

Some Things People Really Need to Know About Band

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BY MARY MACKIE ON OCTOBER 12, 2013 ·

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Back in the day—don't fall asleep!! It's not one of those kinds of stories!!—it used to be cool to say “I'm with the band,” because for the most part, that meant you were a roadie or a groupie, or a friend of the band, hanging around to help out, move things, or provide all sorts of moral and immoral support.

But that's not the kind of band I want to talk about here. No, this band is the high school band; in the fall, it is the marching band, focus of half-time shows at football games, and the highlight of most parades (unless you happen to like the politicians or the screaming fire trucks, that is). In the spring it is the Concert Band and the Jazz Band. And for the longest time, it really wasn't “cool” to admit you were with that band (marching, concert, or jazz), and that's an unfortunate thing. You know (unless you were actually in the band) you thought of the band kids as “band geeks” and you tended, for the most part, to stay away from them, or made fun of them, or ignored them, choosing to get more junk food to eat during half time, or trying to see who you could chat up under the bleachers.

You know I'm right, so be ashamed. Yes, it's not nice to make fun of anyone, not just band students. But perhaps if people really thought about them, thought about what it was they did and how much time, effort, energy and sweat (not to mention money) they put into their music, marching, and entertainment for you, perhaps things might be a little bit different.

People need to really know and understand about BAND.

One of the most important things people need to realize about band is just how hard they work to do what they do. You hear tell of two-a-days that the football team goes through and you think how difficult that must be in the hot August sun; the band does that, too. They may not wear pads and helmets, but they wear heavy uniforms and most of them carry heavy instruments. They have to practice rigorously—their music has to be memorized perfectly, and each member of the band needs to know exactly where he/she is moving all over the field. This takes a while to learn and to perfect. During the early weeks of the school year, the band is out there first thing in the morning; some bands practice three and four evenings

a week; some of them practice all day Saturday. And the band in this small town in which I live starts what they call “Early Week” two weeks before the start of school, some time at the end of July, during which they teach the new freshmen what band is about, and also during which they start learning their new half-time show for the up-coming season.

Band isn't something you roll out of bed and decide might be fun to do that day. It's something that a young person commits to, on a daily basis, often giving up lots of other fun things they could be doing, because they are part of something bigger than themselves: they are part of the band.

So there is learning an instrument and practicing that instrument, not just during band class or time on the field, but at home, practicing on a daily basis. Playing an instrument well is like anything else; it needs practice to make perfect, and practice takes time.

Rather than be dismissive of band students, thinking it's nothing to marching around with an instrument, think about the hours of sweat, and tears, and learning, and practice that each one of them puts into their art. They are just as dedicated as any athlete you see on any high school/college/university team. They are musician-athletes. It's not easy to do what they do.

Each band student invests a significant amount of his/her time into learning the instrument, music practice, and in the fall, practicing the marching maneuvers that will ultimately be seen during the half-time show at football games. Some bands might be smaller than others, but each band member (no matter how large or small) gets up early in the morning and puts in many late nights all to perfect what you see on the field. That also involves giving up their own Friday nights, which if you remember back to high school, were just about the most important night of the week for being free and socializing. Band kids socialize, mostly with each other, but they don't have that Friday night freedom that so many high school students have. It's their choice, of course, but that doesn't mean they don't deserve respect for what they do.



Depending on where you live, most towns have at least two parades (no matter how small) each year. Sometimes the smaller the town, the more parades it has. A parade is boring without bands—and they are also very short, with not much to see in them. Here is another instance where a band student is giving up significant amounts of his/her time outside of school to represent their school and their town, by participating in parades. If a band looks and sounds good, it reflects well on the town, on the school, and on the band director, as well as on the students. This, too, is something that takes time, because the band kids can't lug around a large folder full of music as they march down the street—they have to have all the music memorized. More work, more time, more dedication.

Over the course of the past twenty or so years (and perhaps longer) as less and less money is appropriated for our public schools and the students those schools are trying to educate, too many times the programs that get short-shrift, being cut back or even eliminated entirely, have been arts and music. And music means band. It's

an expensive proposition to have a good, sharp, together band. Look at the band picture above. Each of those students purchased gloves (four pair) and shoes (at least two pair) and they have white pants (home games) and black pants (away games) as well as the jackets, hats, plumes, and gauntlets. They each have an instrument. Some of them are rented from local music stores, some the students own themselves, some are old instruments the schools have had for a long time. The guard (the girls barely visible to the right in the picture) also have uniforms, including flags, sabres (sometimes), rifles (other times)—sometimes more than one flag for the half-time show, depending on who is choreographing their routine.

All of this costs money.

The band has trailers (some bands have 18-wheelers, the more affluent ones anyway) to carry around all their equipment to and from games, and parades, and contests. Those trailers cost money, and it also costs the parent volunteers who drive their own trucks to pull the trailers. They are usually Band Booster Parents, who with no reimbursement, (or maybe a little for some gas) give up their time and spend their own money on the band to see that it gets to where it needs to be.



At games, parades, contests, the students need to be fed. Often it is the Band Booster Association that will step in to help; often it is with donations from places in the community (grocery stores, restaurants, banks) that allows the Band Boosters to take care of the feeding of the band.

All of this costs money.

Some high school bands are lucky and get some funding from their schools, but even getting a little from the school doesn't come close to covering the cost of everything band-related. Most high school bands get nothing from the schools.

Despite the fact that they are students too, who deserve to be supported just as much as any other group, be it an extracurricular group or any athletics team, despite this fact, and the amount of hard work, dedication, time, effort, energy, and

money they put into their work, most marching bands get no financial support from their school.

This is important for people to know. Nothing is handed to band kids. Booster Associations and the goodwill of community businesses as well as constant fund raising is what keeps a band together, not to mention what each students' family puts into the bands' efforts, because without parental support, too, it is difficult for students to stay with band—and let's face it, for the most part, students who start band in sixth, seventh grade tend to stay with band throughout both junior high and high school.

This is just what people need to understand about these hard-working students. Some of what I've been talking about might differ from town to town, city to city, but the fact that the arts keep getting funding cut is something that everyone can agree on. It's the first to go, and that's just sad and wrong.

Which takes me to the last point I want to make here about understanding band. Often people who don't understand will say, "well, what's the point? Who cares about band? What is it good for in the future?"

And I'm so glad you asked.

Band kids learn so much more, beyond the right steps and the right notes, from their years in band. This is where life-long friendships begin. The bonds that hold band kids together is one of those ineffable things that is hard to describe to someone who hasn't seen or experienced it. Because of everything they go through together, they become a family. Families have crises and fights but the bottom line in most families is that each member will go to the mat for another one, no matter what.

Band is like that.

Band kids learn how to get along, especially with such a wide variety and assortment of people from all different backgrounds, faiths, and ethnicities. They learn about compromise and about work ethic. They learn how to mourn defeat and celebrate victory. They learn how to work together, one unit, one team that cannot be broken.

Band is like that.

I don't want to get bogged down in statistics, but they are out there, and they show that students who play musical instruments often have higher GPAs, test grades, and are more likely to succeed in college because of their musical training, than other students who have not had the opportunities they have had. Being "musical" works that creative part of one's brain that sometimes doesn't get used as much as it should as we go through life. But these students have that; they dig deeper, strive harder, produce more and work better together in a wonderful experience that they miss once they graduate and go on to college or out into the work force. They've grown and learned together.

Band is like that. Band is just wonderful on so many different levels.

And people should know that. It really does take a village to raise a child, and it takes a lot of help to keep a band going. Everyone works hard, especially the students, and they should always be respected, and even in times of economic turmoil, they should always be helped, just as athletics always manages to be funded. The band should be part of that funding as well. Our band students deserve that. ALL our students deserve that.

That's probably more than you ever wanted to know about band, but it's not even everything. It's just a start. If anything is obvious, it should be clear that I love band. I support band and appreciate everything that goes into making the band run smoothly.

I only wish everyone did.