

# Bangers, Blowers, and Bob:

## The Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corps Turns 25

BY CYNTHIA POTTS

For future reference, St. Patrick's Day may not be the ideal time to contact the manager of the premier Gay Marching Band in New York State. Jim Babcock is a busy man, sharing his thoughts on the band while traversing snowy streets on the way to catch the train.

We've got our bangers — the percussion people — and our blowers. They play the wind instruments, he explained. The band has two functions, performing at concerts as well as at marching events. These aren't only gay pride events, but they mostly are. The Big Apple Corp puts on three concerts a year, and participates in an average of 10 marching events, Babcock continued. We travel throughout the East. Boston, DC, and of course, we hit Burlington every other year.

Babcock continued, The band has grown so much. We owe our existence to Bob — he's a father figure of sorts. In a way, we're all his descendants, reaping the benefits of what he started.

Bob is Robert Wolff, regular *OITM* contributor and professional theater and sound designer. I was a band man in high school, he explained. It was always a lot of fun. Then I went to a Pride March in New York City. This would have been the mid-70s. There was no band, just a lot of noisy people marching along. At the end came the Tambourine Band, which was a very loud truck filled with people banging on whatever they could get their hands on.

Feeling a strong need for more appropriate musical accompaniment, Wolff wrote to John Simms. Simms had founded the San Francisco Gay Freedom Band and Twirling Corps. The pair arranged to meet in New York.

One of the things John felt badly about was that his band was not very woman-friendly. He recommended that I co-found the band with a woman, and he just happened to have one in mind, Wolff laughed. He'd previously played with Nancy Corporan, she plays the French horn. That very next day, we all sat down for a couple of hours, and when we were done, Nancy was the music director, and I was the band manager.

It was late 1979 when the fledgling band began rehearsals. We'd meet in the basement of this lesbian club on Bleeker Street. There were 13 or 14 of us to begin with, but the band quickly grew.

It was a very political thing to start the band, explained long-time member Eric Rouda. We created a musical backdrop to the

protest rallies. It sort of lent credence to the whole thing — we weren't just a rabble chanting and screaming. There was a *band* behind us.

We performed in front of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookstore, Wolff said. Of course we passed the hat, and that allowed us to buy music. That first winter saw the band playing Christmas carols on the streets of New York. You'd see 1, 2, maybe 3 Salvation Army musicians here and there, but we had a full band. We played in the Village, we played the Upper West Side.

Not all the music was festive. There was a horrible gay bashing incident on Christopher Street, Rouda recalls. We gathered and formed a funeral procession, marching down the street. We played the Battle

back then, Rouda said. But we rehearsed every week. Some better musicians have joined the band. The quality now is awesome, especially when you consider that we're a predominantly amateur band.

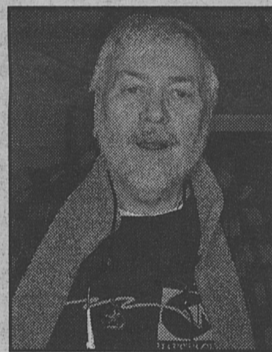
Wolff had left the band shortly after founding it, the time commitment at odds with a busy career and parenting his son. It was because of the band that I came out to my son, who was eight at the time. We were spending time in the park, and my involvement with the band led to that disclosure.

Family is a recurring theme when speaking to band members. The band provided me with a family, writes long-time member Joe Avena. Babcock agrees. I made up some lists after going through old documents, papers

over 18 years, writes Eric Rouda. Even though only three members of the original cadre remain — Rouda, Bob Imlaw, and Marsha Steltlaw — it's not uncommon to hear of band friendships going back 5, 10, 15, even 20 years. These relationships have endured despite the ravages time and disease have taken upon the group. We've lost members to AIDS, to breast cancer. We lost a trumpeter to Pan-Am 103.

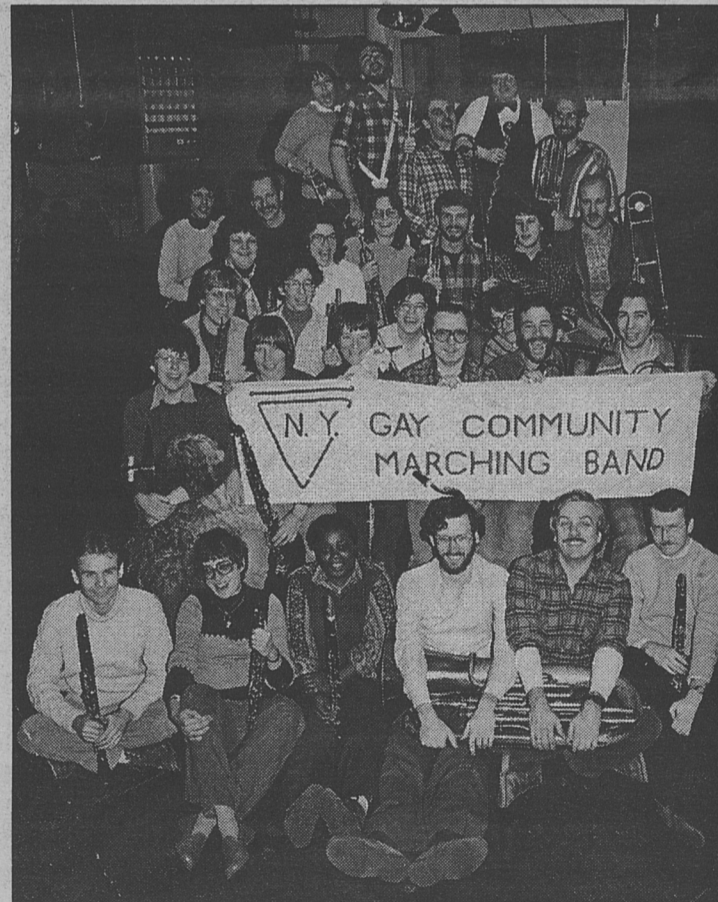
The band has had a tremendous effect on a number of people, Wolff said, not only the people who listen, but the people who are in it. He paused for a moment, reflecting how things have changed in the 25 years the Big Apple Corps have been playing. Young people need to look at what's missing in their communities and work on filling that gap.

Bob and Nancy will be honored guests at the Big Apple Corp's Silver Jubilee 25th anniversary event on May 1. I'm looking forward to it, Wolff said. The band will be in our own back yard for the 2005 Pride March in Burlington, Vermont. No, I won't be playing,



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**Big Apple Corps’ Jim Babcock**

above, Bob Wolff today. right, the LGBAC in 1979 (Wolff is 2nd from right in the front row.)



Hymn of the Republic. It brought an air of respectability and solemnity to what could have been a very ugly protest. The band enjoyed a place of prominence leading NY City's Gay Pride parade for many, many years, Rouda continued, Until 9/11. Now the Police Band leads our parade — as they do for many, many events throughout New York.

We weren't very good musicians

salvaged from attics, garages, ex-lovers' apartments. There's at least 800 people we know the names of who have participated with the band over the years — dozens more who helped that we never wrote down.

The ties among band participants are strong. Many of us have become each other's chosen family. Many of my closest friends are people that I have known in the band for well

Wolff laughed. A bout with lung cancer left Wolff with diminished lung capacity, especially that 15 percent I need for proper phrasing on the saxophone. I play the mandolin now. ▼

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