SAN FRANCISCO LESBIAN/GAY FREEDOM BAND

40th Anniversary Gala

JUNE 20, 2018
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Jon Sims

On April 20, 1978 something momentous quietly happened. In newspapers, on street corners, attached to notice board announcements appeared: “here’s a way to put your lips to good use—Get out your old band instrument and start practicing to join the Gay Freedom Day Marching Band!”, along with the phone number for one Jon Sims.

Little did Jon, or the 50 brave souls who joined him at the Trocadero Transfer for the first rehearsal on June 10, know that they were to be the start of a queer musical movement that resulted in a legacy totalling 37 bands and 200 LGBTQ+ choruses in the U.S., with another 200 around the world. The spark that began it all was a young musician from Kansas with red shoes, outrageous energy, and a vision for a world where music could put a known face on coming out, where music builds bridges, and where it wouldn’t matter whether you were gay or not. He led the Band, San Francisco, and the world down a yellow brick road towards somewhere over the rainbow.

Born May 6, 1947 not far from where he grew up in Smith Center, Jon Reed Sims was quickly recognized as a talented musician. He initially studied piano and organ (but could play almost any instrument), before focusing on French Horn and eventually earning a master’s degree in performance at Indiana University. Jon then moved to Chicago, where he taught music and played with several community ensembles, including the Civic Orchestra of Chicago.

By 1975, he was in California, where he was a lauded band teacher in Daly City’s Jefferson School District, but became increasingly disillusioned with his job and with life overall. Jon bounced about for a few years, dabbling in modelling, taking accounting classes, and working odd jobs (including as a bar boy and door man at the “N Touch), while continuing his study of music, dance, and eurythmics.

In 1978, Jon decided to remedy what he, and many San Franciscans, saw as the Gay Freedom Day Parade’s “something missing”—live music. The rest, as they say, is history.

Originally conceived of as a one show gig, the Band found itself with a calendar stretching far into the new year. With Jon at the helm, the Band won numerous accolades after marching in the city’s Columbus Day, Chinese New Year, and St. Patrick’s Day parades. Moreover, Jon and the Band added to the soundtrack for key moments in the San Francisco Gay Rights movement: the fight against Anita Bryant and the Briggs Initiative, the aftermath of the assassination of Harvey Milk, the White Night Riots, season openers for the first gay softball league, the Gay Games, and the Gay Musical Celebrations tied to Pride Week.

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The Band consistently broke new ground, whether it was being the first LGBTQ+ organization to play at a major symphony hall in the United States, braving flying water bottles at parades, or simply being a gay musical organization at civic events. For many LGBTQ+ San Franciscans, the Band was the first alternative they had to bars or baths. At the center of it all was Jon.

CONTINUES NEXT PAGE
One founding member described the Band as “Ambassadors of Joy”. Jon took that concept further, devoting himself to nurturing LGBTQ+ performance groups that both entertained and educated, founding the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus (SFGMC), the San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Men’s Community Chorus*, Lambda Pro Musica, the FLAG Corps, and the San Francisco Tap Troupe. Other organizations formed by Jon or members of the Band included the Chrysanthemum Ragtime Band, City Swing, David Kelsey & Pure Trash, the Lavender Harmony Band, Varsity Drag, and Vocal Minority. Supporting these and other nascent LGBTQ+ performing arts groups was the umbrella organization Golden Gate Performing Arts (GGPA). Jon’s vision extended well past San Francisco city limits, and he dreamed of the day that the Band would one day play at the White House Rose Garden or march in the Rose Parade. (He did get the Band to Redwood City and Los Angeles, amongst other places.) In the meanwhile, Jon encouraged the formation of the New York Gay Community Marching Band† and the Great American Yankee Freedom Band‡, which led to the founding of the Lesbian and Gay Band Association. (Key founders of the New York and Los Angeles bands later became the Conductors of the San Francisco band.) Jon maintained that the “Band’s message is simple—our message is music”§! Everything that he, the Band, and GGPA did was driven by “love, sharing, and communication”.

Sadly, Jon died at age 37 of the then little understood disease AIDS. Forty years after that first rehearsal, Jon lives on through the legacy he left as the “pied piper of Gay music” who “forged a new path for Gay rights through music along parade routes”. The Band has since played at Mayoral and Presidential Inaugurations, participated in Marches on Washington, sent-off the AIDS Memorial Quilt on tour, revived lost works, and generally continued to be an active part of the community. The SFGMC, LGCSF, and other members of Jon’s musical family have had no less a storied list of accomplishments.

Thank you, Jon, for continuing to inspire LGBTQ+ musical organizations worldwide and being our first Ambassador of Joy.

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* Now the Lesbian/Gay Chorus of San Francisco (LGCSF).
† Later renamed the San Francisco Band Foundation.
‡ Now the Lesbian & Gay Big Apple Corps.
§ Now the Gay Freedom Band of Los Angeles (GFBLA)

** Endowment Fund for the Performing Arts**

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40th Anniversary Exhibition

Just over a year ago, I had the pleasure of beginning to dig through the Band’s 40 years of history as recorded in our archives. I discovered gems from the very beginning (the original band membership work list), things that pulled at my heartstrings (a photo of a child dressed as a Band member waiting for the Band to march by), and relics that flat out amazed me (a scrap of the percussion table drape that had been incorporated into Jon Sims’ NAMES Project/AIDS Quilt square).

It is now my privilege to share all that I have found with you, so that you may be able to explore the journey this merry group has taken from the gem of an idea idly bandied about in bars and Jon Sims’ brain, to the magnificent splash we made as the first openly gay musical organization in the world, and through to the groundbreaking and amazing organization we are today. I invite you to explore the archives, looking not only for the items I mentioned earlier, but other priceless mementos that help to preserve and tell our story.

I owe a great debt to the early archivists, Thom Weldon and Quentin, as well as Heidi Beeler, Sally Canjura-Clayton, and Lisa Canjura-Clayton for loving the archives and continuing to document our history. Additional thanks to the many, many people who helped make this exhibition come to life.

Enjoy.

Andrea Nguyen
Board Member, 40th Anniversary Archivist

The exhibition is loosely organized as follows:
- The Pioneers: Original band membership work list
- Jon Reed Sims: His life and his work
- Year 1: Scrapbooks and events
- The Vision: Building a space for queer music & art
- Concerts: Early days through present
- Photo Gallery: The Band through the years
- Photo Gallery: Artistic Directorship
- Community Partnerships & Awards
- Special Exhibit: LGBA and City Swing
- Gallery of Uniforms past through present
About the Band

Formed in 1978, the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Freedom Band (SFLGFB) was the first openly gay musical organization in the world, inspiring the formation of LGBTQ bands, choruses and performing groups around the globe.

SFLGFB is the “Official Band of San Francisco,” having been given that honor by two San Francisco Mayors. SFLGFB is open to performers of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and musical ability.

Founded by Jon Sims at the height of Anita Bryant’s anti-gay crusade, the Band has made music to build understanding among communities for nearly four decades.

SFLGFB first appeared in public when it marched up Market Street behind Harvey Milk’s convertible in the 1978 Pride Parade, an event re-created in the Oscar-winning film Milk.

The SFLGFB regularly performs at dozens of cultural and civic events each year, ranging from four presidential inaugurations to middle school pride events.

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Moira Wilmes, Brandon Moss, Van Mares,
Shannon Aquino, David Korn

Learn more about hiring or joining the band at sflgfb.org
Upcoming Events

Yerba Buena Gardens Festival Concert
Yerba Buena Gardens
San Francisco
Sunday, July 29, 2018, 1PM

Community Concert
Historic Everett Middle School
San Francisco
Saturday, October 6, 2018, 4PM

2018 Dance-Along Nutcracker®
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
San Francisco
Saturday and Sunday, December 8 & 9, 2018
Thank Yous

Tonight’s event could not have been possible without a few our of our very generous partners and friends:

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Jason Davis and the Exploratorium
Sam Stewart and Facebook Inc.
Jon Sims French Horn Tribute Players - Nancy Corporon, Jadine Louie, Pete Nowlen, Mike Wong

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Phil Oliver
Ruth Keys
Sharon Morgan
Sue Leonard

A special thanks to past and current Artistic Directors that have challenged us to grow and inspired us to play with pride for 40 years:

Jon Sims, founder (1978–1982)
Tom Smith (1982)
Nancy Corporon (1990–1996)
Dr. Roberto-Juan Gonzalez (2007–2008)
Jadine Louie (2009–2012)
Pete Nowlen (2013–present)
Mike Wong (2016–present)

Fashion Show Models
Abradon Williams
Brandon Moss
Bruce Sinor
Chris Hewes
Diane Osborne
Elizabeth Nelson
Ginnie Padget
Jenry Patterson
Jonathan Young
Kathy Hennig
Ken Patterson
Ken Ward
Michael Wong
Moira Wilmes
Nick Semik
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