

War Hymn

The view from 30 years away

by Patrick Harris '69

At quiet times, on airline flights or sitting in long meetings, the subject creeps up on my easily digressed mind and me. Where the hell did all the pieces of the Aggie War Hymn come from and why does it have the hold it has over those lucky enough to be Ags, or luckier still to be in the Band? I have a few Aggie books, and I don't think I've ever seen anything that remotely begins to explain it (beyond: "Pinky Wilson wrote it". And he didn't write the music. He did better than that. He stole it, which is appropriate, right and just.) Why is all this overlooked? It's a rich, eclectic gathering of stuff that makes one of the great raucous incitements to riot ever put to music.

Band members know a few things that most Ags don't because we're in the middle of it. (We're the Bee-Cues, Bravo Quebec, members of the hardest working outfit you ever saw.) There are likely a few things Band members, as individuals, don't know because it is (at least when I was in the Band) difficult to know what's going on clear across the band in another instrument section.

SO it starts off with Recall. It's an old honest-to-gosh bugle call that signaled troops to return to station. It became identified with the end of the working day. At A&M a holiday was off to an official start when the bugler played Recall right after morning chow: sweet music indeed.

The Band, for its performance purposes, knows how to get the student body's attention and make it feel good, too. Play Recall. Play it twice. First time, the trumpets sound with first and third valves down, G (Concert F), B and D, a long path through the horn. It's an easy, low frequency tone, so even a lousy musician can hit that first note right on. It has a strange, deep, hollow sound, as though addressed mostly to folks that can't be at the game. The second round comes out with all the valves open, the shortest path through the horn, in the highest key that the horn can execute the call. This time it's C (Concert B flat), E and G. This sound splits air, a call to all living souls. Everyone's standing up and we're only using the brass horns.

Hullabaloo. There can't be any reasonable explanation for this. Possibly it is some 20's era catch phrase. One story holds that it emulates the sound of World War I tanks moving through the mud. It's a little nonsensical, but a lot hairier than your basic "Boola Boola". It carries no complication whatever, using one note in kind of a cadence count. It's a great transition for the Band because it's on the move now and several hundred troops need to concentrate more on alignment and cadence than picking out the notes on the horn. One of the better openings for a drum section anywhere, anytime. Caneck Caneck.

The main chorus of The Aggie War Hymn isn't original music. It's an old ragtime era song, but not rag music, called "Hello, My Coney Island Baby". That's the melody. I saw Tony Orlando (yeah, THAT Tony Orlando) perform once on television. I once spied a barber shop quartet in Cleveland singing it on local TV. I figure old Wilson heard the piece in New York before shipping out to France and calculated it would be the perfect backdrop for verses really insulting to Teasippers. It truly is a "shoot the lights out" kind of work: music to bar-fight by. Musically, the Band has a lot of respect for it. There's not much goofing around. Just play the music. The baritones, and reeds have a couple of features, up and down runs that connect phrases. The trombones do not embellish but provide a downward tracking backbone, one note per beat where the rest of the Band has two. The drum cadence alone qualifies as a dangerous weapon. Just for effect, the Band plays it twice. The student body sings the second verse twice, "Good bye to Texas University" Good luck for the Aggies.

But what is this "stuff" at the end of the verse? Could it be a voice rendition of a drum roll off? "Chig a

rig a rem. Chig a rig a rem. Rough stuff. Real Stuff. Texas A&M." One A&M president (a non-Aggie, no less) said it was Chickasaw for "Beat the hell out of t.u."

The words ricochet away to "Saw Varsity's horns off", something the student body was doing before the War Hymn existed. The music is "Go tell Aunt Rhodie". The music issued to my trumpet and me was kind of a bugle volontaire. It's a fantastic and creative bit, clearly audible above the message to Aunt Rhodie, that stitches the Band's discipline through the sound riot going on around it. I never did know if any trumpets had a melody part on "Saw Varsity's". If not, the rest of the Band holds its own without the trumpets in the melody line. The trombones rule supreme.

The most frightening thing the Band ever does is the few counts right after "Saw Varsity's" and before "Wildcat". Nothing. Four full counts of nothing. I'm sure many observers aren't fully conscious of it. But there are few instances where a performance organization gets so much effect out of silence. On a street march, you hear the shoe taps on the street: click, click, click, click. Hoo-wah.

"Wildcat" is wonderful. It explodes like a bomb out of the preceding quiet. I think it sounds like bagpipes when it's really right. It's the one thing in the War Hymn music (the full Band rendition) that may be truly original. Isn't this where the bass horns butt in, spitting through their mouthpieces with the big double stinger in the middle?

Then comes "Hot Time". Probably the only time you'll ever hear this piece used to ease things in and calm a performance down. And the trombones don't get the message. The first phrase has the whole Band playing "Hot Time" but I'm certain the trombone line hits the first notes of "Our Boys Will Fight" before making a top-down ya-ta-tah-tah-tah counter to the second phrase. On the close, the second time through "Hot Time", The Col. didn't seem to mind a little trumpet free-lancing. There always seems to be at least one trumpeter playing the "hot time in the old town tonight" phrase an octave over the music sheets.

In the right circumstances, the Band is done but the crowd is in full frenzy, pleased with itself, very pleased with the Band. Or the Band is on the march and moving on to some other piece of music. I believe I first saw and heard the Band playing the War Hymn on the streets of Liberty Texas in 1956 at a bicentennial celebration (for Liberty, the Atascosita District or the Liberty Bell. I did forget those specifics.) I remember, during my college years, being part of the mechanism that makes that amazing sound. I have seen the 30th cadet since me to march at file 11, Bugle Rank. (She is obviously the sharpest cadet in the Corps.)

We were appointed deliverers of the War Hymn. We were gods. We were part of something made of nothing but people now gone who passed it to us, and people now there, to whom we passed it. If we keep our old heads clear, we know that we're the only ones who remember when we delivered the show. But we can go back and see it and hear it. Physically. We're still there. Us. When we were the best we ever were.

No, I really haven't had anything to drink -- maybe too much to think. I apologize for the length of the story. I have indulged myself too much.

Gig 'em Aggies
Patrick Harris/Cleveland
