors directly to the voting site, with reporters sharing the links through their own Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Statistics aren't available on where the votes actually came from, but there's no doubt that the massive

show of support for WCU's band came about because of online conversations back home in North Carolina while the poll was under way in California. Networks of friends and friends of those friends adroitly used Facebook and Twitter to get out the vote.

Sarah Kucharski of Canton, who grew up in Cullowhee and has close ties to WCU, was among the fans who monitored the poll closely, crafting Facebook posts and Twitter tweets to encourage potential voters. "Ultimately, our band won because enough people cared and wanted to make this happen for its members," Kucharski said. "That's the sweetest victory of all."

WCU'S ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Become a fan at www.facebook.com/westerncarolinauniversity.

If you attended WCU and want to find out about reunions and other events for alumni, go to www.facebook.com/wcualumni.

Other WCU sites are www.twitter.com/wcu and www.youtube.com/westerncarolinau.

