


Minnesota Brass

(Top to bottom) The Laidlaw Legion corps in 1949 (photo from the collection of Minnesota Brass); Minnesota Brass on September 5, 1992 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World); Minnesota Brass at DCA in 1993 (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).

by Paul Mordorski

Like many drum and bugle corps, Minnesota Brass Inc. began during the boom of military-based units after World War II. Unlike most that started during that period, MBI is now experiencing their greatest success and proficiency in their more than 57-year history as the 21st century begins.

The corps started in 1946 as the Cecil Kyle American Legion Post drum and bugle corps from Minneapolis. They were a small, all-male group that competed in state Legion class B competition. In 1948, they merged with and became the William Laidlaw American Legion Post corps. Laidlaw improved quickly and switched to class A in 1949, where they competed for many years.

Laidlaw was stable through the mid-1950s,

playing bugle calls on single-piston, small- and large-bore horns. For the 1956 season, they took a dramatic step by actually playing modern music, which included *Dear One* and *The World is Waiting For the Sunrise*, popularized by Les Paul and Mary Ford. That year, the corps traveled to Duluth and placed fourth in state Legion competition.

Old photos show the Laidlaw corps marching in black uniforms and wearing white cummerbunds. This was a break from the military tradition and gave the members a much more showy appearance.

In 1957, the corps changed its name to the Laidlaw Toreadors and adopted a Spanish uniform, style and music. The new uniform had red and white tops, and flared, gaucho-style black pants. Drum Major Glenn Kuss wore a matador's uniform, complete with red cape. Although Laidlaw often wore boleros that complemented the Spanish theme, they wore the more politically correct "envelope" flight caps for Legion functions.

The 1960 edition placed first at the state American Legion competition, beating rivals Schmidt Indians and the Govenaires. The Toreadors' vivacious, Spanish-style repertoire during this period included *Granada*, *April in Portugal*, *Brazil* and *Perfidia*.

Throughout these years, funding was cut by sponsoring organizations and this was considered for the Laidlaw-sponsored drum and bugle corps. Post Commander Mike Caligiuri became an ally of the group, helping provide sponsorship through not only Laidlaw, but also the American Legion 5th District. Because of his efforts, the corps still presents the "Mike Caligiuri Award" to a long-standing member who shows dedication, commitment and a positive attitude.

Looking for new sponsorship in 1965, the corps joined forces with the Grain Belt Brewery to create the Grain Belt Diamonds. Going for a totally different look, corps members wore tuxedos, which turned out to be an unpopular idea with fans. The black dinner jackets and homburg hats elicited comments from judges and audiences that the corps looked like funeral directors.

After several different identities and transformations, Men of Laidlaw was adopted as the corps' new name. This version wore blue windbreakers, shakos and black pants. The blue wind breaker came from Director Frank Lozar, who showed up at practice wearing an attractive, reasonably priced jacket. Since they were looking for a replacement for the ill-fated funeral director uniform, the new look was adopted.

The late 1960s saw long-time St. Paul Scout member and music director Corky Whitlock take over the horn line. His creative arrangements and enthusiasm for the activity brought new life to the Laidlaw Legion-based group.

During a historic trip to Lowell, IN, in 1969, Whitlock and fellow soprano player Terry Bremer came up with the name Twin

Cities Amalgamated Brassworks, Inc. as the new name. It was shortened when an announcer called out, "Take it away, Brass." The name Brass Inc. was born.

The 1970s started with growth and change. This was the end of direct sponsorship from the Laidlaw American Legion. At the American Legion nationals in Portland, OR, they placed second to the Yankee Rebels in a not-hotly contested show.

The 1973 season was historic for the fact that Geni Cavitt became Brass Inc.'s drum major, the first female in that position. Other notable drum majors included Ed Eishen who wore red, white and blue pants and had a flamboyant style; Lee Portz, who was assistant director when he was drum major and later became corps director; and Ron Haselius, who is MBI's current corps director. During the early- to mid-1970s, Brass Inc. played such upbeat numbers as *Latina*, *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, *I Feel the Earth Move* and *Lullaby of Birdland*. The corps was becoming a crowd favorite in the Midwest, as their brass and general effect scores attested.

A continual presence with Minnesota



Minnesota Brass, 1987 (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Brass Inc. since the early 1950s has been soprano player Frank Lozar. Known as "Frank the Beard," Lozar has marched with practically all of the MBI corps, from the small, under-50 units to the large 2002 unit that marched 65 horns. Now in his mid-70s, Lozar continues to participate.

The late 1970s brought stronger and renewed competition among Midwest senior corps. Brass Inc. benefitted from the competition from rival corps such as the Spirit of 76, Chicago Connection, Govenaires and Jesse James Gang.

In the late 1970s, the Midstates Senior Championships were born, with Brass Inc. winning in 1978. The corps also performed in the Red Carpet Association and resumed competition at Drum Corps Associates, where they were an associate member, placing 11th or 12th from 1977 through 1979.

The early 1980s saw the corps adding "Minnesota" to Brass Inc. and also brought a smaller, more regionally based organization. During this period, membership fluctuated between 50 and 70. It was in 1981 when MBI competed in and won their first Drum Corps Midwest Senior Championship. The corps won their 20th DCM title in 2002.

After two years of competition in the

International Corps Association, Minnesota Brass Inc. returned to DCA and in 1986, became a member by placing ninth. The corps became a consistent finalist at DCA, placing in the top 10 as a member corps every year since 1991.

With the name Minnesota Brass Inc., it stands to reason that the corps has featured many talented brass soloists over the years. Three of these soloists, Greg Hilliard in 1989, Frank Minear in 1991 and Roger Grupp in 1993, have been named DCA soloist of the year. Other top players who have thrilled audiences nationwide include Whitlock, Hank Wadsworth, Tom Jones, Tina Cavitt, Bea Jaeger, Bill Germar, Mike Honkanen and Scott Snyder.

The visual presentation was an aspect that Minnesota Brass was always seeking to improve. Aside from Dik Buelow in the 1970s, MBI was searching for that stable presence in show design. Andy Classen, who started creating shows for the corps in the mid-1980s, has provided that stable and creative presence to help these presentations come alive. Classen, a trumpet professor at Drake University, composed the music for the 2003 season.

Theme shows started becoming popular for Minnesota Brass Inc. in the early- and mid-1990s. "Crime Fighters Parts 1 and 2" featured music from "Dragnet," "Dick Tracy" and "Naked Gun." The "Memphis Belle" show in 1994 featured World War II era music including *Vicki and Mr. Valves* and *Amazing Grace*.

The "Vacation" show in 1995 took audiences on a Caribbean tour with *El Cumbanchero* and *St. Thomas*, ending back in the states with *New York State of Mind*.

The 1995 season also marked the first year leading the corps for Gavin Burnham, MBI's longest-serving director. He held that post for seven years and is in his second year as executive director. Burnham was practically raised in drum corps, as his father, Jeff, was corps director for several years.

In 1996, Minnesota Brass Inc. celebrated its 50th anniversary with many activities. Fueled with many alumni who rejoined for the occasion, the corps marched 114 members, the largest to that point.

The show, titled "Minnesota Jazz -- Past and Present," included *Thanks for the*

Memories, arranged by 20-plus year member/instructor/ arranger Rick Rueckert. It included nostalgic snippets of 21 MBI favorites, including *Lady of Spain*, *Sesame Street* and *On Broadway*.

The reunion banquet included speakers and presentations from over the decades and ended with the singing of *For All We Know*, a popular song with members which became the official corps song in 2001.

The year after the hyped 50th, 1997 had a unique concept, some bittersweet moments and concluded in style. MBI played *Poet and Peasant Overture* by Franz von Suppé, which combined 19th century classical music with jazz.

For the first time since 1983, MBI was defeated at DCM, as the Racine Kilties made up a 6.7-point prelim deficit to claim their first DCM senior title. Brass bounced back at DCA to beat their Wisconsin rivals for eighth place.

With the glow of the 50th anniversary year diminished, MBI instituted a long-term, multi-year recruiting effort. Led by Jeff Burnham, Sherry Duggan, Tony Wunderlich and Bill Klein, this strategic endeavor has helped bring in a large number of new members, setting the stage for future success.

The last five years have been the most successful in the corps' history. Once again, the thematic approach has provided cohesive show formats that have continued Minnesota Brass' tradition of entertaining fans and providing quality performances.

The 1998 season was the first of a series of three performing thematic shows based on brass rock groups, starting with *Tower of Power*. The San Francisco-based band's music has been, and continues to be, very popular with MBI members, as evidenced by their *Tower of Power* Buckhorn Festival thematic parties which were held for years.

MBI rallied around the soul funk music and songs like *You're Still A Young Man*, *Squib Cakes* and *What Is Hip?* helped Minnesota Brass Inc. to a fifth-place finish at DCA, their highest to that point.

This was followed by the 1999 *Earth, Wind and Fire* show, which garnered fourth place at DCA and showcased *In the Stone*, *Got to Get You into My Life* and *Fantasy*.

The horn band trilogy was completed in 2000 with the Chicago show, featuring *Make Me Smile*, *Saturday in the Park* and *Free*, earning another fifth-place DCA finish. In all these seasons, the corps once again successfully defended their DCM senior title.

The 2001 season featured a continued thematic approach, this time featuring music from James Bond motion pictures. In an effort to bring corps spirit and unity, MBI started a new tradition, singing a corps song after all rehearsals and performances, with an old favorite, *For All We Know*.

During the later years, Minnesota Brass has become recognized as having one of the top percussion units. Under the leadership of Joel Matuzak, MBI's front line won its first sub-captain award at DCA for best pit in 2001. The entire percussion section,

which was second at DCA in 1999 and 2002, is setting the standard for quality, entertainment and commitment.

MBI marched its largest unit ever in 2002 with the popular and successful "Black to Blue 2002" presentation.

Featuring music that progressed from dark to light -- *A Night in Tunisia*, *'Round Midnight* and *Blue Skies* -- MBI received their highest score ever at DCM Finals, a fourth-place DCA finish and arguably its most successful season.

In 2001, DCA initiated a new associate member status for the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame. Ten members have been inducted, including Gavin Burnham, marching member 1985-1986, director, business manager, executive director, 1988-present; Jeff Burnham, marching member originally joined in the 1960s, director, 1972-1975, recruiting coordinator, 1997-2002; Frank Lozar, marching member, early 1950s-present, corps director; Roger Grupp, board of directors, soloist, member, 1971 present; Scotty Wild, director 1992-1994, show coordinator, "Drum Beauty" organizer, 1987-present; Dick Maki, marching member, 1958-1981, 1995 to present, director, 1962-1963; Tina Cavitt, marching member, 1973 to present, soloist, board, 1980-1981; John "Corky" Whitlock, brass instructor and arranger, musical director, consultant, marching member, soloist, 1968-1993; Mike Palmquist, director 1976-1979, marching member, 1975-1979, 1981, 1991, 1995-1997, MBI DCA representative; Paul Chaffee, director, 1989-1991, marching member 1978, MBI DCA representative.

Like any organization, Minnesota Brass Inc. wouldn't survive without the dedicated efforts of their behind the scenes support staff. The multi-decade unsung heroes of MBI include Gwynne Byrne, corporate secretary, wardrobe; Susan Fisher, promotions, wardrobe; Al Jensen, corporate vice president, truck maintenance; Ann Jones, DCM show coordinator, wardrobe; and Kurt Schiebel, business manager, public relations.

The organization continues to grow in size and financial stability. As Director Ron Haselius stated at the beginning of the 2003 season, "Our goals remain the same. We will perform like we are champions, whether the judges reward us or not.

Our attitude is excellence in everything we do -- both on and off the field. We can never learn enough from our past and that past gives us clues to the direction of our future."



Paul Mordorski marched in the St. Paul Scouts from 1968 through 1972 and in Minnesota Brass, Inc. for 15 years between 1975 and 2000. He has played soprano, French horn, baritone, bass drum and has been a

member of the pit. He continues as a corporate officer of MBI, operates its support group, the "Sideliners," and has produced the corps newsletter for 15 years. He has also written for Drum Corps World since 1977.



The 2002 Minnesota Brass corps at DCA, Scranton, PA (photo by Patrick O'Toole from the collection of Drum Corps World).