

Houston Pride Band History

1970's: End of a Decade, Beginning of an Era

1978 was an historic year for the gay and lesbian community in the United States. As it approached ten years since the Stonewall Riots, the gay community was finding its political and economic strength. The rainbow flag was first unfurled as a symbol of our community, and the Gay Bob doll, complete with its own closet, appeared on store shelves.

In the midst of everything that was happening across the country, a group of musicians started meeting in a home to start making music together. Lead by Clint Moncrief, Rue Starr, and Rufus Cheney, the Montrose Marching Band was formed. The group was sponsored by the Montrose Activity Center. In April of 1979 the group began rehearsals in the service building in Cherryhurst Park in the heart at Cherryhurst Street and Windsor Street just north of Westheimer.

For a young band, it proved to be a busy year. The band first provided a pep band for a Police vs. Gays softball game in June. On July 1st, the Montrose Marching Band made its first parade appearance at the first gay pride parade held in Houston. Clad in red tennis shoes, blue jeans, white shirts, bandanas, and hard hats, MMB was a hit with the crowds; however, bigger things were to come.

On October 14th 1979, the first Gay and Lesbian March on Washington took place. At the march, the Texas contingent led the way with 40 members of the Montrose Marching Band up front. The year and the decade ended with another first for the band. The Montrose Marching Band, Twirlers, and Drill Team presented its first concert, The Joys of Christmas, at Bering Memorial Methodist Church.

1980's: A Looming Crisis in the Community

The 1980's proved to be one of the most trying for the gay community. As AIDS appeared, the gay and lesbian community found itself with their friends getting sick and dying around them and a societal backlash from the "gay disease". The community rose to the occasion and began to take care of one another when no one else would. The disease that decimated us also brought us together as never before.

The new decade saw the Montrose Marching Band continue performing inside and outside the community. In March of 1980, MMB was invited to perform in front of Houston's beautiful Art Deco City Hall for the Houston Festival. As the group continued to grow in size and musicality, it was decided that they should widen the scope from being a marching band. In 1981 Andy Mills took over, and the Montrose Symphonic Band and the Montrose Singers were born. During Pride Week that year, MSB played host to the Great American Yankee Freedom Band of Los Angeles and the newly formed Oak Lawn Band of Dallas for the Fred Paez Memorial Concert and Fireworks Display at Spotts Park. With the help of supporters such as Jim "Fanny" Farmer and Mary's bar, the band was able to purchase instruments and equipment. They began to rehearse at Bering United Methodist Church.

In 1982, the MSB held their two famous Tower Theater concerts. GLBT community bands can serve as a bridge between communities, since they represent a non-political, wholesome American pastime. Andy Mills embraced that by making such classics as America the Beautiful and Crossley March a standard part of the programming. But a gay sensibility did shine through. The May concert featured The Bone Sisters, a trombone quartet in drag belting out such tunes as Blow the Man Down. Andy was not opposed to some theatrics on his part either. For the September concert, he conducted Star Wars wearing a full Chewbacca mask.

The Montrose Symphonic Band was not the only lesbian and gay band in the US. Starting in Los Angeles, the movement began to spread quickly across the country. In 1982, the Lesbian and Gay Bands of America was founded, with MSB as a charter member. The founding members of LGBA were:

- San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps
- Great American Yankee Freedom Band of Los Angeles
- Montrose Symphonic Band
- The Big Apple Corps (New York City)
- D.C.'s Different Drummers
- Oak Lawn Symphonic Band of Dallas
- Minnesota Freedom Band
- Chicago Gay/Lesbian Community Band

In March of 1984, Andy Mills stepped down and a board of directors led by Elroy Forbes was elected to handle the many tasks of running a community band. David Christianson stepped in as Artistic Director. The band continued to perform at community events such as Gay Pride Week, the Houston and Dallas Pride Parades, the Gay Softball World Series, and a Texas Gay Rodeo Association event in Simonton, Texas. The big event of that year was the first Lesbian and Gay Bands of America massed band concert at the Hollywood Bowl in California. It was a magical evening for the performers as well as the audience. The special guest for the evening was Rita Moreno.

At the end of 1984, R Vernon “Bob” Morgan took over the conducting duties for the annual Christmas concert. He continued to lead the band through some great concerts in 1985 including a Gay Pride Week concert featuring City Councilman George Greanias narrating Copland’s Lincoln Portrait, and a concert at the Miller Outdoor Theater featuring local television personality Marijane Vandiver.

By the late 1980's the AIDS epidemic began to take its toll on the band. The group which had as many as 75 performers was down to around 30, many musicians playing as long as they could until their health would not allow it anymore. MSB members found themselves performing in more and more benefits for AIDS organizations, including a special one in 1986 featuring Andy Mills in a return to the podium in memory of the band members they had lost. The concert featured singers Marsha Carlton and Teresa Mauney.

Several conductors helped get the band through the end of the decade, including Jerry Bach, Ralph Gutierrez, and Roy Cisneros. In 1987, the band officially changed its name to the Lone Star Symphonic Band.

1990's: Excitement Abroad, Trouble at Home

1990 brought the band’s first opportunity to travel internationally. The third Gay Games was being held in Vancouver, British Columbia, and LSSB wanted to be part of it. Through much fundraising, they were able to send all 25 members of the band to participate. Members marched in the opening and closing ceremonies as well as at a sold-out performance in Vancouver’s historic Orpheum Theater.

After traveling all the way to Canada, the LGBA world came to Houston the following year, as the Houston band hosted the fall conference in 1991. It was an exciting, western-themed weekend that culminated in a concert at Jones Hall, featuring a band with over one hundred musicians from across the country. Roy Cisneros lead the evening. Guest conductors included Conductor Emeritus and founding member Andy Mills, Tom Graff of Vancouver's Lesbian and Gay Rainbow Band; Nanisi Barrett, LSSB's swing band conductor; and Susan Wood, Associate Conductor of the Minnesota Freedom Band.

Another historic opportunity occurred in 1993. With the election of Bill Clinton as President of the United States, LGBA was invited to perform at the Inaugural Parade. Six members of the LSSB went to the event. The massed band played along the parade route on the freezing January afternoon. In a memorable moment, the band played America the Beautiful as the President walked by. When he saw the LGBA banner, he smiled and gave a "thumbs up" to the band. As any musician who was there will tell you, it was a tremendously moving moment.

1994 brought yet another major event. This time it was the Gay Games in New York City, and the Houston Pride Band would play an even bigger role. The massed band concert was at the Paramount Theater at Madison Square Garden. The band's own Connie Moore produced the concert, a major feat in the era before emails! And Nanisi Barrett served as the Artistic Director for the Event. The concert was well attended, especially considering the competition: Barbara Streisand was playing on the main stage, next door.

During all this time, the band was still fulfilling its local community duties. Three concerts a year, along with the parades and other events stretched the band thin. In 1994 Roy Cisneros stepped down after what was the longest tenure of any of the band's conductors. The band was exhausted and almost ready to stop. Three members, Connie Moore, Debbie Hunt, and Russell Williams, refused to say die though. Buoyed by the emotional support from other bands that they received at the LGBA Fall Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, they plotted a comeback. Filled with renewed hope, changed attitudes, and a new sense of direction, they came back to Houston to begin the process reviving the band.

In February 1995, the trio gathered past musicians and recruited new members to attend a meeting to determine a course of action and find a new rehearsal space. Dignity-Houston came to the rescue. On April 21, 1995, with coordinating efforts of C. Patrick McIlvain, the Rice University Gay & Lesbian Alumni, and Pride-Rice Gay & Lesbian Student Group, the band made its first public appearance as the Houston Pride Band, in a performance benefiting the Annise Parker Campaign Fund.

Later that year, several members of the band traveled to Indianapolis, Indiana for the Fall 1995 LGBA conference. LGBA musicians participated in a touching performance for an audience of attending members of the annual PFLAG conference.

In the Spring of 1996, the Houston Pride Band and Dallas' Oak Lawn Band, under the artistic direction of Beau Cain, former assistant conductor of the Lone Star Symphonic Band, joined forces to bring LGBA to San Antonio, Texas for a massed band performance in front of the Alamo.

Membership in the band was growing steadily, but one thing was still missing: a full-time Artistic Director. The band had not had a permanent conductor since its rebirth as the Houston Pride Band. Members of the group took turns at the conductor's podium, but the lack of a primary conductor was making it increasingly difficult to learn new music to present to the gay and lesbian community. Finally late in 1996, Lynne Weynand joined the group as Artistic Director/Conductor. Within weeks, she whipped the group into shape and the band put on a series of Christmas performances at Dickens on the Strand in Galveston, and at the Briar Patch, E.J.'s, Rascal's, and finally at Gentry's bars in Houston. Members of the board of directors for the Tom Moore Community Music Foundation, Inc. were on hand at the Gentry's performance and made a surprise announcement: the band had been chosen as the primary recipient of a grant from the foundation. With the grant, the band had a huge advantage over years past. The group was able to purchase new instruments, repair old ones, and restock the music library. The band soared to new heights under the baton of Ms. Weynand.

In January of 1997, LGBA was again invited to perform at President Clinton's second inaugural parade. This time Lynne Weynand was chosen as one of the conductors for the event. The event kicked off the year in a grand style and the band kept it going with over seventeen performances throughout the year.

1997 was also the year that the Houston Pride Committee moved the annual parade to the night. The Houston Pride Band took advantage of the change and created uniforms of black pants and shirts under shimmering gold lamé vests and capes, topped off with glow-in-the-dark accessories. The twenty-two member band was joined by twenty more musicians from Dallas' Oak Lawn Band for a memorable march down Westheimer.

1998 brought the third Gay Games of the decade. This time it was Amsterdam, and members of the band made the trek across the Atlantic for the event. There was ten days of events and performances, large and small, culminating in a spectacular closing ceremonies performance for a crowd of over 200,000 spectators at the Ajax soccer stadium. Another highlight was the Pride Parade that took place entirely on boats along the canals of Amsterdam. The musicians braved motion sickness as they played for the throngs that formed along either side of the canal.

2000's: A Resurgence

The turn of the century found the Houston Pride Band again without a conductor. A few staunch members rehearsed every week. Arthur Dickey, David Christenson, and Pierre Tejada all took the baton at different times to keep the band going. Still supporting the community, the band played at events such as AIDS Walk, the Bering United Methodist Church's Spring Fling, Galveston's Dickens on the Strand, and of course the annual Houston Pride Parade.

The September 11th attack on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001 shook the world. For a couple of weeks after, air traffic was suspended, and we didn't know if or when another strike would occur. The LGBA conference that year was scheduled for the third week in September in St. Louis. There was much discussion about canceling the event, but the organizers felt that, if nothing else, the accompanying concert would serve as a diversion and a place of relief for the community. Band members from all over the country got in their cars, including Houston Pride Band's Russell Williams, and drove to the conference.

As the 25th Anniversary of the Houston Pride Band approached, the board decided that a celebration was in order, and the first self-produced concert in several years was planned for October of 2003. Band member Scott Ashcraft stepped forward to conduct.

The small group of performers that night hoped that the concert would help the band turn a corner, and they were right.

HPB continued putting together concerts and performing throughout the community. In the fall of 2004 Scott Ashcraft stepped down as the Artistic Director. Fortunately, a friend of the band, Les Wood, stepped right in to help pull off the holiday concert for the year. He then led the band in their most musically challenging concert, Out West. Special guest Emcee was Gene Mikulenska, the first openly gay rodeo champion.

Slowly but surely the band began to grow, and the audience began to grow as well, but in the Fall of 2005, Les Wood stepped down, and the band received help at the podium from several different band members who conducted the Holiday Vacation Spots concert featuring music from around the world. Following this concert bassoonist Jason Stephens stepped to the podium on a full-time basis and has spent the next five years building the band musically.

2006 brought, in addition to more concerts, parades and other performances, the Gay Games in Chicago. Many band members traveled to the Windy City to take part. Events included a field show (complete with a streaker) at Chicago's Soldier Field, a memorable concert at Millennium Park, and closing ceremonies at Wrigley Field.

In anticipation of its 30th Anniversary, the Houston Pride Band decided to rededicate itself to the community. Starting with the first concert of the 2007-2008 season, the band donated the proceeds of ticket sales from the concerts to worthwhile organizations. The first concert, Celebrating Diversity, benefited AssistHers. In addition, the band invited community organizations to set up booths and provide information during the post concert reception. The winter concert, Celebrating Relationships, benefited PFLAG. The band also took part in a special Christmas event with Resurrection MCC called Celebrating the Season, and held a children's concert at Spotts Park. The anniversary season had a wonderful climax with the gala concert at Zilkha Hall in Houston Hobby Center. There were many former members, including two of the founding members, Andy Mills conducting his signature pieces, and lobby presentation of the history of Houston Pride Band.

The decade ended with an historic first for the lesbian and gay community. LGBA, along with 4 members of the Houston Pride Band became the first GLBT organization to

march in a presidential inauguration parade. With the election of Barak Obama the massed band braved the cold to march down Pennsylvania Avenue. That fall had another first, as LGBA held their conference in New Orleans during Southern Decadence. Since it was “just down the street” there was a large contingent of HPBers in attendance.

2010's: Onward and Upward

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we continue to grow both in musicality and size. In the summer of 2011, Jason Stephens stepped down after six years at the helm and turned the baton over to Skip Martin who had been the Assistant Conductor. Jason's last performance as conductor was for the No Strings Attached concert at Zilkha Hall. This was a special event, as 20 musicians from around the country joined us as a regional LGBA event. The afternoon concert also featured a guest appearance by the Gay Men's Chorus of Houston.

With Skip Martin's music education background, he was able to pull a new sound out of the ensemble. His talent was recognized when the Oak Lawn Band of Dallas hosted the 2012 LGBA Conference, and he was named one of the Artistic Directors of the event. The Houston Pride Band had almost 20 members attending the conference including several who provided support to our sister band, by serving on the planning committee for the event.

The Houston Pride Band's history is one of many ups and downs, but some things have remained constant throughout: our dedication to our music, our community, and to each other.

Music, Visibility, Pride

Organization Names

Montrose Marching Band- 1978-1981

Montrose Symphonic Band- 1981-1987

Lone Star Symphonic Band- 1987- 1995

Houston Pride Band- 1995- present

Conductors & Artistic Directors

Clint Moncrief 1978-1980

Andy Mills 1980-1984

David Christianson 1984

R Vernon Moore 1984-85

Jerry Bach 1985

Ralph Gutierrez 1985-1988

Roy Cisneros 1988-1994

Beau Cain (associate conductor)

Nanisi Barrett (Swing Band) 1990-1991

Ralph Gutierrez (interim) 1994-1996

Beau Cain (interim) 1994-1996

Lynn Weynand 1996-1998

Irvin Decker (interim) 1998-2003

Arthur Dickey (interim) 1998-2003

Pierre Tejada (interim) 1998-2003

Virginia Prudence (interim) 1998-2003

Scott Ashcraft 2003-2004

Les Wood 2004-2005

Jason Stephens 2005-2011

Skip Martin 2011-present