

12/8 Path Bands

“The black New Orleans brass band nurtured a characteristic outdoor-playing style that utilized a hoarse and “crying” tone, wide vibrato, and a peculiar instrumental attack not heard in jazz and dance bands. This is easily heard but hard to describe. There is a tendency for different instrumental parts to clash with some dissonance, and the looser instrumental attack causes parts to be momentarily out of tune and time with each other. Sometimes this may be inaccuracy or ineptitude, but it is not just “sloppy” playing or musical illiteracy, as some critics charge.

New Orleans musicians *habitually adopt a characteristic “brass-band” style when they play this music.*”

pg. 40 Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz

by William J. Schafer

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"You won't get a wild heroic ride to heaven on pretty little sounds."

--George Ives

The characteristics of “attack” that Schafer is able to define as “peculiar,” “looser,” “momentarily out of tune and time” but “not just ‘sloppy’ playing” probably define the playing of almost all brass bands in the 19th century that wanted to sound full, loud, lively, thrilling. The old brass bands we see in photos usually consisted of a bass drummer and a snare drummer, two cornets, two trombones, low brass, maybe some reeds like clarinets or flutes (plus saxophones after they were invented later in the 19th century) and were aiming to enliven, enhance, enlarge the events they played; usually no written music in view. The “beaten and blown” outdoor-playing-style sounds like a strange style among many normal styles to Schafer in 1977 because most of the playing he knows is indoors, most of it is “stringy and singy” (more folksilly known as ‘pickin’ and singin’); most of the jazz and dance music he hears is mediated from recordings, radios, TV sets, in which standards of “smooth professionalism” were applied in the studio production, etc. So 19th century normal sounds “peculiar” to him. Natural sounds “sloppy.” Happy seems to be “crying.” Togetherness seems “loose.” Dynamic seems to “clash with some dissonance.” Organic and authentic seems “momentarily out of tune and time with each other.” But which brass band had to contend with charging critics in the 19th century? Hear what I mean? Standards of literacy, a visual uniformity and synchrony, high ideals of performance perfectionism, tight unisons, vibratoless tones, tones free of hoarse, crying, vocal qualities, etc. etc. are all part of a Serious 20th Century Problem called “Serious Music” that must be taught by teachers and criticized by critics if it is to exist at all.

Charlie Ives, southern Connecticut’s premier or “first great” composer, had a Dad, George Ives, who played cornet and liked to lead the local brass band in Danbury. He especially liked to hear two brass bands marching past or “through” each other, playing different tunes! Surely that’s one way to more than double your hoarse, crying, sloppy, loose, clashing, dissonant, out of time, out of tune, peculiar pleasure! Charlie was

a chip off the old block until World War I showed him just what a bad trip Western Snivelization was turning out to be. He got depressed and stopped trying to compose that good old outdoor brass band thang. Maybe he realized that you can't really compose and orchestrate wildness. It is immanent in all of us playing together and not a transcendent composition by one person.

Now it's the 21st century and while the American political economy is more dedicated to war, empire, crusading, civilizing, plundering, than ever before (you have to go back to 1898 when Teddy Roosevelt led a cavalry charge up a hill in Cuba, or to the 1840s when Thoreau refused to pay his taxes for an imperialist war on Mexico, to find similarly nationalistic-militaristic American eras), we do have the scientific and cultural knowledge to be fairly certain that:

children are born to groove;

children would rather play music than read music;

children will play a little out of time and out of tune if you will let them;

children could be happy indeed reclaiming the outdoor brass band style in every locality.

We need to know this. But we also need to feel it, experience it, be in it and of it, under-stand (get into the earth under the feet of our stance) it, in order to dance it.

Pat Campbell:

Community bands are continuing today as their own musical culture, allowing adults to continue to play as they did in their school days. There may be no need to hang up the trumpet or lock away the clarinet, because dedicated bandsmen (and women) are organizing in cities, 'burbs, and small towns for evening rehearsals, seasonal concerts, and community events of various sorts that beg for music that the children and youth may not have the time to make. Trained since they were nine in public school programs where instruments are lent and loaned, these mature wind and brass players (and percussion, too) look for a way to continue a positive experience. Hence, the community band that meets in the elementary school cafeteria on Tuesday evenings, the Lutheran church on Saturday mornings, or the Grange Hall every Sunday night. With eight or nine years of instrumental music study that began in fourth grade, and some with college band experience as well, these adults look to the community band as an outlet for their musical and social expression—a means of getting out, keeping up, staying in touch. Community bands are an American music phenomenon, as American as apple pie, baseball, and gazebos in the public square. Who stands as band-leader, director, conductor? Most likely, a credentialed music teacher, committed to life-long education in music for adults with hearts young and alive in music.

* Find out about the phenomenon of the New Horizons Band program for the over 50 crowd: <<http://www.newhorizonsband.com/about.html>>.

Because I have heard, and seen, and played cowbell, shaken shakers – I do believe! In Seattle a few years back, I was part of the 12/8 path band experience. While

my music is vocally oriented, and I've played all of the instruments that don't fit the band profile, I learned that one never observes a 12/8 path band: one joins in. In a matter of minutes one Thursday evening, the brass players had picked up the phrases (riffs) that they could play continuously; I heard David immediately get it on his trumpet, Tyson on his trombone, and Tyler on his tuba. Charlie handed me a cow bell, playing as he moved it in my direction. No need to talk: do. Shannon had picked up a bass drum and was getting samba tones and grooves that I had not realized was possible on that thudding drum (but of course he knew samba), and Marisol, salsera extraordinaria, was at home with some fierce wrist-whipping movements on the guiro. We couldn't stand still, either, and so we were moving towards this player and then that player as we played, nodding our heads, giving ear-to-ear smiles. Steve was swinging on his trombone and lo-and-behold, my choral colleague, also "Steve", had picked up a three-pitch groove on a trumpet he had never before played. That was our Thursday night "rehearsal". By Friday afternoon, we were rolling across campus, gathering a few more players and a stream of dancers. On Saturday, we had become a larger group standing outside the Seattle Center House, playing for anyone who would listen and groove with us. And they did. I must say that this was a brand new musical peak for me, probably due to the spontaneity of the music, the good people who were making it, and certainly the driving sound itself. What a recruitment tool for school music programs, especially at the secondary school level, when students need to be shown what music they could make – and be wowed into enrolling.

* Find out about the 12/8 path band, how to join one, and how to create one:
www.128.path.org.