

Twenty Years Later, Still Swingin'

Portland's gay and lesbian band celebrates its 20th anniversary

BY AARON SPENCER

Most folks leave their school bands and never look back, trading a hobby and its shortfalls—the stench of old brass, the spit valves, the ridicule—for whatever adulthood can offer.

But some never let go of those days in the band room. For many, that experience came when as sexual minorities, they needed a place to belong and an outlet to express themselves. After all, band nerds and gays were pretty close on the high school totem pole.

These people fill those band-sized holes in their hearts with an after-work activity that's been around for 20 years now—performing in the Rose City Gay Freedom Band. The band will celebrate its anniversary at a special concert in March.

"The band gets me out of the left brain and into the right brain," says Melinda Muller, who plays oboe. "And it's a positive outlet for people who are gay to do musical events and try to give back to the gay community."

The band, a nonprofit of about 90 members, plays concerts, private events and most notably, the Gay Pride parade. Marchers say that performing in the parade is a goosebumps-evoking experience, and it adds a necessary facet to Portland's Gay Pride.

"How do you have a parade without a band?" Muller asks.

Why a gay band?

The idea for a gay band was conceived by Chuck Nance in 1991. He posted fliers around town for rehearsals held in a room at the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland.

"I saw that flier, and I'm like, 'Cool, I'm calling these people.' I didn't even hesitate," explains Brenda Dworschak, an original member and trumpet player. "I wasn't sure there was going to be anyone at the other end of the phone because it was a real tattered flier. I was like, 'Has this been up here forever?'"

Dworschak called and went to the rehearsal, and after walking in on a Bible study, she found the band's first members, a handful of people, including Nance.

Nance has since passed away, but Dworschak says the inspiration for the band came from a desire to play music for the gay community. Nance also saw an opportunity to represent Portland in the Lesbian and Gay Band Association, now a worldwide organization, Dworschak adds.

"When you start to play together, it's that common thread of bringing people together because they have a passion for music."

—BRENDA DWORSCHAK,
TRUMPET PLAYER

ple play in the positions.

"It wasn't my first experience with the gay community," shares Greg Henion, a drummer, who is straight. "The music community is more of an arts, liberal community. You find fewer musicians that have a problem with sexual orientation. I just wanted an opportunity to play."

Give me some show tunes!

When the band started, much of its music was admittedly campy. It's a gay band, members

Other local bands at the time were also "sort of hoity-toity," says Muller, who is the band's general manager. Nance's band gave musicians of all skill levels a chance to perform, she explains.

The band is not strictly for gays, either. It's for LGBTQ musicians "and friends," says Muller. Several straight people



note, the music should be fun.

But that changed six years ago when a new artistic director, Joe Accuardi, came aboard. A professional with the Portland Columbia Symphony Orchestra, Accuardi wanted the band to do more than show tunes.

"People think of us as more of a high school, popsy kind of a band. That's what people would assume," Accuardi says. "I like a more traditional route for the symphonic band because it's more true to the art form."

This new direction bothered some band members. The new music was too difficult for some. For others, it was boring. Some members walked out.

"Whenever you have a group, you're going to have two different things pulling," Henion says, "members that want to be challenged and improve and members that just want to have fun."

The band has since shown marked improvement. It plays at the Oregon Adult Band Festival, where organizers describe it as one of the best. It has attracted better musicians, like those from the Oregon Symphony.

The RCGFB's Pride Marching Band performs in 2010's Gay Pride parade.

But the band still has spots for those who want kitsch. The Rose City Gay Freedom Band has transformed into an umbrella group comprising three bands: the Portland Gay Symphonic Band, for classical music; Rose City Swing, a small swing band; and the Pride Marching Band, a more casual group.

The bands plan to improve their skills and grow their membership; all three groups will perform at the anniversary concert in March.

"It sometimes sends shivers when you see it," Dworschak says. "When you start to play together, it's that common thread of bringing people together because they have a passion for music." ☐

THE ROSE CITY GAY FREEDOM BAND 20th Anniversary Concert is Sat., March 5, 8 p.m.; Kaul Auditorium at Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock Blvd.; \$12 in advance, \$15 cash or check only at the door; rcgfb.org.

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