



A Musical Gift from the Past to the Present

By David Cochran

In an era of high technology, high anxiety and stressful lifestyles, there is a group in the Princeton area which meets weekly to play and enjoy music in a relaxed atmosphere much as it has for over a century. The Blawenburg Band, which began in 1890 - long before stress became a buzzword of society, is an informal, diverse group of men and women whose only common interest is playing music in one of New Jersey's oldest bands.

Few records have been kept by the group over its history but that doesn't seem to bother any of its everchanging membership. "This isn't something we have to do," noted Percy Van Zandt, who at eighty-eight years of age is the band's oldest and longest standing member. "We play in the band because we like to. We're just an amateur band," said Van Zandt, a baritone horn player, "that's all we are."

It is this unpretentious approach to music which draws musicians from all over the region to play with the band. While most hail from the Montgomery-Princeton area, others drive from as far away as Highland Park for an opportunity to play with the group.

Changing with the Times

In the early days, when most of the musicians lived in Blawenburg or on nearby farms, the band practiced above the local blacksmith shop. Today Van Zandt is the band's only Blawenburg resident, and the band rehearses in the Reformed Church Education Building.

Other changes have come with the passage of time and the introduction of modern contraptions like the car. At the turn of the century the band only performed locally due to the constraints of transportation dependent on the horse and carriage. The advent of the automobile in 1912 literally put the band on the road. It became a very popular group and was invited to play at Harvest Homes from South Branch to Hopewell. The band also became a regular participant in the Hopewell Memorial Day Parade, and even travelled all the way to Newark once to perform. In the early days, the low-budget band proudly wore hand-me-down uniforms. Today the group attires itself any which way - no uniforms are worn.

Princeton resident and university alumnus George Soete (PU '46) has directed the group since 1956. Reflecting upon the changes in the band during his quarter century of leadership, he said, "We've got more people in the band than we used to have. The growth of the area has allowed us to maintain a group of twenty-five to thirty musicians. These are good, serious players."

More Than Amateurs

Not only are the members of the band serious musicians, but they maintain a highly professional attitude towards their performances. Very little deters the band from playing once it books an engagement. "We stopped for a few years for the Wars," Van Zandt reflected. "We couldn't get enough boys out at that time. I remember at Neshanic one time; we were playing for a Harvest Home. The platform was a little shaky and while we were playing, the board under the director gave way and he fell through. But he kept on directing and we kept on playing. We never missed a beat!"

Age doesn't seem to be a matter of concern for the Blawenburg Band. It's not uncommon to find a senior citizen playing beside an adolescent. The group has evolved as a family band and there are presently six family combinations in the group: two brothers and sisters, two fathers

Money Not an Issue

Today's concerts still include Harvest Homes and the Memorial Day Parade, but the group also performs at nursing homes and private parties. The Blawenburg Band is largely unconcerned with money. "We get a few dollars here and there for our playing," treasurer Van Zandt commented. "Sometimes we reimburse somebody who has to drive a distance to play with us or sometimes we'll give a contribution to the church for letting us practice there."

"But we don't want the band to break up our families," commented Soete. "If a group will feed us and let us bring our families along, we don't worry about being paid."

Over the years, the band's repertoire has changed somewhat to keep up with the times. "We used to play a lot of Sousa marches in 1921 when we started up after the war," Van Zandt remembered. "We also used to play popular old tunes like 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' and 'Down by the Old Mill Stream' and the people would sing along." Today the band still plays Sousa, but supplements the marches with light popular classics and show tunes. Soete said the heavier classics are reserved for indoor concerts.

Despite the air of informality which surrounds the band, Soete's musicians characterize him as very organized and well prepared. "We always have our music when we need it," observed one member. "You can count on George to keep us informed of upcoming events."

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Perhaps the 1982 Blawenburg Band is just what many other community organizations would like to be: a voluntary group which thoroughly enjoys what it does, and does it well. In a harried age, the band is a pleasure to listen to and a welcome reminder of what many of us would like to believe were simpler times. There is some comfort to be taken in the thought that the Blawenburg Band at the turn of the next century will be very much as it is today laidback, low key and thriving.

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Cochran, David. "A Musical Gift from the Past to the Present," *Princeton Magazine*, December 1982.