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2007 US Open Brass Band Championships

retrospective

The thriving American brass band scene once again put on a contest to remember with Fountain City picking up the honours this year - with a little bit of British help.



We are the Champions! Fountain City celebrate their 2007 US Open win

One of the great things about the US Open and brass banding in general in the United States is that it is still in something of a developmental growth stage, both in terms of numbers and of quality.

Each year there seems to be more ensembles springing up the length and breadth of the country, whilst the bands themselves are undoubtedly getting better. Eventually things will start to level off somewhat, possibly even stagnate or decline, but for now, things are still on the up and up. This year's US Open proved that once again.

It hardly comes as a surprise but one of the biggest challenges for any band at an entertainment contest is deciphering exactly what is the best thing to do to appeal to the judges and the audience: It is no different here in the United States.

Entertain first and put the music second, or place the music first and put entertainment close behind, or just find the acceptable mix between both? It's a difficult equation and one bands the world over always find tough to conquer if they are to come up with that winning formula.

Some bands got it right here on the day with a mix of music that was both well played and entertainingly choreographed. Others opted for the choreography as the integral part of their offering but fell a touch flat, whilst a few bands went for the safety option of being seated and little choreographic enhancement – but that didn't appeal to the judges either.

That's not a problem of course with the ingenious Buskers Competition that quite frankly should be taken up by other entertainment contest organizers around the world. This is the brass band world's equivalent of 20/20 cricket (not that the Americans would know what that is of course – perhaps baseball played over two innings?)

The formula is simplicity itself. A group from one of the competing bands walks on stage between the official order of play at the main contest and performs a number.

Here, literally, anything goes, from players dressed as nuns through to Drag Queens and anything else that take their fancy. The audience show their appreciation by putting dollar bills in a hat whilst the eventual winners are decided by a mystery judge.

The winners this year were the home band of Prairie, although their 'stage name' so to speak was the 'Prairie Barbershop' with 'Buster Strikes Back', in a style that wasn't traditional Barbershop as American's know it. It was highly entertaining and very well played though.

As to the main contest though, there appeared to be three different levels of performance. The top three bands were able to separate themselves from the rest of the pack quite easily with their quality, whilst the two bottom bands played their hearts out but were a little way off the pace. In between came a handful who showed great promise, even if they were a touch ragged in places.

In that middle group was the first band to take the stage, **Eastern Iowa Brass Band**, under their new MD Casey Thomas. The band showed tremendous improvement over last year's performance and this time earned fourth place. Their opening march, '*Knight Templar*', was real quality, almost traditionally British in execution with a good deal of dynamic contrast and dramatic crescendos and diminuendos.



Making 'Light' work of it...: Paul Waech shows his walking steps

Meanwhile '*Lightwalk*' featured some fine flugel playing from band veteran Dan Davies, but by the end of their programme the band perhaps lost a bit of their stamina and it just faded a touch in precision and tuning. It was a very promising account however and shows just what potential lies with the band for the future.

Illinois Brass Band lined up across the front of the stage as they began their performance with a controlled '*Fanfare for the Common Man*'. Their second piece, '*Barn Dance and Cowboy Hymn*', was Eastern Iowa's finale so it was easy to make a direct comparison. Illinois appeared a bit crisper in their playing and might feel a bit hard done by their sixth place finish overall.



Backs to the wall? Illinois make an about turn

Perhaps Illinois lost favour with the judges for a programme that was a bit ambitious with their march, *'The Thunderer'*, and the last movement from *'Jazz'*, by Philip Wilby. This seemed a slightly strange choice as it comes from a very prescriptive test piece and as a stand alone piece doesn't make much musical sense – especially at the reprise ending.

Illinois's interpretation of *'Lux Arumque'*, with all the cornets standing and facing the back of the stage just didn't come off for us on the day either. The effect looked great but unfortunately the acoustic of the hall negated the aural effect almost totally.

The third band on stage was **Fountain City**. This was the first band to truly separate itself from the pack. The opening march, *'ORB'* had a big British sound and their time in the UK earlier in the year at the Whit Friday March contests (and Cambridge at the All England Masters Contest) had been put to good use. Raquel Rodriguez followed with a bright *'Carnival of Venice'* that already had us thinking she'd be taking home a new cornet, and she did with both best cornet and best soloist on the day: What a classy player.



Carnival Queen: Raquel Rodriguez takes the solo honours

Where things paid off with the judges for Fountain City was when then performed, from memory, a choreographed and

continuous space medley of *'Planet Krypton'*, *'Mars'* and *'Luke & Leia'*. This really was effective stage presence and effective playing to boot – quality all the way.

Then the band showed a bit of humour by mixing the *'Cantina Band'* from Star Wars with Louis Prima's *'Sing, Sing, Sing'*. Antics were everywhere including small combo featured in the back of the auditorium making its way to the stage and a duel for the limelight on the stage which saw MD Joseph Parisi playing the trumpet (it's worth noting he was the principal cornet of the band when it first formed). Again well rehearsed and presented – and crucially, well played.

Fountain City concluded with the finale from *'Music of the Spheres'* and took in our mind a commanding lead so far. This perhaps wasn't the greatest finisher as like *'Jazz'* playing a final movement of a test piece never really works without the rest of the piece to adhere to – something never quite adds up.

This though was a truly entertaining programme that won the band the most entertaining prize as well as the overall winner's laurels on the day. However, we thought they may have just left the door open enough for one of the later bands to sneak in and grab the top prize and in our final summing up had them second overall. They are though a very, very good band in the making.

The last band before the lunch break was the **Prairie Brass Band**. The band started with Dallas Niermeyer's arrangement of *'Bells'*, which opened with two members of the band playing foresaid hand bells. In fact, most of the highlights of their programme were arrangements made by their MD including *'Robin Hood and his Merry Men'* and Chuck Mangione's *'Echano'*.



Perfect pose: Prairie continue to head in the right direction

It was a well drilled and presented programme that played the strengths of the band and showed that progress is being made very much in the right direction. They are still a little way behind the best here, but are closing the gap each year.

So what about the overseas contender **Wingates**? If the evidence of how much the audience enjoyed them was anything to go by then they could count themselves a touch unlucky that they didn't end up winning the contest. Throughout their performance they got two standing ovations, so there was proof in the pudding that the audience loved it, if not the judges.



The beat of just one drum: Wingates make thier mark

They opened things up after the lunch break with a great performance of the march '*Ravenswood*', so much so, that they took home the award of best march. After walking on stage in their traditional jackets and bow-toes, the band shed them to reveal all black shirts underneath and the rest of their programme reflected that much less traditional approach.

Lucy Pankhurst's new composition '*Wicked*', was just that. Featuring a multiphonics beat-box from solo euphonium Gary Curtin to open the piece, the funk message (if that is the way to describe it) got passed around the band and brought cheers from the audience. It also meant that deservedly the US Open trophy for best new composition or arrangement went to a bespoke new work.

The band now had the audience eating out of the palm of their hand and Andrew Berryman spared no expense in trying to win them over. He stripped his black shirt off to reveal an American flag shirt underneath before conducting his arrangement of '*Mambo Number 5*', complete with rhythmic percussion, choreography and vocals – and it worked a treat.

Next, came some wonderful playing from 11 year old Peter Moore on trombone. He was ever the young child with the cheeky smile until he put the trombone to his face and immediately aged 25 years producing such a mature sound and showing immense musicianship in '*Blessed Assurance*'. Having previously won the British Open Junior Solo title for the last two years (he couldn't make it a hat-trick this year due to this trip) here he showed that he is a special talent indeed. The audience loved him.

The band closed with '*Malaguena*' and '*Reunion & Finale*' from "*Gettysburg*," again choreographed without ever going over the top. We thought they were in front of Fountain City at that stage but that was not the case.

Motor City may have just taken the stage at the wrong time, being a victim to the draw. The two previous bands, Fountain City and Wingates had just wowed the crowd with quality all around performances and although they performed admirably they were not in the same league. George White did a very nice job on his trombone solo, '*Georgia on My Mind*', and overall the band produced a well drilled performance.



Stand by me: Motor City try to hide away...

Motor City's *'American Salute'* was well handled, but after the flag waving spectacular of Wingates it seemed a touch muted in comparison. The band concluded well enough with a swinging version of their hometown tune, *'Hello Detroit'*.

The penultimate band, **Milwaukee Festival Brass**, decided they were just going to go out and have some fun. They brought a lot of cheese (not the musical type) from Wisconsin, in the form of foam cheese wheel replicas on stage and funny noses, bowties and hats.

Their opener even included MD Pat Backhaus "stealing her extra bow" during it's *'No Business like Show Business'* too. One of the truly American things they brought to the table was the cymbal solo at the end of the day for the *'Bucky Badger Song'*.



Bucky Badger! A fantastic piece of cymbal crashing from Milwaukee

It may not have won best soloist, but could have been arguably the most entertaining with cymbal flips and the like – it was great stuff. In the end it was just enough to sneak them ahead of Motor City for 7th place. A band that knew its limitations, but played to its undoubted strengths from the word go - Wisconsin must be a great place to live.

The last band of the day was the defending champion, **Brass Band of Central Florida** who didn't sparkle as effectively as they could have done but they still showed plenty of the quality that has gained them titles here and last year at Brass in Concert.

They brought the audience to their feet with the first piece, (then again it was *'The Star Spangled Banner'*) - something that we doubt you'd would ever see in a UK entertainment contest where the National Anthem is usually greeted with a shuffling of feet and a few mumbled words from embarrassed mouths. It got a bit of a mixed response as well – some took it as a musical piece whilst others weren't overly keen to applaud what is seen as something almost sacred in terms of musical importance.



No Pagliacci clown this - Dee McAfee on stirring form

After a solid performance of *'Candide Overture'*, Dee McAfee delivered a stirring rendition of *'On With the Motley'* that had glimpses of Peter Roberts all over it – real bravura playing. A new arrangement of Bennet's *'Triumphal'* followed and already two-thirds of the way through the programme, we were wondering "Where are the typical bells and whistles we get from Central Florida?"

Those moments never quite came for us, although their rendition of *'Lux Aurumque'*, in the dark with instrumental choreography was very classy. The band closed with *'Malaga'*, which they used at Brass in Concert last year. It rounded off a slightly below par performance from Florida, both in terms of content and execution and they couldn't have too many causes for complaint at the final result. They were beaten by better bands on the day.

The contest itself (and its organisation) was another huge success. Frank Renton brought his own insight into the music and humour into the day and whilst some bands gave him a rest and used their own personnel as MC's, they should make use of the man dubbed 'Voice of the US Open' to say it for them. The odd band even went to the extent of rehearsing how they'd respond to a so-called joke from their MD prior to a piece being announced – which never ever works.

Finally though, it was great to see rival band members watching all the other groups and trying to figure out which aspects of each performance they could take back to their group and use in concerts. There is a real sense of partnership in the contesting cause here.

A close contest though at the top end and for Fountain City real delight in not just stopping BB Central Florida's dominance but making it a double year of celebration following their NABBA victory win earlier in theseason.

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