

USF History Oral History Project
Oral History Program
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Digital Object Identifier: U30-00006
Interviewee: Fon Silvers (FS)
Interviewer: Deborah Anderson Silvers (DS)
Interview date: November 24, 2007
Interview location: Tampa, Florida
Transcribed by: Kimberly Nordon
Transcription date: March 29, 2011 to March 30, 2011
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: March 30, 2011
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: April 21, 2011

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Deborah Silvers: This is Deborah Anderson Silvers. It's Saturday, November 24, 2007. I'm here with Fon Silvers, and we're in Tampa, Florida. He is a former member of the Golden Brahma Pep Band. We are conducting an interview today, and it is being recorded. Fon, you know you're being taped and this is okay with you?

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Fon Silvers: Yes.

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DS: How was the Pep Band organized?

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FS: My first memory of the organization of the Pep Band is that someone announced—someone from the basketball area was looking to have a band play during the basketball games. I can't really remember who made the announcement or how it was communicated, but what I do remember is the information that the music department had been asked to provide a band to play during basketball games. So, someone obviously had the job of recruiting music majors to play in the pit band. The Pep Band had music books; actually, they were music folders with the music we were supposed to play. So someone had done the work necessary to collect the music in the folders, but beyond that we didn't have much organization. Once the band members had been recruited into the organization, well, that was the organization of the Pep Band.

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DS: How did you come to be in the Pep Band? Did someone audition the members of the Pep Band?

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FS: No, there were no auditions. Basically, the music department knew that if they

recruited music majors, they could recruit music students who could play. So they didn't pursue auditions. Besides, if they'd auditioned the music majors to be in the Pep Band that probably would have backfired. Auditions are usually associated with gigs that pay. Also, we traded off playing in the Pep Band. I wasn't the only bass player in the Pep Band. If someone in the Pep Band wasn't going to make it to the basketball game, that person would ask someone else to do it. I didn't play all the games. I'm also sure I had someone else to cover for me. It wasn't a prestigious enough gig to make me say, "I can't do that other gig; I'm playing in the Pep Band." But it was at least a compliment to someone to be asked to play in the Pep Band. I mean, you wouldn't want to be the person not asked to play in the Pep Band. "Why not ask me? Am I that bad?"

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DS: Well, were you paid to play in the Pep Band?

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FS: I don't think so. I don't remember getting paid to play in the Pep Band. I don't remember doing it for free either, but if we'd been paid I really think I would have remembered that. For the music majors back then, getting paid to play a gig was a really big deal. Getting paid to play was an indication that someone other than a teacher thought you, you know, could play well, well enough for money. Besides, you know the whole poor student thing. So any revenue is a big deal.

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DS: What did the music department think of the Pep Band? What kind of organization or support was provided for the Pep Band?

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FS: The music department didn't think much of the Pep Band. We saw it as a fun diversion, but nothing serious. The music in the music folders didn't change, so it wasn't like someone saw the tune selection as some sort of creative outlet. Instead, once the tunes in the music tunes were set, well, they were set and that was it. Also, having assigned individual students to be members of the Pep Band, the organizers apparently figured we were good to go. So we were able to get ourselves to other gigs, so [we] should be able to get ourselves to the basketball games. I guess that's what they figured, because I don't remember anyone gathering the members or making sure we knew we were supposed to be at the basketball game.

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One episode that really illustrates that situation: Back then I didn't have my own amplifier. When I played electric bass, I used the music department's amplifier. That amplifier was huge. I mean, it was four feet tall, four feet wide, and maybe one and a half feet deep. So I checked it out from the music department's resource office, while the resource office was open. After the game I came back to the—I came back to the music department's resource office, and it was closed. So I broke into the resource office to return the amplifier. As I was doing so, this guy who always seemed to be at odds confronted me. He wanted to know why I was breaking into the resource office and

threatened to call the university police if I didn't give him a good answer. (DS laughs) I told him I'd been playing in the band at the basketball game and I was trying to return the music department's amplifier to the music department. Apparently he was able to notice that I had the amplifier before breaking in, not after.

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Anyway, no one had made provisions for me to return the amplifier. But on the other hand, someone had set up the music stands and power extension cords to the area where the Pep Band played. So there must have been some organization and support, but not enough to make you think, "Wow, someone's really running this show."

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DS: What was the format of the Pep Band?

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FS: The Pep Band was basically a trimmed down version of a big band. We had a rhythm section, drums, electric bass and guitar. We had a horn section, trombones, trumpets and saxophones. We just didn't have very many of them, not a full big band. I remember Steve McAuley was conductor, or leader, whatever, of the Pep Band at least once. I think he also played trombone other times. The conductor job was basically starting tunes and stopping tunes. It's not like he was conducting *Moses und Aron* by [Arnold] Schoenberg.

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DS: My goodness. Did the Pep Band have a uniform?

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FS: No. I think the use of uniforms would have caused everyone to want to not be in the Pep Band. After all, "cool" musicians don't wear uniforms. Michael Brecker doesn't wear uniforms. So no, I can't see us wearing uniforms.

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DS: How much did the Pep Band rehearse?

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FS: We didn't rehearse at all, not at all. It was understood that if you couldn't walk in and read the music in the books, well, you deserved whatever embarrassment you got. It was that simple: walk in, warm up, read. It worked, too. That was the beauty of using music majors in a big band format that they understood. We were able to read everything in the music folder, and we were able to play it in the small big band format.

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DS: Um, so what was the attitude of the music department for the Pep Band?

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FS: Like I said, no one thought much about it, if at all. To us, it was a fun diversion. The

Pep Band also didn't seem to be much competition for the attention of the music students or resources of the music department. So I don't really think anyone thought, you know, we needed to think about it very much.

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I only played in the Pep Band for one season. I don't remember doing it for very long. So I don't remember if someone in the music department decided the music department wouldn't do it anymore, or if I decided I wouldn't do that any more. But I don't remember being distressed by my discontinued participation in the Pep Band. I just remember being in the Pep Band and then doing something else. I don't even know if they continued the Pep Band or what.

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DS: What was the attitude of the music department and its students towards the idea of a marching band?

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FS: This was pretty universal. We didn't think very highly of the idea of USF having a marching band. We didn't very highly of marching bands. I mean, the purpose of a music group is to play music, and, well, a marching band is the self-inflicted worst possible conditions under which any group could play music.

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First, playing outside removes any possibility of a warm resonant sound. I mean, after all, that's why Carnegie Hall is an enclosed hall. If an open stadium was a good acoustic environment for a concert, it would be Carnegie Stadium. Second, playing music while marching around tens of feet away from the audience, or with your back to the audience, can only make the sound worse. I mean, otherwise the New York Philharmonic Orchestra would be the New York Marching Orchestra in the Carnegie Stadium. I mean, do we ask doctors to perform surgery while we walk around? Do we ask political candidates to holler their speeches across the Potomac? No. So why is it such a good idea for a music group to play while marching around on grass tens of feet away from the audience or with your back to the audience? That's what we were thinking about marching bands.

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The problem is that we totally did not understand what a marching band is about. It's not about the aesthetics we find in Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan Opera. It's an example of the saying, "If the only solution you have is a hammer, you'll perceive all problems as a nail." We were only able to see Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Hall. That meant we weren't able to understand the aesthetics and the purpose of a marching band, including me. It wasn't until I attended USF football games and saw the participation of the marching band and the whole thing that I realized we totally didn't understand. But then, I don't really think the faculty and the students of the music department can understand. The aesthetics and the ethics of any serious music student would cause any member of such a music school to short circuit at the notion of marching around on grass

while playing music, so that no one would get to—would get to asking the question, “Well, why should I do that?”

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DS: How would you describe the contribution of your participation in the Pep Band to your USF college experience?

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FS: I had fun playing in the Pep Band. But it’s not like the Pep Band was a serious, integral part of my college experience. I mean, we don’t hold reunions of the members of the Pep Band. I can’t even remember all the other members of the Pep Band. But there’s a bit of background to that. What you’re suggesting is that I somehow identified myself with the Pep Band and USF. You’re implicitly suggesting that my gig in the Pep Band created some kind of bond or affinity to myself and USF. The current members of the Herd of Thunder do get that experience.

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But back then, things—well, USF—things were different. Back then, USF was a commuter school. We were told USF was a commuter school; the statistics showed USF was a commuter school. Sure enough, all of us in the Pep Band lived somewhere off campus, so we were commuters, too, or so we thought. Obviously, we didn’t understand all that was meant by commuter school. But we did understand is that USF was not a traditional university, so we didn’t get all, “Rah, rah, rah, yay team,” about USF. We came to school at USF, we wrote tuition checks to USF, and that was about it.

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Also, back then USF didn’t have the identity it does now. Between 1956 when USF was created and the 1980s when I was in the Pep Band, USF had been the Brahmans—Golden Brahmans—Brahman Bulls, Golden Brahman Bulls, and the Bulls. The poor performance of the USF basketball team losing most of their games didn’t give us anything to identify ourselves with. So USF didn’t really have an identity with which we could identify ourselves. I mean, what are we going to cheer? “Rah, rah, rah. Yay, go USF Brahmans! Golden Brahmans! Brahman Bulls! Golden Brahman Bulls! Bulls!” et cetera.

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It’s not there anymore, but I do remember a restaurant in the university area with a Brahman bull on its marquee.

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DS: University Restaurant.

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FS: Right. This issue of identity has to be there for a student for a student to have a college experience. So back then, USF was a commuter school, not really a traditional university, which couldn’t decide on its mascot and couldn’t field a winning basketball

team. So in that context, my participation in the Pep Band didn't really have a chance to create the special college experience of the Herd of Thunder. It just couldn't make up for the lack of school purpose and identity. I'm very proud of USF now, you know, having figured out how to define a purpose as a university, not just a commuter school; and identity as a mascot, the USF Bulls; and still maintain its long-term goal as a research university. That's something the students can wrap themselves around and, looking back, and say, "I was part of that."

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DS: What else can you remember from the Pep Band that we haven't discussed?

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FS: I remember we had fun. We didn't take it all that seriously, not like a recital. We didn't give it much preparation—you know, rehearsals and all that—but it was fun. It was a lot of fun. I think we did it more because it was fun than for any other reason.

End of interview