


Blue Devils, 1973 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

by Bob Fields

Concord, CA, is in the middle of Contra Costa County, just east over a small ridge of hills from the San Francisco Bay Area. Back in the late 1950s, Concord was one of the many fast-growing bedroom communities surrounding major cities along the West Coast.

As in the Midwest and East, many of these



Blue Devils, 1974, at the DCI Championships in Ithaca, NY (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

small towns had marching groups based around their local American Legion and VFW posts. Local and state competitions for all types of marching groups were popular and hundreds of parades kept these groups busy nearly every weekend.

I lived in the Western part of the same county and marched with a drum and bugle corps called the Richmond Hawks. The Stockton Commodores, Capital Aires All-Girls (later the Capital Freelancers), Los Angeles Chinese Imperial Dragons, San Francisco Cathay Chinese, Relays Raiders and Delta Thunderbirds were just some of the drum and bugle corps in parades and field competitions.

In those days, however, the Concord Blue

Blue Devils

Devils were well-known as an excellent drum and bell corps. It was certainly quite a surprise that in just a few short years they would rise to a powerhouse status as a drum and bugle corps.

The beginning of the corps has been well-documented, starting with a group in 1957 called the Martinettes, an all-boy drum corps and all-girl drill team. Bill Martin turned his organization over to Ann and Tony Odello who, through the local VFW, moved the unit to its next level.

The Blue Devils Drum Corps was named for the color of the VFW, blue, and for majestic Mt. Diablo (Spanish for Devil Mountain), which overlooks the Diablo Valley where Concord is located. With fewer than 50 members, the organization already began its winning ways as an all-boy unit using only percussion instruments supporting an all-girl drill team.

The following year, the Blue Devils added bells to their percussion line, becoming a competitive drum and bell corps. The drum and bell corps provided its twirling groups with musical accompaniment during parades and shows. Both units achieved early success at field shows and parades.

By 1961, a flag section was added to the drum and bell corps, which allowed them to compete in the state junior division. The Blue Devils Junior Drum and Bell Corps remained undefeated in California State Championships from 1957 through 1970.

In 1964, stockbroker Jerry Seawright became manager of the group and soon had bigger aspirations.

With more and more groups being added to the Blue Devils family, it soon became easy for the group to make the move from a senior drum and bell corps to a drum and bugle corps in 1970.

In February 1971, the drum and bugle corps was composed of the percussion and flag lines from the senior drum and bell corps and a newly added horn line. They attended their first standstill competition in Southern California.

A year later, in the spring of 1972, they had grown to 70

members and took their first summer tour to compete in the Pacific Northwest. They made a big splash and decided to move their status from class B to a class A competitor.

In 1973, the now well-established Blue Devils entered the national scene by touring to the Midwest. They placed 23rd in Whitewater, WI, and became an associate member of the newly formed Drum Corps International. That same year, their younger junior drum and bell corps was converted to a B bugle corps and a C bugle corps for little kids was formed.

By 1974, the A corps, as it is known in the organization, had become a full DCI member, placing ninth at the DCI Championships in Ithaca, NY. Nationally, the corps was becoming known for its powerhouse horn and percussion lines and was starting to push the well-established groups aside.

By 1975, the A corps made a tremendous jump to third place at the DCI Championships in Philadelphia, PA. At home they still had an identity crisis, with the drum corps activity still relatively unknown to the general public.

Television advertisements for the Santa Clara Vanguard's "Pacific Procession" brought many former drum corps marching members out to see the new drum and bugle corps compete. For many old-timers, just hearing the sound the pit added to the show and seeing floating drills instead of squads was a big shock.

Having been out of drum corps for eight years playing drums professionally, I was one of the fans drawn back to the activity. I was so inspired that I contacted director Seawright to volunteer my help and was soon attending camps as a volunteer just to be close to this awesome group.

In 1976, Seawright invited me to ride along with the Blue Devils on their Eastern tour. My assignment was to write a daily on-the-road feature for their local newspaper, *The Concord Transcript*. As their very own Clark Kent, I witnessed what seemed to be the opening of the floodgates for what was to become one of the most spectacular drum corps in competitive history.

Touring through the desert and into the hot plains states on old, non-air conditioned 4103 buses for four to six weeks was not nearly as much fun as you would think. But

Blue Devils, 1976, at the DCI Championships in Philadelphia, PA (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).





Blue Devils, 1978 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Blue Devils, 1980, at DCI Canada (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

like the kids, I was amazed to see big cities and new worlds that most of the members had never seen before.

Looking back, 1976 was a phenomenal year for the Blue Devils. The kids grew more amazed as they won show after show while the corps headed East. Many of the judges, who were viewing the corps for the first time, were awed by the incredible power of their horn line, the flawless drum line and the spectacle of their visual show.

One Midwestern horn judge was so blown away by what he had witnessed that he summed it up on his tape during a competition, uttering a couple of explicatives and nothing else.

Word spread fast about this new super corps and many times there were hundreds of people watching each and every rehearsal while on tour. But nothing was to compare with the joy of winning their first DCI Championship in Philadelphia.

I remember the kids jumping up and down in the parking lot after the finals. They had won their first DCI title in just three years of national competition. It was just like they had each won a million dollars. They had won all there was to win that year -- the

anything but a household name.

I remember returning home to Concord and our bus drivers stopping to strap brooms to their side mirrors indicating a clean sweep. The kids were tired, but extremely happy as we all stood in the hot parking lot being welcomed back by one of the city officials.

Unfortunately, it became obvious very quickly that this city official was not sure if the Blue Devils were a basketball team, marching band or maybe even a motorcycle gang.

Through the years, and the 10

coveted "triple crown" of drum corps: CYO Nationals, World Open and DCI.

Somehow it made all those deserts and mountains we crossed, traveling each and every night, sleeping in our seats and seeing nothing but cornfields along the way worthwhile.

Still, fame had not yet caught up with them back home. The on-the-road articles I sent back to the newspapers certainly helped, but the Blue Devils were still

DCI Championship wins, I would say the community has finally figured it out.

That one trip for me turned into many more with the Blue Devils. I learned to drive a 4104 and one of those odd looking Scenic Cruisers and drove for many other corps along the way over the years.

I was not the only one who became inspired by working with such a wonderful organization. Seawright gave the kids, instructors, volunteers and everyone around us that feeling of being able to leap tall buildings with a single bound. I became personally so fired up that I have spent every year since involving myself in the drum corps activity.

Subsequent corps directors and managers like Mike Moxley, Dave Gibbs and Pete Emmons have also shared that same enthusiasm and love of the organization, making it what it is today.

But while it is true the Blue Devils have a great organization, what turns most people on to them is the music. The incredible

horn line with arrangements by Wayne Downey, the drum line that has won eight DCI high drum trophies and the dance-oriented guard all leave most fans on the front of their seats wanting to see the show "one more time!"

Over the years, the Blue Devils have been the leading promoter of the jazz idiom. They have played hot jazz, cool jazz, jazzy jazz, elegant jazz and every type of jazz, thus converting thousands of drum corps fans to jazz fans along the way.

Much of the credit for this is due to Downey, who has arranged their music for more than 25 years. The Blue Devils' brass

Blue Devils, 1982, at DCI Midwest (photo by Steve Linsenmayer from the collection of Drum Corps World).



line has won the coveted DCI Jim Ott Award an unprecedented 17 times during the history of DCI.

Downey has worked with bands and drum corps all over the world and teaches at Diablo Valley College in Concord. His arrangements of Blue Devils tunes are now standards for many high school marching bands through his association with Jenson Publications, Barnhouse Music Publishing, Warner Brothers/COO Belwin Publishing Co. and Arrangers Publishing Company.

Downey was inducted into the Drum Corps International Hall of Fame in 1991 and is still active with drum corps and marching bands internationally.

Why jazz music in the 1970s? With all the different styles the corps could have gone to in the early days, like so many others, I wondered why the corps chose to go down the uncharted trail of jazz?

Downey explained, "The choice of jazz was a simple one for the Blue Devils because of Jim Ott's and my love for that style of music, and the fact that both of us were in jazz band in college didn't hurt.

"I attended San Jose State University and they had a very progressive jazz program, as did the University of the Pacific where Jim attended school. You must also remember, Chuck Mangione was on the radio waves big time and Jerry Seawright's best friend was Carl Jefferson, the founder of Concord Jazz Records. Carl was the mover and shaker who made the Concord Pavilion a reality with the first Concord Jazz Festival."

But it was certainly not jazz in the very beginning, as they experimented with a number of styles. The Blue Devils played a mixed bag of tunes that were quite like many of the other corps in country. In 1971, jazz was frankly not all that popular in the drum corps activity. Their show yielded a variety of tunes like the theme from "Lawrence of



Blue Devils, 1986, at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Arabia," *Ninth Symphony/Ode to Joy, America the Beautiful, Big Spender* from "Sweet Charity," *Stoney End* and *The Shadow of Your Smile* from "The Sandpiper."

In 1972, they followed much the same track with a variety of musical styles, playing *Strike Up the Band, Ave Maria, Venus, The Man I Love, I Got Rhythm* from "Girl Crazy" and *Day in the Life of a Fool*. But already they were starting to be noticed for their musical strengths.

In 1973, they took their first DCI tour and came in 24th with a 66.10, this time mixing classical and popular with *Chant and Jubilo, Jupiter* from "The Planets," *Ave Maria, This Could Be the Start of Something Big, Miserlou*, the ever-popular *Caravan* and



Blue Devils, 1988, at the DCI Championships in Kansas City, MO (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Morning of the Carnival. Still, they were searching for a direction that would make them unique.

By 1974, things were really looking up for the Blue Crew and they were starting to get noticed nationally. That year they played *Chant and Jubilo, Clouds, Feel of a Vision, Touch of Venus* and *Lady Sings the Blues*.

But it was two special pieces that year that really got their strong horn line noticed -- a medley from "Porgy and Bess" and the Blue Devil signature piece, *Legend of a One-Eyed Sailor*. At DCI, they surprised everyone with a ninth-place finish of 79.15. *Legend* seemed to work so well that they decided to try another jazz piece the following year.

In 1975, they played a Buddy Rich selection, which almost didn't make it to the field. At a rehearsal site at the old Treasure Island Naval Base in the middle of San Francisco Bay, *Space Shuttle* was almost shelved due to the inability of the percussion and brass parts to meld together into a cohesive piece of music.

Month after month they tried in make it work, but just as they were ready to shelve it, the staff found the problem in the score and fixed it. It would have been a big disappointment if they had cut the song because they shot up to third place with a 88.60 playing *Space Shuttle, Love's Been Gone So Long, Squibb Cakes* by Tower of Power, *Legend of a One-Eyed Sailor, Chase the Clouds Away* and *Feel of a Vision*.

The summer of 1976 was a revelation to the Blue Devils. Their first-place score of 92.70 at DCI was incredible for an organization that was only in its third year of serious DCI competition. That year they firmly established, as their very own, three pieces of music that still today bring goose bumps to those who remember seeing them play it in person: *Channel One Suite, Legend of a One-Eyed Sailor* and *Chase the Clouds Away*.

In 1977, they continued to build on their successful jazz format when, with a 92.05, they took first once again at DCI, playing *Channel One Suite*, the beautiful *Spanish Fantasy* and Maynard Ferguson's *Gonna Fly Now* from the movie "Rocky."

In 1978, they premiered another classic Blue signature piece, the "Chicago III Suite." This was successfully married to *Spanish Fantasy* and *Legend of a One-Eyed Sailor*.

Even though they had hoped for three titles in a row at DCI, the corps dropped to third place. Still, fans loved the marriage of rock and jazz that music from the rock group Chicago brought to the corps' production.



Blue Devils, 1989, at the DCI Championships in Kansas City, MO (photo by Sue Johnson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Rounding out the 1970s, the corps placed first once again, playing "Chicago III Suite," *La Suerte de los Tontos* and *My Heart Belongs to Me*. The Downey arrangement of *La Suerte* has probably been played by almost every high school jazz and marching band in the country since then.

Beginning the 1980s, a Downey original also became another signature piece for the corps -- *New York Fantasy*. This piece, along with *Ya Gotta Try*, *Pegasus*, *Free* from Chicago, *La Suerte de los Tontos*, *Pauper in Paradise* and the beautiful closer of *Dindi* earned them second place.

Keeping with a good thing in 1981, they used *New York Fantasy* as the opener, then *Ya Gotta Try*, *La Danse Bonheur*, *One More Time* Chuck Corea, the fabulous *Johnny One Note* and *Dindi* to earn them a second place score of 93.79.

Another original piece, titled *T.O.* -- the initials have had many interpretations -- was co-written by Downey and jazzman Rob McConnell to start the corps' 1982 show.

Pegasus, *Paradox*, *One More Time* Chuck Corea and *People Alone* from the movie "The Competition" pushed them back into first with a 95.25.

In 1983, they kicked off once again with *T.O.*, followed by a more mellow jazz/blues piece called *Everyone Loves the Blues*. *Paradox*, *One More Time* Chuck Corea and another original Downey piece called *A New Beginning* earned them another second place with a 93.80.

During the summer of 1984, they played the exciting *Bacchanalia*, followed by *Latin Implosion*, *Karn Evil 9*, *La Fiesta* and *Like a Lover*. They placed second with a 97.90.

In 1985, they played *Liferaft Earth*, *Trilogy*, *Karn Evil 9*, *Piano Concerto No. 1* and *First Circle* and moved down to third with a 97.10.

For 1986, the corps featured *Channel One Suite*, Maynard Ferguson's *Conquistador*, *Spanish Fantasy* and "Chick Corea Suite." They shot back up to first once again with their highest score ever -- 98.40 -- which they received three more times over the years.

In 1987, playing *Fanfare for the New*, *Harlem Nocturne*, Frank Zappa's *Enchinas Arf*, *Free* and *Spanish Dreams*, the corps for some reason dropped to fourth.

The 1988 season had the corps playing the classic *Happy Days Are Here Again*, *That Old Black Magic*, *Goodbye Yesterday* and *Since I Fell for You*. They moved back up to third with a 96.30.

In 1989, the corps continued with the great

jazz pieces, but was unable to climb out of its slump. *Ya Gotta Try*, *If We Were in Love*, *Allegre* and *Johnny One Note* were all big hits with fans, but not so much with the judges. They moved back down to fourth with a 95.90.

In 1990, they played selections from "Tommy," the Who rock musical. This was an interesting show since they dressed the field

In 1991, they had their worst year score-wise since they won their first championships in 1976. Although the music was certainly memorable, they were just not able to make it click that year. They played *Commencement* from "Adventures in Time" and *Bird and Bela in B-flat* (second and third movements). Still, with a score that most corps would envy, 93.80, they dropped to their lowest placing -- fifth -- in 17 years.

In 1992, their show, "Big, Bad and Blue," became one of their most memorable of the 1990s. An exciting show featuring the guard was a big hit with fans, especially their closer of *When a Man Loves a Woman*.

They also played *Someone's There*, *El Congo Valiente*, *Fuego Cubano* and *La Suerte de los Tontos*. With a score of 95.40, they placed fourth.

For 1993, the Blue Devils'

creative team was trying to find a way to climb out of their slump. In their show, "A Don Ellis Portrait," they played *Open Wide*, *Great Divide*, *Chain Reaction*, *Strawberry Soup* and *Niner-Two*, which proved to be a crowd favorite. Their score of 95.10 kept them in fourth place one final time.

In 1994, they hit gold once again with a show called "My Spanish Heart." This included *Spanish Fantasy Part One*, *Night Streets*, *Day Danse*, *My Spanish Heart* and *Spanish Fantasy Part Four*. For the fans, marching members and staff, it was great to see them in that first-place spot once again with a top-finishing score of 98.40. It was the second of the four times they would hit their highest score.

In 1995, the show was titled "Carpe Noctem" and featured *Buleria* from "Jazz Pana," *Conquistador*, *Coronation of the Dead* and *Ines* from "Legend of Alcobaca," *Day Danse* and *Dom Pedro's Revenge*, also from "Legend of Alcobaca." They placed third with a 96.70 and left most of the PA announcers quite tongue-tied trying to read the pre-show introduction.

During the 1996 season, they were back in the gold once again with one of their most fun shows to watch. "Club Blue: A Gangster Chronicle" featured the music *Children's Hour of Dream*, *Desi*, *Tess' Theme* from "Dick



Blue Devils, July 10, 1992, in Stockton, CA (photo by Steve Rodriggs from the collection of Drum Corps World).

with layers of tarps, like they use in winter guard, to simulate a pinball machine. It was a popular show musically, with some big horn sounds. Once again they placed fourth with a 95.30.

Blue Devils, 1994 (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Tracy" and *Trouble* from the movie "Mission Impossible." They placed first with a 97.40.

In 1997, continuing their winning ways, they did another crowd favorite with a show titled "As Time Goes By" featuring *Casablanca*, *Bankok*, *A Night in Tunisia* and the theme *As Time Goes By*. They took first with the third of their all-time highest scores

Second Prelude for Piano. They moved back up to the second slot with a 97.60.

Their 2002 show was titled "Jazz: Made in America" and featured *Ragtime*, *I Got Rhythm* from "Girl Crazy," *Fascinatin' Rhythm*, *House of the Rising Sun* and a reprise and teaser of *Channel One Suite*. They stayed in second with a 97.30 against a

jazz, the Blue Devils have been able to provide performance and clinic experiences with many jazz greats like Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich, Ralph Humphrey, Dave Weckl, Peter Erskine, Maynard Ferguson, Bobby Shew, Bob Montgomery and Chuck Mangione.

Many of these jazz superstars have become fans of the Blue Devils after hearing their own music performed by the corps live or on CD. But more importantly, many of these performers have had the opportunity to work in clinics with the marching members to help them become better musicians.

The Blue Devils have not limited their performances strictly to field competitions. They have explored the theater environment by presenting such shows as "Exhaltation," "Exuberance" and "Jazz Man in the Moon" to sold-out theatres in Denver, San Antonio, Ypsilanti and at EPCOT in Orlando, FL. Many times they incorporated electronics into their music, which has not yet been approved for field competition, but adds a pleasing dimension to their music.

The 2003 Blue Devils show, titled "Phenomenon of Cool," will not only be seen in the United States, but also in Japan as the corps travels there after the season.

This is not the first time the corps has taken its show to other lands. They first traveled to Osaka, Japan, in 1983 to attend

the 21st Century Celebration. Since that time the percussion section visited Japan once again in 1988.

The corps traveled to the France in 1992 to attend "Carnaval" and then to the Netherlands for performances and clinics. In 1996, they returned to Japan for a 10-day trip of parades, fields shows and indoor performances. In 2000, the A corps members took a three-week tour to Germany, Belgium, Holland and France.

But the A corps was not the only group to travel overseas during these years. The award-winning Blue Devils Twirlers also traveled to Tokyo, Japan, in 1982; Milan, Italy, in 1983; Calgary, Alberta, in 1984; Turin, Italy, in 1986; and Lyon, France, in 1998. And the Blue Devils B Corps traveled to Japan in 1998 to participate in the World Marching Band Festival with groups from Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Australia.

Exploring new directions, the Blue Devils organization also formed the Blue Devils Music School for music students as young as four to learn to play instruments. They now teach basic music theory, percussion and piano classes to more than 150 students ages 4-9 each year.

In 1996, they took yet another musical direction, founding The Diablo Wind Symphony as a way to serve some 60-80 students ages 14-18, catering to all types of non-marching music. The Wind Symphony Ensemble took a 14-day performance tour to Australia in 2000 to perform at the Newcastle and Queensland



Blue Devils, June 28, 1997 (photo by Rocky Lewis from the collection of Drum Corps World).

at 98.40.

For the 1998 season, they offered a show called "One Hand, One Heart," featuring music from "Romeo and Juliet" by Tchaikovsky cleverly blended with "West Side Story" by Bernstein. It was worth third place and a 97.70, but for some reason it was not a crowd favorite as the previous two years' shows had been.

The corps closed the book on the 1990s with its 1999 production called "Rhythms -- At the Edge of Time." It was quite a collection of different rhythms, as the name implied. *Estancia Ballet* was Afro-Cuban/Malambo, *Powerhouse No. 2* was done rumba-style, *Powerhouse No. 3* was done samba-style, *Adios Nonino* was a tango, *Unchained Melody* was jazz and the closer of *The Dirty Boogie* was a swing tune. The result was their 10th DCI win and their fourth all-time high score of 98.40. Will they break that 98.40 in the next millennium?

The 2000 show was a wild ride indeed. Titled "Methods of Madness," it presented *A Night Piece for Orchestra* from "Taxi Driver," *Prelude* from "On Dangerous Ground," *Prelude* from "Psycho," *Scene d'Amour* from "Vertigo" and *The Wild Ride* from "North by Northwest." This exciting and entertaining show yielded a third-place finish with a 96.90.

In 2001, the Blue Devils presented "Awayday Blue" featuring *Awayday* and *Fantasy Variations on George Gershwin's*



Blue Devils, 1996 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

fabulous show presented by The Cavaliers who absolutely stole the show at the 30th anniversary DCI Championships in Madison.

During their years of playing high-tech



Blue Devils, 2000 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Conservatories of Music.

In short, most drum and bugle corps define the success of their organization by the number of titles they hold. Certainly through the years the Blue Devils can claim their fair share of those titles. The A corps alone has won the "Precision West" 16 times. They have won Santa Clara Vanguard's home show, "Pacific Procession," 18 times. They won both the U.S. Open and the Drum Corps East Championships. They have been Drum Corps West champions three times, World Open champions twice and CYO Nationals champions three times. They have won "Drums Along the Rockies" in Denver eight times. They have been DCI Canada champions three times and DCI West

(Above) Blue Devils, 2002 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Blue Devils, 2001 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



champions four times.

They have won DCI East seven times, DCI North three times and DCI Midwest four times. They have been DCI South champions twice and won the DCI "Preview of Champions" six times.

Their guard members have won the Winter

Guard International Championships four times and, of course, their greatest accomplishment is that of winning the Drum Corps International World Championships an unprecedented 10 times.

The Blue Devils organization as a whole can be proud of the millions of hours given

by the volunteers, management, marching members, board members, bus drivers, instructors and all those who have made the three drum and bugle corps, the twirling groups, winter guards and the drum and bell corps champions in their own right.

And to that end, more than 7,000 young people have become top quality performers thanks to this world-renowned organization that started as a neighborhood drum corps 46 years ago.

For a photo and bio of Bob Fields, turn to page 233.

