

Jimmy McConkey: The Jimmy I Remember

Many Thanks to Doug MacKenzie who did all of the research and wrote the text of this great Remembrance of Jimmy. This is Part 1. We will include Part 2 in the next issue.

Jimmy McConkey was perhaps the first drum major to break the rigid military code of marching in Drum and Bugle Corps. His iconic style with the Archer Epler Musketeers, including his famous “dipsy doodle” dance in their concert and his unforgettable shoutout in *April in Paris*, set the stage for what was to come.



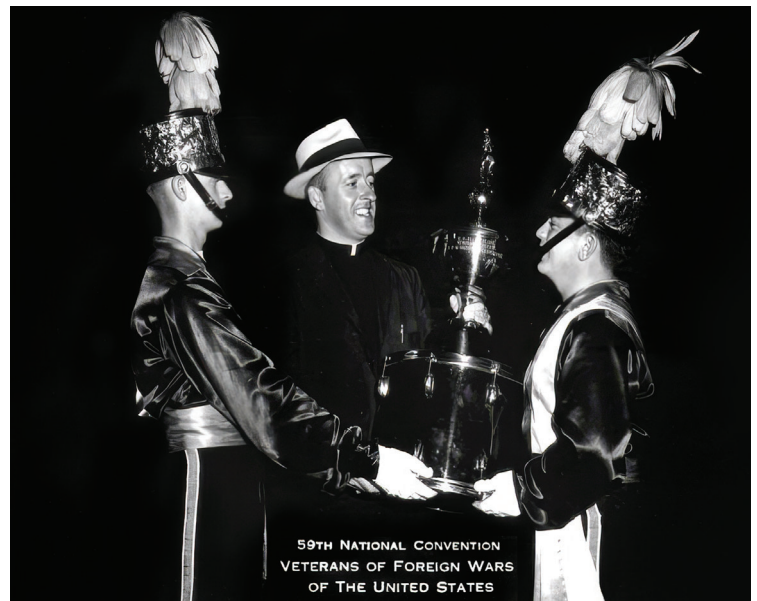
Jimmy McConkey with Archer Epler Musketeers (1959)

He began with the famous St. Vincent's Cadets of Bayonne in 1950, then St. Joe's Newark in 1956 and 1957; he moved to Blessed Sacrament as Drum Major in 1958, where he and Bobby Paul led the corps to a sweep of both the CYO and VFW National Championships. He then joined the Archer Epler Musketeers for the 1959, 1960, and 1961 seasons. In late 1961, McConkey moved to Toronto at the request of Canada's Marching Ambassadors and appeared with them at the Canadian Nationals. They would place second to the Guelph Royallaires. In January 1962, he joined the Toronto Optimists.

He was a true innovator in drum major showmanship. He designed his own uniforms, always incorporating a large belt buckle, a trademark carried over from his Musketeer days.

He also taught guard for the Optimists, Hamilton Conquerors, and the Marching Angels of Sarnia, along with Joe Gianna, a fellow Optimists soloist, who taught the later two horn lines. His presence elevated the Optimists to an almost perfect competitive year, losing only once, at the first contest of the season in Toronto, by a mere 0.5 points to the Garfield Cadets, who would go on to win the American Legion Championships.

That same year, Jimmy would lead the Optimists to a landmark victory over his old corps, Blessed Sacrament, at Rome, New York. He also won two Canadian National Championships in 1962 and 1963, making him perhaps the only performer ever to win national titles on both sides of the border—another reason for inducting him into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame, which many have long sought.



Bobby Paul, Father Garner and Jim McConkey (1958)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)



You can see Jimmy's surprise when Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights are announced in second place (Rome, NY, 1962)

This elite competitive trajectory reached an emotional peak in 1963. On June 15, 1963, Jimmy led Canada's Green Machine, The Toronto Optimists, into Jersey City's legendary Roosevelt Stadium, the very backyard of his former New Jersey and Pennsylvania corps. The moment his name was announced over the PA system, the stadium erupted into a thunderous, roaring homecoming welcome. The Optimists, a crowd favourite that afternoon, placed fourth behind Blessed Sacrament, Garfield, and St. Joe's Batavia.

As a highschool marching member of the Optimists during the legendary 1962 and 1963 seasons, I had the privilege of knowing Jimmy both on the field and personally. He lived nearby at the Gianna house; I would come home after school, and Jimmy would be there.



*Jimmy with the Optimists at the 1963 Preview of Champions, in Jersey City, NJ
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The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)

I last saw Jimmy in 1976 at the DCI Championships in Philadelphia. Mike Thys and I had just left a hotel in downtown Philly. We were at an intersection on a red light when I spotted this guy in front of me – I turned to Mike and said, “That’s Jimmy McConkey” Mike says bull s**t, the light turns green, and we step off the curb with the guy walking in front of us – I say hey Jimmy – he turns around. He yells out, “Dougie MacKenzie!” It was karma; who would have thunk it! Six degrees of separation.

After the DCI finals, we spent the evening at the Archer Epler post, laughing, drinking, telling stories, and slipping back into the rhythm of a friendship forged years before. Jimmy drove us there and, we think, drove us back — neither Mike nor I remember the return trip with any clarity. The next morning, over breakfast, he gave each of us a copper bracelet. By the time we reached the border, Mike was convinced he had Legionnaire’s disease; his bracelet had turned green, along with his wrist and forearm. In reality, it was just a hangover with accessories. But in the moment, Mike was ready to be hospitalized.

It was the last time we saw him. And it was perfect — chaotic, hilarious, improbable, and unmistakably Jimmy.



Jim McConkey with the Toronto Optimists (Grey Cup Parade, Toronto, 1962)

Let Me Entertain You

Not everything around Jimmy was as dramatic, but there was drama. As I said earlier, he'd often be at my house when I got home from school, waiting to perform his lipsync routines to the LPs of Judy Garland and Ethel Merman. My mother and I were the audience. He didn't just lipsync; he became them, gyrating, posing, and slipping into the persona of those two divas with a commitment that would have impressed Ed Sullivan. We didn't think in terms of "drag"; at the time, we wouldn't have known what that was. We just thought it was entertaining, and he was very talented.

These performances would be repeated at the Beer's house, which was around the corner from my house. Bernie Beer, WDCH of F, was the assistant director of the corps at the time, and he and his wife, Mary, were always open to having Jimmy, Joe, me, and others over. There is a good picture of Jimmy and Barry Bell at the Beers' and one of Barry and me, too. They had two very musically talented children: Larry, who would play in the corps, and Marion, whom I can confess I had a crush on some sixty-plus years ago. Often after Sunday rehearsals at A. E. Long, where Bernie was an executive, we would all go back to the Beers for corned beef and rye sandwiches. These were the boil-in-the-bag variety and a big deal then. I remember thinking it couldn't get any better than this. I'm hanging out with the Assistant Director; the soloist and drum major, Marion, was the icing. The nights at the Beers were full of music and jovial good company; I fondly remember those days.

Jimmy also organized a few guys and put on a skit at our corps banquet based on Officer Krupke from *West Side Story*. I think it was 1962, or perhaps his last year, 1963. The skit featured Jimmy, Ronn Prokop, Dave Johns, and me. He was always the centre of attention and never missed a chance for the theatrical.

Bugle Polishing Parties

We had brass horns back then, and inspections by a judge were common on both sides of the border. It was like a military inspection. Each corps would line up, and a judge or military officer would look at each individual up and down. If your horn wasn't polished, you would be docked a tenth of a point. This also applied to dirt on your shoes or uniform and the length of your hair. In a nutshell, it was spit and polish. Many contests were won or lost on the inspection line.



Barry Bell and Jim McConkey (1962)



Ronn Prokop, Doug MacKenzie (behind Jimmy), Jim McConkey and David Johns doing Officer Krumpke sketch (1962)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)

Jimmy would arrange a horn-polishing party. I think he did this for two reasons: one, it built camaraderie among the members, and it was always an opportunity to have a few beverages with the boys. Because of my age, I was shut out of the beverage part, but I found that hanging with the older members built relationships that I still have to this day. Sadly, our ranks are diminishing, but these are the things you look back on with nostalgia: the shared rituals, the laughter, the sense of belonging.

The Draft

Contrary to rumour, Jimmy did not dodge the draft; he travelled freely back and forth across the border without trepidation. He and I never discussed his status or the war; he was likely “four F”. My father, who was in the British Army during the war, was wounded twice and never questioned Jimmy once about the draft or being in Canada. He absolutely deserves to be in the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame. An unforgettable character and a “major” contributor to drum corps.

The Drum Corps World

And while I’m writing this, I’ll mention that anyone who has ever played in a drum corps has, for the most part, experienced the same things. Sure, the activity has changed and may not be what it was in the fifties, sixties and beyond, but there is this thing that binds drum corps people together, past friend or past foe. It cannot be explained; it is within the individual who participated, and it can’t be replicated by those who didn’t.

A recent example: when I was in Indy this year for DCI, my pal Mike Thys (now fully recovered) and I wound up having dinner with four guys from Holland, the Netherlands. We didn’t know them; it was a chance meeting over a menu, and Mike picked up on them speaking Dutch.

Now here’s the thing: these guys were from Dordrecht the home to Jubal Drum and Bugle Corp. Mike is from Turnhout, Belgium, where he was born, which is only 60 kilometers from Dordrecht – our drum corps experiences mirrored each other even though, geographically, we are over 6,000 kilometres away; they played in the seventies and eighties and we played in the fifties and sixties. It is also not uncommon to sit next to someone at a contest you’ve never met and end up talking about how you competed against one another, or how they remember the Toronto Optimists.

A few years ago, I spoke with Dave Richards, Frank Dorritie, Joel Leeson, Louie Scirrotto, and Freddy Johnson about Jimmy and the WDCH of F. His absence from the Hall of Fame is considered an oversight. Among older alumni, especially those from Blessed Sacrament, Archer-Epler, and the Optimists, the sentiment is often: “Jimmy should have been in the Hall years ago.”

Things have evolved, and so have people and the movement. My Drum Corps isn’t the Drum Corps of today, but I’m over it and enjoy watching the kids perform today. The past should not be forgotten, but the past should be forgiven.



Barry Bell and Doug MacKenzie (1962)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)



Jim McConkey presents John Wayne with an honorary membership in the Toronto Optimists (Hatari parade, June, 1962)



Artwork by Don Daber. Reprinted, with permission, from "The Art Of Drum Corps World" by Steve Vickers

On the recording of Toronto Optimists at the 1962 Canadian Nationals, after playing concert.
Jimmy can be heard saying: "You better bleed on the finish line!"
Gene Chepswick and Don Daber discussed the idea and Don Daber created this illustration.

