MEDUSA'S REVENGE

A history 'zine from the Queer Big Apple Corps

Original art and photos by band members

A short history of QBAC

Interviews with founding members

ISSUE NO.01: OVERTURES

December 2025

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to Medusa's Revenge, the 'zine documenting and celebrating the history of the Queer Big Apple Corps. As the band marks our 46th year, celebrates new and exciting milestones, and persists through our nation's threatening political climate, it is more important than ever to preserve and honor our history as an organization.

To that end, this inaugural issue of Medusa's Revenge is titled Overtures. In music, the overture is the start of everything. It's where the story begins, and where the audience's attention is grabbed because we all realize something is about to change and something amazing is just getting started. The overture contains the seeds of everything that's yet to come, whether recognized or not. And, the overture is about everyone coming together and agreeing to jump into a new experience that could very well change us for good.

As queer people, we know how important our LGBTQ ancestors are. We would not be where we are today as individuals, as a band, or as a larger queer community without their persistence, fight, and bravery. We stand on their shoulders, and feel strongly that we should know and celebrate our history.

This issue - the first of many, we hope - is dedicated to the founding members of the Queer Big Apple Corps. They are all present in these pages, but if they're not featured this time, they will be soon. Indeed, Overtures is just the beginning. Let's play!

With love,

Nora and Leah

Nora Neus and
Leah Singerman

10 BLEECKER STREET TODAY Drawn by A. Gail Bier

former site of Medusa's Revenge, the original QBAC practice space November 2025

ON THE COVER

"Chloe, QBAC Drum Major 2025"
Acrylic on canvas
12 inches high x 9 inches wide
Painted by Gwyneth Leech
https://www.gwynethleech.com/
August 2025

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE QUEER BIG APPLE CORPS

By Nora Neus

On a warm September evening in the dank basement of a lesbian coffeehouse and bar called Medusa's Revenge in the Bowery, queer history was made. It was 1979. A handful of gay men and lesbians gathered for the first rehearsal of a fledgling new concert band. They really weren't sure how it would go.

"At the time, gay men and lesbians didn't fraternize. You didn't talk to each other," founding member Joe Avena remembers. "It was just not a thing that you did."

So at first, the gathered musicians didn't speak.

"Of course, the lesbians kind of went in a group and spoke, and the gay guys went to a group and spoke," founding member Jacqui Aquilino remembers.

Spot Illustrations by Mercedes Li

But then, rehearsal began, and amid the opening strains of John Philip Sousa's The Thunderer, the diverse group of gay men and lesbians, all different ages, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses, became one.

"The band for me, and maybe for the city, maybe for the country, was a catalyst to get gay men and lesbians to talk and communicate and see something in each other beyond whatever the myths were or the rules were. Let's break the rules and become a family," says Avena.

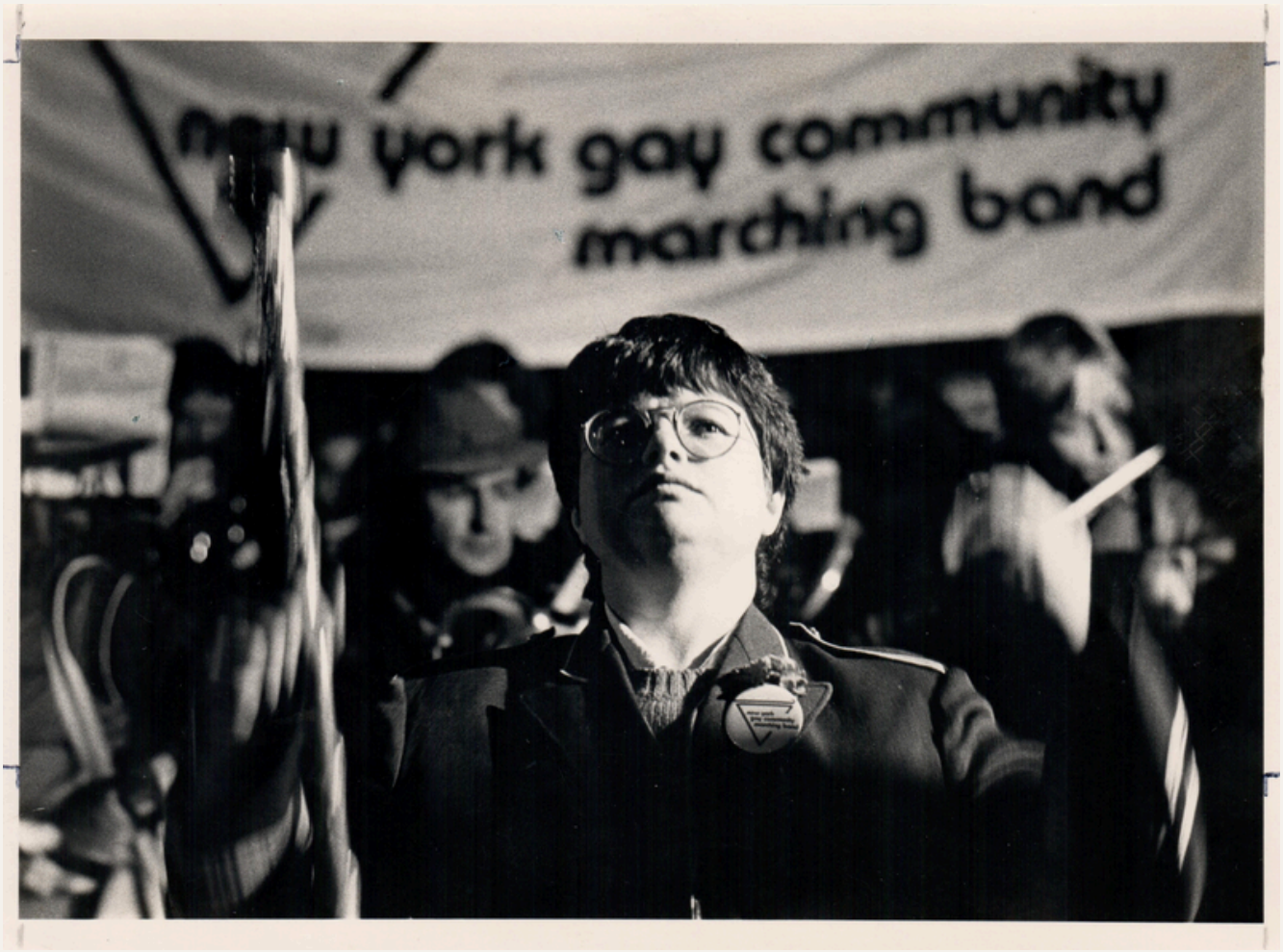
CO-FOUNDER BOB WOLFF AT AN EARLY REHEARSAL

That was part of the goal in founding what was then called the New York Gay Community Marching Band. Nancy Corporon and Bob Wolff founded the band together in 1979, inspired by their friend Jon Sims who the previous spring had founded the nation’s first ever gay and lesbian band in San Francisco.

“We set up a card table at the top of Christopher Street and handed out flyers,” Nancy Corporon remembers. The flyers had an evocative title: Get Your Instruments Out of the Closet! Passersby responded well, taking flyers for themselves and friends, and the early rehearsals were full of people.

“get your instruments out of the closet.”

Many of these brave musicians were not out to their families and friends, but they were intent on creating a queer community around their shared love of music. It was also one of the only places gay men and lesbians could socialize that did not revolve around alcohol.



VIGIL AT THE RAMROD, 1980

“To have a place where normal people, gay people, men and women were making music and friends, and a strong political statement was a lifesaver for me,” remembers founding member Marsha Stone.

Soon renamed the Lesbian & Gay Big Apple Corps, the band took to the streets of New York City. Their first gigs were celebratory and fun, but soon, they were called upon for more serious occasions. In November 1980, a shooter opened fire at the Ramrod, a popular Village gay bar. The band played a funereal march for a candle lit vigil in the streets; onlookers openly wept.

Thursday, October 10, 1985 DAILY NEWS ☆ 29

Bad eggs mar gay band's show

By JACK LEAHY and DON GENTILE
Daily News Staff Writers

A band comprised of gays and lesbians hired for a Queens concert last weekend was pelted with eggs and verbal abuse when they displayed a banner bearing their name, the Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corps.

The Saturday night outdoor concert, in a park at 78th St. and Woodside Ave. in Elmhurst, was arranged by Elmhurst Alive, a local civic group, as free entertainment for the public, and was paid for by the owner of five Queens McDonald's fast-food stores.

Ira Meyer, the McDonald's owner, donated $350 to hire the band, which he had employed for a similar concert in the community last year. This time some in the audience became enraged when the band displayed its banner.

"People started pelting raw eggs at the band," said Dorothy Friedman, an assistant to Meyer. "There was snickering and a lot of catcalls. They played Sousa, top tunes of the '40s, and songs from 'A Chorus Line' and other Broadway shows. It was really good."

No conflict seen

Ron Laney, executive director of Elmhurst Alive, said he was aware of the band's gay identification but had felt that would not be a problem because the band was hired recently by community [illegible] in Brooklyn.

"This is what you get for bringing some culture into this community," he said.

Thomas McKenzie, vice president of the Newtown Civic Association, in Elmhurst, said, "I went to the concert but I left early. People were running out of the park after they saw that sign. This is a family-oriented community."

Two of Meyer's franchises are in Elmhurst. He responded to the furor by apologizing to community.

"This aberration is repugnant to me as it must be to the community at large," Meyer wrote in notices he sent to community groups. He wrote he wanted to "apologize to the community for any offense resulting from the concert."

In an interview, Meyer said there had been no complaints about last year's concert.

"But this year was different," he said. "Ever since Saturday, my phone has been ringing with calls from outraged people."

JOE AVENA WITH EGG ON HIS TUXEDO

Fun fact: Joe wasn't actually hit by the thrown eggs. The band members who were hit did not want to pose for a photo. The band decided Joe was the hottest guy and was willing to pose for the photo documenting the historical moment!

Other times, people would throw eggs, soda cans, and even bricks at the band as it marched past. In one now-infamous incident, a group of people threw eggs at the band during a performance in Elmhurst, Queens. The band called the police, who did come to the park but just drove around in circles and then left without ever getting out of the car. "So we just confronted these guys," Avena remembers. "The entire band went out into the street past the audience and went right up to the gang [and said] *What's the problem here?* They ran away and they left. It was a critical moment of standing up to this bullying. And the band went back on the stage and finished the performance."

Some wondered why they wouldn't just take the words "Gay and Lesbian" out of the name; the band stood firm in its commitment to being open and proud, hoping to change attitudes about the gay community.

The band thrived until the early 80s, when band members started getting sick: big bloody scabs on their scalps and backs, unexplained exhaustion, and fevers. It was AIDS. Not knowing how the new disease was spread, other than it was prevalent in gay communities, band members had a decision to make: would the band keep rehearsing, blowing humid, potentially fatal air into horns in close quarters and risk dying? Despite the fear, they decided yes. They were family, and thankfully soon learned that was not how AIDS could be transmitted.

Founding member Eric Rouda clearly remembers how much the band's support meant after his partner, Gregg Flaum, died from AIDS: "They took off from work and they showed up to be with me. I carry that with me always. It's always there." By the late 90s, 34 band members had died from AIDS: lovers, partners, friends, bandmates. Again and again, the band was called upon to play funereal marches at AIDS vigils, but this time, for their own. Rouda still plays baritone horn in the band; he welcomes the young band members, excited to see the band grow into the future.

"The AIDS Years"
Photograph courtesy of Joe Avena

AUGUST 2001

Through the 90s and early 2000s, the band's popularity grew as the LGBTQ+ community won important victories. The band would perform around the country, at the inaugurations of Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, in parades in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Providence, and Albany. They performed to jubilant crowds outside Stonewall Inn when gay marriage was legalized. And of course, the band marched in every New York City Pride parade, even as it became more and more corporate, prompting even more debates from within the band.

By 2020, the band had grown to over 200 people of all ages, and then Covid-19 struck. But the band had already weathered one pandemic and they would weather another. They emerged stronger and with a new name, one that captured the current diversity of the band: the Queer Big Apple Corps.

SHORT HISTORY, CONT.

And then, the band received the surprise of a lifetime: they were selected, after over a decade of failed attempts, to march in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. They would be the first ever LGBTQ+ group to march in the parade.

"It's the epitome of a band, to play in the Macy's parade," Aquilino says with wonder… of family-friendly entertainment, of acceptance by the mainstream, of visibility.

Marching in the drumline was a beaming,73-year-old Nancy Corporon herself, shaking a tambourine in perfect rhythm, back with the band she started.

"I look back on… Medusa's Revenge, and then I march in the Macy's Parade with the band? Oh my God!" she says, emotion in her voice. "I am so proud of what I created and what it has become, acknowledging from the very depths of my heart, those folks who came into leadership positions at the right time, the right people at the right time, always saving the band and making it better, 'til today." That includes the inimitable marching band director Marita Begley, a founding member as a clarinet player in her early 20s, who has now directed the band for decades and in many ways, makes the band what it is today.

NANCY CORPORON AT WORLD PRIDE 2019

The story of the Queer Big Apple Corps is much more than the story of one band, though; it is a story of resistance from a post-Stonewall America through today, a story of intergenerational community and how move forward in progress while respecting where we've come from, and finally, a story of queer joy in a world that so desperately needs such narratives.

Only one answer comes to mind to a question posed by co-founder Nancy Corporon: "You can hardly imagine a world without that band, can you?"

No, not at all. And luckily, we don't have to.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

NANCY CORPORON

By Nora Neus

Q: Okay. Thank you so much for doing this. I really, really appreciate it. So to start, where or what is home for you?
A: I live in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Q: And where did you grow up?
A: I was born in Kansas, like [SF band founder] Jon Sims and raised in Oklahoma, and then started bouncing around the country, Chicago, New York, et cetera.

Q: At what point did you meet Jon Sims?
A: We met while we were both in college, in about 1970. He was at Wichita State and I was at Oklahoma City University, and Wichita State was having a competition, and I'm pretty sure I went to observe it. I wasn't competing, but Jon was, I guess, part of the host committee and a flutist that I went to school with at OCU was in a woodwind quintet with Jon the previous summer. And so she introduced us.

Q: Yeah. And at this point — did you know that you were both gay or lesbian at this point?
A: I certainly didn't. I had no such awareness, and Jon had not come out to me, although I think he had a better grip on himself than I did. He grew up in Smith Center, Kansas, and he was always the one, the boy who knitted, and the boy who cooked, and the boy who — So I think there were those early indications for him. We met in Wichita, and then it was a few years later that our paths crossed again because he moved to Chicago, and I was in Chicago at the time, and we were both studying with Dale Clevenger of the Chicago Symphony, and we ended up — Jon and I ended

up playing in groups together in Chicago. That would've been '73, '74, '75 in there. And he ended up moving into an apartment that was a half a block away from me. I had married a man in 1973, and my husband and I lived half a block away.

And that was great because we spent time not playing, just hanging out. He went to San Francisco for a vacation or to visit somebody or whatever, and he came back and he said, "Oh, Nancy, San Francisco is where I belong." And I actually helped him pack his U-Haul and waved goodbye to him as he set out for his drive to San Francisco. And that would've had to have been '75, '76, something like that.

Q: Wow. So at this point, did you feel like a kinship with him?

A: Oh, totally. Yes. I was honored to speak at Jon's memorial service in San Francisco, and one of the things I said was, Jon and I knew that we were very special to each other, and we knew that we would be in each other's lives forever, but we didn't quite know how. And at one point, we discussed getting married, which drew a big laugh from the crowd, of course. But yeah, we knew somehow we had connected on some very primal important level. But what it was was that we were both gay, although it took me a few more years to figure it out.

Q: What was that process like for you to realize that you were gay?

A: Well, I guess when all was said and done, I shouldn't have been that surprised. If you look back on my growing up and my serious tomboy existence, and I never really dated boys in high school and all of that, I didn't understand girls who would go gaga over boys. I never understood that, to this day. No. But yeah, that was — how did it happen? Well, I was working — this was in New York because I moved to New York in '76. And —

Q: With your husband at this point, or —
A: No, no, no. We divorced. We divorced.

Q: Oh, how fast?
A: Three years, three official years. But the marriage was really over after about six months. But — couples counseling, all that, you got to make the effort. But yeah, it wasn't happening. So I moved to New York by myself and was trying to break into the music scene there. And so I was working temp to make enough money to pay the rent and all of that. Well, not too many days after I started, this woman walked through the office and I went, whoa. And then I thought to myself, what was that? What was that feeling?
And then we became friends. She was with a woman. They invited me to their house for dinner, and I was able to ask questions and whatnot, and I can't remember — it maybe was around the same time, this "whoa" thing happened that I was reading the Sunday paper, and in the magazine in the back, there was an ad for "The Joy of Lesbian Sex." And I went, that could be interesting, that could answer a few questions for me. And so I ordered it, and it came in a plain brown wrapper, of course. But as I flipped through that, I went, Oh, oh, oh. And the two things together said, okay, well then there you have it. That's who I am. I came out to myself, I would say, in February of '78. And then I was pretty excited to call Jon, and we wrote letters back and forth as well as calling.

Q: So at that point, you knew he was gay.
A: At that point I knew he was gay.

Q: And so what was that like when you told him?
A: Oh, he was thrilled. I don't think he said anything like, well, I always knew, or why did it take you so long? Or anything like that. He was just genuinely joyous. It was at that point that we figured out, oh, so this is what we're supposed to be to each other, kind of thing. It was kind of an enlightenment moment.

Photograph by Roberta Raeburn

That spring, Jon Sims started a gay community band in San Francisco.

A: Until then, the gay event at the end of June, Stonewall-related, was called a march, not a parade. And it was mainly slogans and angry, and Jon's idea was this event needs some music. And so he put out, I guess in the spring, put up flyers and all that. He got about, I don't know, over a hundred people to come to the first rehearsal. And I mean, it was almost all men.

Q: So he starts pestering you to start a New York band?

A: Oh, yeah. And I fought him. At the time I had just started graduate school at NYU. I remember one thing, it was the very first piece he said, I lifted my arms and gave the downbeat, and it was if there was a collective sigh in the room where everyone said, oh, this is really happening, kind of thing. It was magical. It was magic.

That sold her.

A: So I said, Jon, I can do the artistic part. That's like a no brainer for me, but all the administrative stuff, I said, I don't have the bandwidth to do that and work on my degree as well. So next thing I know he's saying, I want to introduce you to someone. And wouldn't you know, he had found me Bob Wolff, who said, well, I can't do the artistic stuff, but I could do all the administrative stuff. And Bob was fantastic. Bob was salt of the earth. He was very organized. He's very thoughtful.

Q: So what was your first step in recruiting folks?
A: We set up a card table at the top of Christopher Street and did that for several hours every weekend. We realized if we just said to people, come join a gay band, but we didn't have a start date or a rehearsal space, even I saw that that wasn't going to be very successful. We called it the New York Gay Community Marching Band. And again, that came from Jon. I had to laugh at him because he said, Your name is really important. I said, This coming from the person whose organization was named the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps. You're giving me naming advice? [Laughs]

Bob and I were a little innocent, certainly at first, because we thought it was just going to be like, we were going to have rehearsals and we were going to play concerts, and we were going to do little events and parades and things like that, but it was mainly going to be just a music group kind of thing. And by accident, we put the word community in our name, and that really became a focal point of what we did. It gave meaning and purpose to everything that we did. It was one of the things that, maybe not in the very beginning, but it was one of the things that band members cited as reason they joined, or the reason they stayed.
I always said the music had to come first. If you didn't play interesting or good music, then there's no point. That had to come first. And —

NANCY CORPORON, CONT.

Q: You said that. That was your —
A: I said that, yeah. But then you overlay the community service aspect on it to make it really compelling, like I'm doing something good for me and my community. That is a very strong motivator for people. Then I think it always has been all through the history of all the bands.

Q: So going back to starting off, what was it like to hand out flyers on the street for this? What kind of responses did you get from people?
A: It was very positive. We were at the top of Christopher Street, just across the street from the Christopher Street subway station. There were a lot of people said, Oh, I know a friend who used to play trumpet. Can I have a flyer? It was a very successful location for recruitment. I remember a guy came up, saw our signs and stuff. He said, Can you be in the band if you're undecided [on your sexuality]? And our answer for any question like that was, Yes, you can, because we don't discriminate. And that was one of our recruiting mantras. You don't have to be out there, like a card-carrying whatever. You want to come and play music, and you're straight? Great.

Greater GothamBusiness Market, 1979
Photograph by Roberta Raeburn

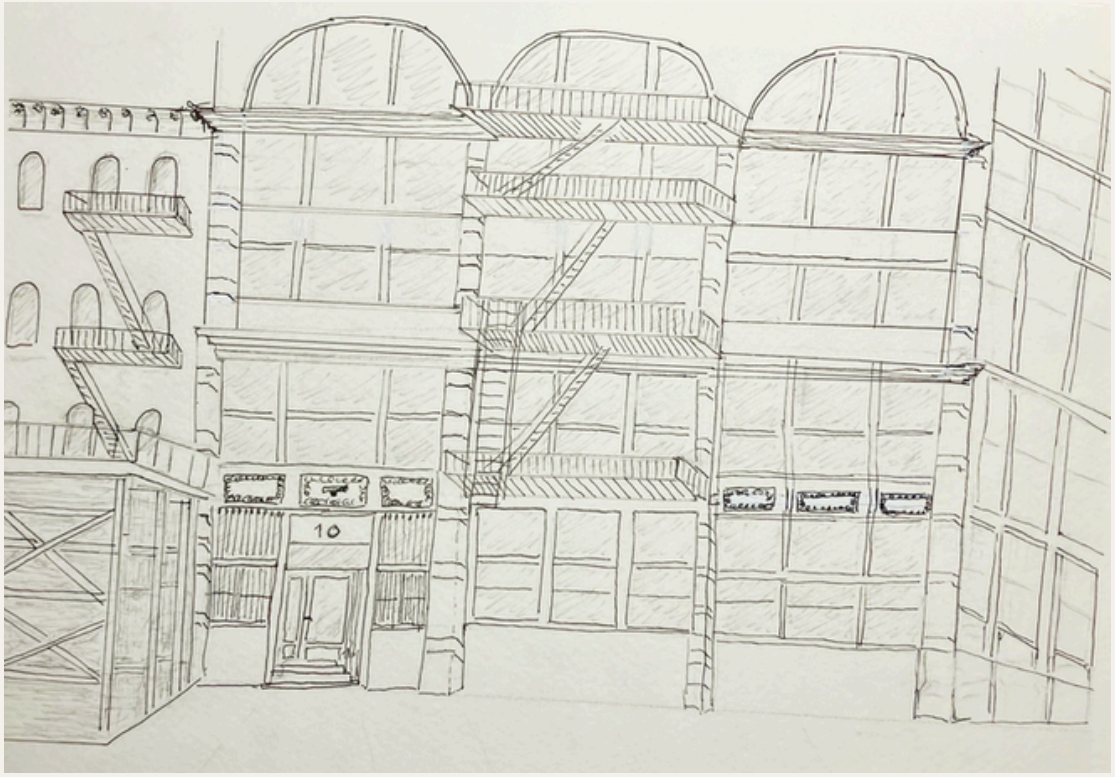
NANCY CORPORON, CONT.

Q: That's still very true.
A: And I think we have to also bring out the fact that this was the late '70s, and gay men and lesbians didn't talk to each other except to scream at each other. And it was an uneven playing field because basically men had means usually, not always. And the women were often less well off. And men had a tendency to try to run women out no matter what organization it was. But here in the band, there was no question, but it was a woman leader. That was me. I was on the podium, and anybody who's ever played in a music group has an automatic deference to the person on the podium.

Photograph by Roberta Raeburn

So that was kind of easy. And they also saw that Bob and I worked together on everything. We were the model for men and women working together, and I think that it made a huge difference. One of the sadnesses in my life about the beginning of the band is that I fell ill before the first rehearsal. I mean, seriously, ill — hepatitis, and I ended up having to go home and stay with my parents for two months. So I missed the first two months of the band. That was a very sad happenstance for me. But on the other hand, I look back and I say, that's a really good sign that people want this group so much that even with change like that, which is kind of seismic, when the person you think is going to be on the podium isn't there. That the band came into existence anyway, without me standing there. So I was — what can I say — proud of the strength of the concept that then I came back after a couple months and things progressed.

Q: Wow. So what was your first rehearsal? What was that like?
A: I remember being excited to be back, and we were rehearsing in Medusa's Revenge, and it was, on purpose, a dark space. It was a basement performance space and very noir as a place, so it wasn't bright and shiny or anything like that.



10 BLEECKER STREET TODAY
former site of Medusa's Revenge

Sketch by A. Gail Bier, November 2025

There's a good picture of the band in Medusa's Revenge after I came back, January of ‘80 or so. I think I'm wearing a top hat, and —

Q: Oh, Jacqui Aquilino sent me that picture. Let me pull it up. [Displays photo]

A: Yeah, that's it! So let's see, there I am. Yeah. And oh my God, I'm just looking at all these people. Wow. All these pictures bring back such memories.

Q: Yeah. What comes up when you see that picture?
A: Well, how did this little band of musicians grow into what it is today? It's just kind of magical. I mean, how did it even happen?
Well it happened because so many people loved the band and loved what we stood for, and loved what we did, and were able to step up in times when the band needed them. The band has been blessed over and over and over again with the right people at the right time, committed. I mean, Bob and I would look at each other. We started this, but look what these people have done with that whole idea. We were in awe of the band. I still am, of course.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

JOE AVENA

By Max Saenz

Q: When did you join the band, or how did you find it?
A: It all started when I was 26 years old. It was 1979, I was trying my best to come out of the closet, and by chance, I was at my first Pride March that June. I stood on the sidelines, and a marcher handed me a flyer to join a gay Catholic group called Dignity NY. A week later I joined, and by the fall, I became their first choir director. Over that summer, I learned there would be a March on Washington [for Lesbian and Gay Rights] in October, so I went with a few members of my Dignity group. There were so many people in DC, and I was like, Oh my God, that many from our community all in one place. I really felt at home, especially listening to Holly Near in the distance singing, “We are gay and lesbian people / And we are singing / Singing for our lives." She was so reassuring and uplifting, it was life affirming.

As I was standing on the sidelines of the march, I heard a marching band coming toward me. Sure enough, the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps came around the corner. I was so jealous, thinking, I cannot believe there's a band like this in San Francisco. It was amazing. A few minutes passed and I heard yet another band coming, and it was the Montrose Marching Band from Houston, Texas! As a true band nerd, I was seething with jealousy.

Returning to NYC on the chartered bus, I was loudly lamenting that New York City didn’t have a band. Somebody yelled out, “Oh, I have a flyer that says New York is starting a band next month.” He offered me the flyer, and I packed it away. At the time, I couldn’t join the band because as the choir director for the Dignity NY group, I had other obligations. Instead, I waited until just after New Years Day 1980. I had just turned 27 and I knew, “It's the New Year and I will join this New York Gay Community Marching Band. It was almost three months since I had heard about the band, so when I joined, they had already started rehearsing, and I missed the first gig. The week that I joined, they had a performance lined up at the Gay Synagogue. I was a great clarinet player, and dove right into my first performance with the band, only five days after I joined!

Q: What was your first rehearsal like with the band?
A: My first rehearsal was on January 7, 1980—just 90 days after the band was formed. That winter, it was perpetually freezing out. When I joined the band, rehearsals were on Monday nights, and as luck would have it, it snowed without fail every Monday. I remember going to my first rehearsal at Medusa's Revenge, which was an underground lesbian club. I soon learned that they used the expression “underground” because they really meant that: This club was literally underground! It was in the subbasement of a building on Bleecker Street, in a dark and unpopular area of Manhattan. As I went down those many steps, I remember thinking, if it gets any deeper, I'll be in another country!

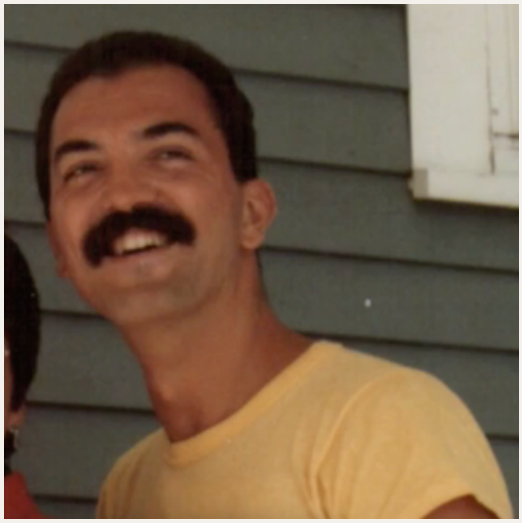
At the bottom of the steps was a large room with an industrial heater on the ceiling—something you would see in a commercial building like Home Depot. I recall that heater was louder than the band! It was a constant battle between the heat or the music. Nancy Corporon was the conductor. She’d turn the heater off and the band would play. We'd stop playing, get ready for the next piece, and she’d put the heat back on.

Nancy spotted me and asked what I played, which was the clarinet, so she told me to get my instrument out and sit over there with the 3rd clarinets. I sat down next to a woman named Jacqui Aquilino. I started talking with Jacqui and her standmate, Minnie, and we quickly warmed up to each other. On my other side was Stan March, who eventually became my best friend for many years, until he died of AIDS in 1990.

Soon the music started. It was a Sousa march and really out of tune, but it didn’t seem to matter because everything about this band suited me perfectly. I was an instant fish in water! When the break came, Marsha Stone came over to welcome me. She played the trumpet and introduced herself with a big smile. Then baritone player Eric Rouda greeted me (he’s still in the band today). He shook my hand, said, “Hi, my name is Eric. Where do you live?” I

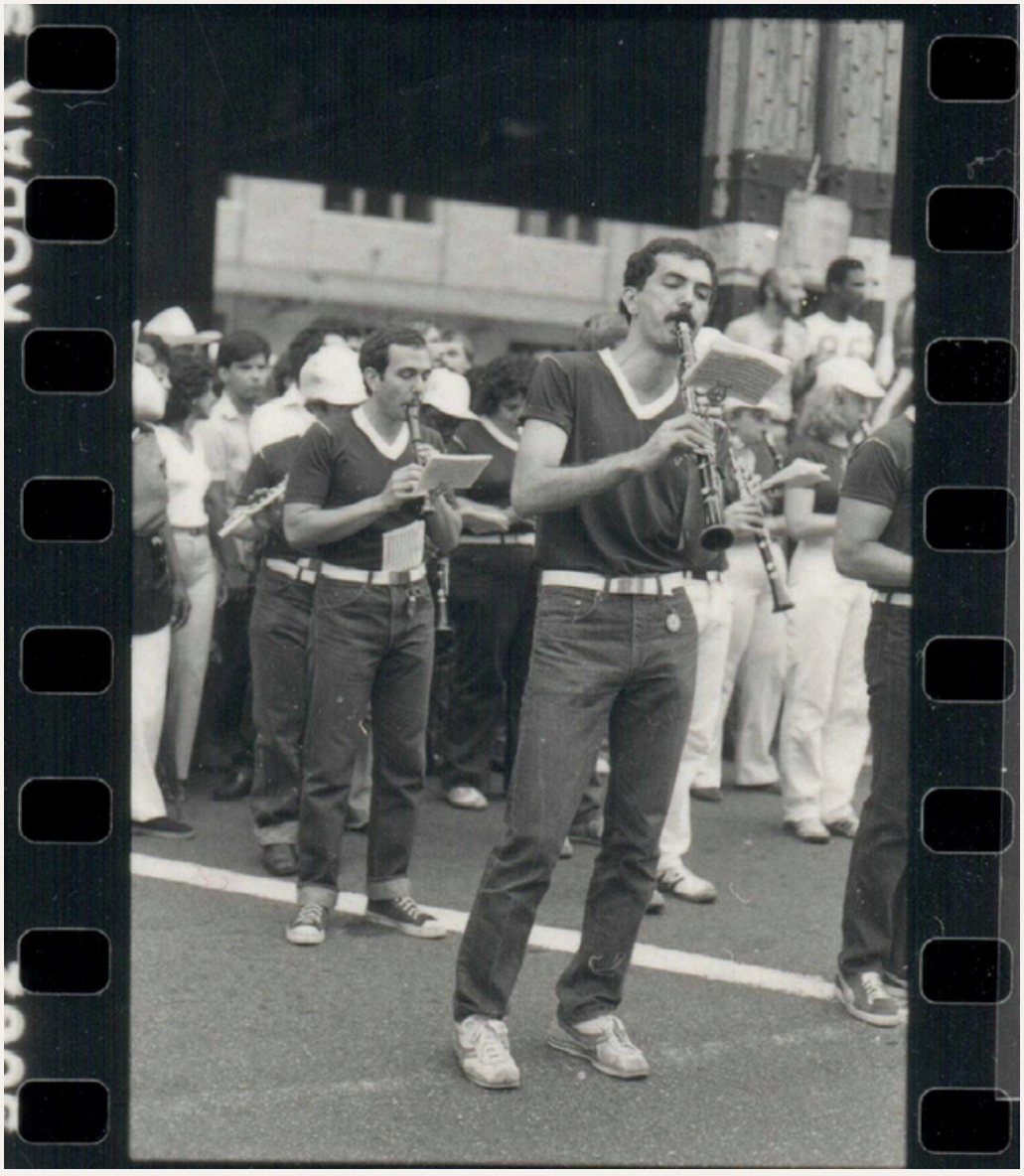
said, “I live in Brooklyn.” He replied, “Well, I live in Brooklyn too. Great. We'll be best friends.” And we were. In fact, we've been very close friends for 46 years now. The same for Jacqui Acquilino, Marsha Stone, Trudy Lundgren, Mark Prokosch, Fran Rosen, Marvin McGowan, Marita Begley, Ana Del Campo—and of course Stan March before he passed away. I've been friends with these people since the very beginning. They have each been an important part of my personal life, still to this day.

Q: What was the culture like in the band in those early years?
A: In the community, gay men and lesbians didn't socialize. There were urban myths about us that prevailed at the time. There was a women's chorus; there was a gay men's chorus; there were women's bars; there were men's bars. But now there was the band—where we sat close together. The band was different. The band was unlike any other organization in the city. The music and the mission drew us in. Whether I was sitting next to a woman or a man, we talked, and if somebody had something fun or interesting to say, I listened. You can't just say, well, I'm not going to laugh because a woman said that. I had a good time with my bandmates, and within a few years, our clarinet section became very close. Once a month we had sectionals that ended with coffee, cake, and lots of chatter. Through those clarinet sectionals, we became a close family. Our camaraderie and respect for one another soon spread throughout the band. It was a very unique experience that one might only find in a family—and that’s exactly what we became, a family.



My boyfriend at the time was in the NYC Gay Men's Chorus. He soon became part of our band family and grew to love all the members he met because he was constantly surrounded by lesbians who loved him back.

The band, for me, and maybe for the city, maybe for the country, was a catalyst to get gay men and lesbians to talk, communicate, and see something in each other beyond whatever the myths on the street were. Our band family broke those boundaries, and I count my blessings every day for finding this incredible organization that has given me a lifetime of friendships I will always cherish.



THE BAND'S FIRST NYC PRIDE MARCH, JUNE 1980

THE STORY OF

MARSHA STONE

By Katerina Watson

When Marsha Stone talks about music, her voice softens into something reverent.

“It kept me off the streets,” she says. “It gave me something to hold onto.”

She’s seventy now, a trumpet player who grew up in East New York, long before Brooklyn became shorthand for trend. “It was a pretty rough area when I was growing up,” she recalls. “Fortunately, music was a part of my school life and my church life.” She joined St. Rita’s Drum and Bugle Corps as a kid, one of those neighborhood programs that took kids off the streets and taught them rhythm, discipline, and pride.

Later, in junior high, when the teacher opened the instrument closet, there wasn’t much left. “I was the tallest kid in the class,” she laughs. “And by the time I got up there, the only thing left was trumpets. So that was that.”
What she doesn’t say right away, but what the rest of her story reveals, is that she was always waiting for another kind of music to begin.

In the 1970s, being gay in New York meant living a double life inside. One that could get you fired from a job, arrested, or beaten up if you slipped up. “I always knew,” Marsha says. “I knew I was gay since I was four years old. Always. And I thought I was the only one.”

There were no gay centers, no rainbow flags in windows, no Ellen or Will & Grace or RuPaul. “Anything you saw about gay people in the media,” she says, “was slit-your-wrist stuff. You were sick. You were bad. It was a crime. Even without anyone telling me, I knew not to tell anybody.”

She found her first small glimpses of community in political circles - the Gay Activists Alliance, the Gay Liberation Front - but even there, she says, “you had to be careful.” The only other safe spaces were the gay bars or Christopher Street. “If I wanted to go and just relax and breathe,” she says, “I’d go there.”

And that’s where the sound found her again.

“I was strolling down Christopher Street one day,” she remembers, “and I think it might’ve been Nancy and Bob handing out flyers about joining a band. I told them, ‘I haven’t played in years.’ And they said, ‘Get your instrument out of the closet.’ I think the flyer even said that.”

She grins. “And that was it. They didn’t care what level of musicianship you had. It was just fantastic.”

The New York Gay Community Marching Band, today the Queer Big Apple Corps, was in its infancy then: a ragtag orchestra of courage and joy rehearsing in a shabby space on Bleecker Street. “It was shitsville,” Marsha says. “It was dangerous in the lower East Side back then. Every Monday night, it rained. Every Monday! It was always so dreary.”

But when she walked into rehearsal, the air changed.

“It was Mecca,” she says. “We had this big heater hanging in the corner that made so much noise we had to turn it off when we played. But it didn’t matter. Because it wasn’t a bar. There was no drinking, no darkness. We got a chance to be normal.”

Normal. For a group of queer musicians in the 1970s, that was radical.

They played Sousa marches from a tattered book, no auditions, no shame. They rehearsed in jeans and maroon T-shirts that read New York Gay Community Marching Band. “Mine is on an AIDS quilt now.”

They weren’t professionals. They were people who had finally found each other.

Sometimes, when the band played in public, danger followed. “We were on display,” she says. “I remember a gig in Elmhurst where we got egged. That’s no big deal, but it was a reminder: we were exposed.” The West Side Massacre, a 1980 attack on gay men at the Ramrod bar, shook them all. “It scared the shit out of us,” Marsha admits. “And I think we always felt an awareness. I won't say a fear because I think we were all pretty fearless.”

They played on. Through prejudice, through loss, through the storm of the AIDS crisis that took so many of their friends. “You know how many of those boys are dead from AIDS?” she says, looking at an old photo. “Yeah. Yeah...” I imagine that, just for a moment, the hum of a heater fills her memory.The same low, steady drone that once rose with the clatter of trumpet valves and the sound of rebellious laughter echoing through a cold, rented room on the Bowery.

Still, when the band played, it sounded like survival.

If there is a single thread that runs through Marsha's story, it's the belief that sound can hold what language can't. She talks about marching in the Pride Parade, trumpet lifted, the band spilling Sousa marches into the hot June air. "Just such a high," she says. "Because I remember marching before there even was a band. I wasn't at Stonewall the night it happened because I was still in high school [but the next day] me and my friend Peter ran down to Christopher Street. And I remember the electric energy around that…it was energizing because people weren't afraid. It was like they let their anger out of the closet. Don't fuck with us."

Years later, when she marched that same street as part of the band, she felt the music vibrating through the pavement, echoing back from the buildings that once hid them. It was like coming full circle.

Even now, decades later, the metaphor of the instrument closet lingers. It's both a joke and a benediction - a reminder of how simple it can be to open something up and let it make noise again. "It was the only thing left," she says of that trumpet all those years ago. But maybe it wasn't what was left. Maybe it was what was waiting.

"Get your instrument out of the closet," the flyer said. And they did. They took themselves out, one note at a time.

They played in T-shirts and jeans, passed hats around in bars to cover rehearsal rent, laughed through fear and rain and heartbreak. They built a city of sound around themselves, brass and breath replacing the bars and walls that once confined them.

In that way, Marsha's trumpet is not just a horn; it's a declaration. It's a survival tool. It's a memory kept alive in metal and air.

She lives in Maine now, playing in a community band where, she jokes, “the director stops a hundred times on four measures.” But her heart is still in those Monday nights on Bleecker Street. The laughter, the heater, the rain. It was family. A place where you didn’t have to drink to feel part of something. You could just show up, open the case, and play. They were a band, sure. But really, they were just trying to make a sound the world couldn’t ignore.

It’s hard to listen to her story without hearing the music underneath it: the hum of defiance in the low brass, the shimmer of connection in the flutes, the steady percussion of marching feet on wet pavement. What began as a few queer New Yorkers clutching secondhand instruments became something much larger - an anthem of presence.

And maybe that’s what she’s been saying all along: that music was never just about notes. It was about the right to make them.

Marsha’s story isn’t just about coming out. It’s about tuning up.

The air of those first rehearsals still lingers somewhere between Bleecker and Bowery, echoing in the hearts of those who marched, those who watched, those who never got the chance.

“Get your instrument out of the closet”, the flyer said.

And she did.

A HALLOWEEN STORY

By Leslie Becker

GREENWICH VILLAGE HALLOWEEN PARADE, 1999

The band has had a long tradition of participating in the Village Halloween Parade, but it has only been since about 2008 that we have been in the front “elite” section. Back in the 80s and 90s we all just showed up in the mayhem with our instruments – percussion and large brass carried our instruments to-and-from rehearsals and gigs as the dream of a truck was still 20 years in our future – and we tried very hard to find each other in a sea of zombies, Raggedy Anns, Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton masks, many princesses and a strangely large number of people dressed as dice. We had a trumpet player at the time who was obsessed (I mean, really obsessed) with playing the charge cheer and the “whinny” effect from Sleigh Ride. He would just play them over and over like a gay band clarion call, beckoning us to join the group. We’d all individually slowly push our way past ghouls and goblins, obeying the “CHARGE” demand until we were all together. It was so very annoying and yet so very effective.

As both the parade and the band grew it became more difficult to participate, so one year we just said feh, never mind and we didn’t register. The parade organizers (such as they were – it was so very disorganized back then) reached out to us asking why we were not marching, so we told them ok, we'll come but you need to pay us. That was our first mistake…oh, they paid us alright (I think the first year it was $100) but that opened up a can of worms! Now we had to march, we were still in the way-back with the riff-raff, but we were committed. So march we did.

Except...one year we showed up at the designated meeting point, and it was such utter pandemonium and chaos. Our then president played snare, but he had to park his car, so he dropped off his drum and left to find parking. While he was gone, our then head (and only) drum major (not Marita – it was during the short time she took off from the band) decided we weren't going to do the parade, it was too dangerous, there were too many people…you get the idea. The list of complaints she rattled off was pretty long. So, the few people who had signed up for the parade just…left.

Remember this was before cell phones so there was no way to tell other members, or the president who left his snare sitting on the curb, that a decision had been made to not march. Some of us showed up for the gig but left not finding anyone at the designated meeting spot. Finally, the president arrived back at the call location having found parking many blocks away, and there sat his drum and carrier, right there on the curb where he left them, without a (then-named) LGBAC member in sight. Not knowing what do to, he put on the drum, marched and played the cadence and each song in the set all the way to the end of the parade and collected the band's check for participating.

So next year as we march up 6th Avenue on October 31st, remember that dedicated president who had no idea where the rest of the band was, but he knew that there was a small check waiting for us at the end of the parade and we needed that money!

WHAT QBAC MEANS TO ME

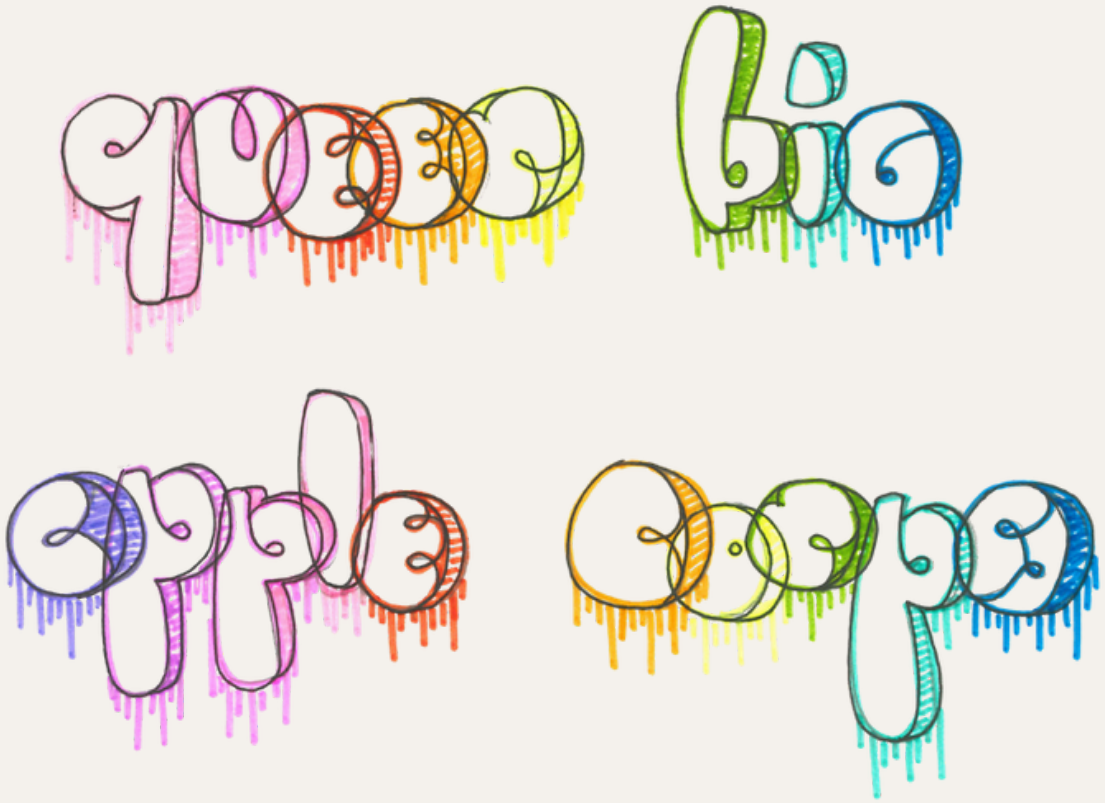
By Anna Oggier

I have just completed my rookie year as a QBAC member and honestly it brought me so much joy and happiness to be doing color guard again.

I was a puppeteer for the Village Halloween parade last year and the band was behind me and I couldn't stop thinking how amazing it would be to do band again. I missed the activity and 2025 came and I decided to JOIN!

Color guard is where I made so many amazing friends and memories.

My fav memory would have to be DC and despite the heat, I had so much fun for World Pride. Everything was amazing and I just had so much fun.



Drawn by Mercedes Li
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MEDUSA'S REVENGE

Issue 1: Overtures

CLARA NETTE , A QBAC DRAG QUEEN!
Drawing by Marina Sneider, November 2025