

# The Sound of the South

## *Creating traditions*

*By Chris Warden*

People who turn 40 often think about middle age and their eventual retirement.

Not so for those affiliated with Troy University's Sound of the South, which reached its 40th year this fall.

"I'm able to be part of creating traditions," said the band's director, Ralph Ford, "and that's exciting."

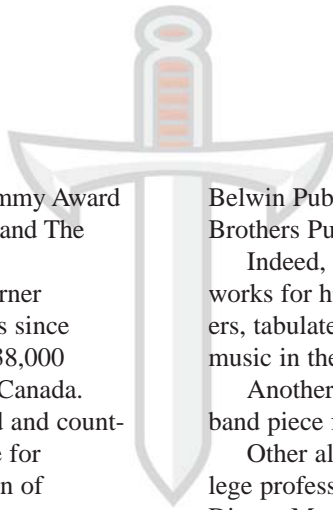
Those traditions are many and nationally recognized. One is exceptional performance.

The Sound of the South has played for halftime audiences of the Peach Bowl, the Senior Bowl and the Blue-Gray Classic.

It has also played for fans of the Atlanta Falcons, Miami Dolphins, New Orleans Saints and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The band was chosen to represent Alabama in four presidential inauguration parades – 1969, 1973, 1984 and 1989.

And eight national television networks – from the big three to cable leaders ESPN and Fox – have featured the Sound of the South.



The band has also performed with Grammy Award winners Brian McKnight, Lee Greenwood and The Temptations.

The band has been featured on the Warner Brothers Marching Band promotional CDs since 1997. These are distributed to more than 38,000 schools throughout the United States and Canada.

There is one person, according to Ford and countless band alumni, who is most responsible for creating and fostering the Sound's tradition of excellence: Dr. John M. Long.

"He was able to create and build something," said Ford. "I'm not filling shoes, I'm standing on shoulders."

The band's first director, Long came to TROY after earning many statewide and regional honors as the band director for Robert E. Lee High School in Montgomery, AL.

One of Long's first acts was to change the band's name. He wanted a name that people could remember and was unique.

It was a title as big as Long's vision for the band. Other bands have used variations of the name – Sound of the Southland, Mighty Sound of the South – but none have come close to the band's success since Long took over.

That tradition of excellence is being spread by the Sound's alumni.

Belinda Wright said she came to TROY as a pre-veterinary medicine student. She had played in her high school band and didn't want to stop playing music.

She hasn't. "After about a year-and-a-half, I changed my major to music education," said Wright (1982).

Wright now directs the band for Reeltown High School in Notasulga.

Wright is one of nearly 400 Sound alumni who have gone on to direct bands, said Ford. Many of them have moved up the ladder to be principals and school board administrators, he added.

Other alumni have pursued successful composing careers. The band's second director, TROY alum Robert W. Smith, left the position in 2001 to concentrate solely on composing.

He wrote for industry leader,

Belwin Publications, and now writes for Warner Brothers Publications.

Indeed, he and Ford each have three original works for high school orchestra in the top eight sellers, tabulated by Belwin, the largest retailer of sheet music in the country.

Another alum, Robert Grice, has the No. 1 selling band piece for elementary school bands.

Other alumni are performers, producers and college professors. One, Allen Gray (1994) produces Disney Magic Music Day, where bands from all over play at Disneyworld.

The alums' success is no accident.

"This band is a challenge," said Neill Youngblood (2008), who came to TROY as a result of the Sound's exhibition performance at the Little Big Horn annual band competition in Opp, AL.

"It's a lot of hard work," agreed James Oliver-Felber (2006). "When you're dying in the 100-degree heat, you have to pull together, support each other." Smith recruited Oliver-Felber after working with him at a summer drum and bugle corps camp.

Attitude is critical, said Long. "but you still have to be able to play."

Wright, and many others, said that attitude came from the top.

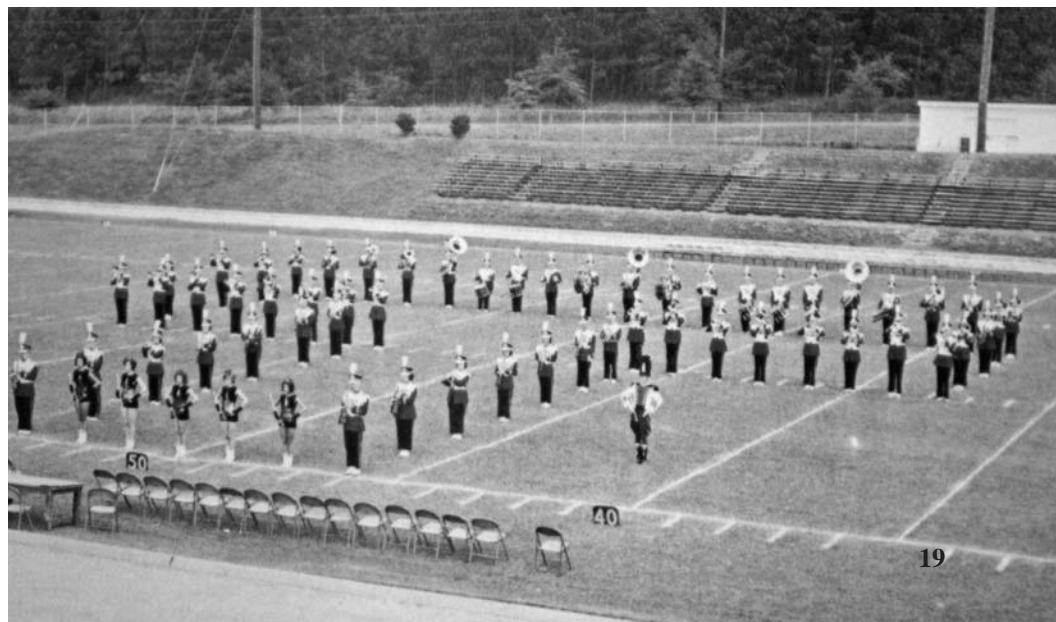
"Dr. Long led by example," Wright said. She said she remembered him talking about building good character. "But it was what he did and the way he did it that stuck with me."

And Ford said he has carried forward what he learned from Long, both as a student and as Long's assistant.

"Students have to feel they have ownership," said Ford, who has been affiliated with the Sound of the South for 20 years. "They have to know that their contribution is important."

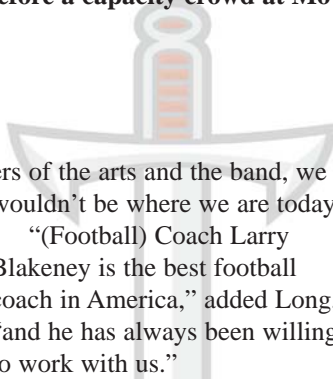
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**The Sound of the South has grown through the years since its beginnings in 1965.**





**The Sound of the South performs before a capacity crowd at Movie Gallery Veterans Stadium during halftime of a TROY football game.**



“I saw early on that we had to help each other,” Oliver-Felber said. “If we didn’t, we wouldn’t have as good a product.”

Youngblood and many other alums used the word family to describe the band. “This is where you find your closest friends,” said Youngblood.

Long prefers to talk about other people when it comes to the Sound’s success. He said the band owes a great deal to Ralph Adams and current Chancellor Jack Hawkins, Jr.

“It wouldn’t have mattered what we did,” said Long. “If they hadn’t been such strong support-

ers of the arts and the band, we wouldn’t be where we are today.

“(Football) Coach Larry Blakeney is the best football coach in America,” added Long, “and he has always been willing to work with us.”

Still, it is Long who set the high standards for the band today. When Long retired in 1996, the alumni who came back to honor him “filled the whole football field,” said Oliver-Felber.

A similar turnout is expected at Homecoming, Nov. 5, when the band’s 40th anniversary will be celebrated.

Long said he’s excited about this year’s band and the celebration. Most years, he says, he can’t always tell at the beginning of the year how the band is going to be.

Long: “I would tell people who asked about the band: ‘I don’t know about that but I can tell you one thing. We are going to show up.’”

But as its history reveals, the band has done more than just show up. “It’s brought quality music to all the people,” said Long. “They’re going to hear a good band.”

“When you play quality music, you play it well and people are always going to like it,” said Ford.

“And I know we’ve all done our job,” Ford added, “when somebody comes up to me and says, ‘Man, the band was great.’”

People have been saying that to the Sound of the South now for 40 years.

It is the Sound of the South’s greatness that is its finest tradition.

*Warden is a professor in Troy University’s Hall School of Journalism.*

## And the band plays on ...

Many Sound of the South alumni remain active in the field of music, pursuing careers as artists, composers and directors. Some of those accomplished alums include:

- \* Dr. Marc Dickman, 1982 graduate, “A Weaver of Dreams” jazz CD
- \* Shane Porter, MS in 2000, leader and writer for New South Orchestra
- \* Chad Fisher, current student, trombonist “The Chad Fisher Group”
- \* Robert W. Smith, composer “The Odyssey: The Symphonic Music of Robert W. Smith, Vol. 3”
- \* Allen Gray, 1991 graduate, owner of Matrix and Jalen Publishing
- \* William Hickman (1965), Paschal Ward (1970), Oliver Boone (1979), Harold Blakenhip (1979) and Vincent Rosse (1984) are members of the National High School Band Directors Hall of Fame, along with TROY Associate Professor George Corradino.