
by Joseph G. Flynn and Harry P. Jenkins

Blue Rock . . . the name conjures an image to those who witnessed this great corps in action. Anyone who was ever involved with the corps, in whatever capacity, knew they were part of something special.

Those among us who were fortunate to have worn that uniform of gold and black knew the magic that was Blue Rock. Many corps can measure their success by pointing to their trophy case and “the Rock” certainly earned its rightful share of trophies. But another success, difficult to describe even by those who experienced it, is the Blue Rock mystique.

Many corps seek an identity; some find theirs, some never do. Blue Rock had one others envied, many sought, but few attained. It electrified the atmosphere with an air of dignity and class that transcended the definition of drum and bugle corps.

Blue Rock was founded in 1958 in Wilmington, DE, and Penns

Blue Rock



Blue Rock, 1966, at the American Legion Nationals Prelims in Washington, D.C. (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

a national caliber drum corps could be developed almost anywhere. Doing so would take more than seven years.

Until 1966, Blue Rock was primarily a local corps. Dominant in the South Jersey circuit, Blue Rock consistently placed near the top of the annual New Jersey State Championships, but was unable to crack the top echelon of the nationally ranked North Jersey corps including Garfield, St. Lucy's and Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights.

The 1966 season marked Blue Rock's first appearance at finals of a national contest, placing sixth at the World Open. A narrated recording from that summer comments that

the corps was seen as ushering in a new era for drum corps, “not one of loud, brassy sounds, but of music and dignity.”

That season also marked the beginning of a consolidation of drum corps in the region, with Blue Rock absorbing members from corps in Maryland, southern New Jersey and southeastern

Pennsylvania. By 1968, the corps' growing success was drawing members from as far south as Washington, D.C., and as far north as northern New Jersey.

A small staff of volunteers provided instruction for the early years. Brass arrangements were handled by member Larry Kerchner, who went on to arrange for some of the finest junior and senior corps in the nation and later won a Grammy. Sciarra handled percussion arrangements and instruction, as well as drill design and instruction.

By 1967, Blue Rock was being more widely recognized as a competitive “threat” on the national level. Achieving finals at the VFW Championships for the first time, the corps placed seventh and was the highest-scoring East Coast corps present.

Still unable to consistently crack the top echelon of the North Jersey powerhouses, Blue Rock nonetheless had closed the gap and was considered one of the top corps of the “second tier” that included such names as St. Joseph's of Batavia and the 27th Lancers.

That year also featured the origins of what became legend in the drum corps world: *Baby Elephant Walk*. (Interestingly, the piece was introduced mid-season as a replacement for the failed *Music of Dragnet*.)

In what started as a prank, contra bass player Bob Sanna inserted a French horn mouthpiece into his contra and blew an “elephant call” while the corps was playing the piece. Sciarra stormed over and wanted to know who had done it and then wanted to

hear it again. With this, the “baby elephant” was born. As the tradition continued, Chuck Quackenbush gained fame as Blue Rock's “elephant” and the musical piece, in its



Blue Rock at a Christmas Circus contest at the New York Coliseum, December 20, 1962 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Grove, NJ. Oddly enough, Blue Rock's origins were as a senior corps. But with the other well-established seniors such as the Archer-Epler Musketeers and Reilly Raiders in Philadelphia and the Yankee Rebels in Baltimore, the new corps from Delaware was unable to establish a foothold.

In 1960, Blue Rock re-emerged as a junior corps. Founder Dominic “Ted” Sciarra had a vision for the new corps. Having grown up on Manhattan's Lower East Side in the area known as “Hell's Kitchen,” he learned to drum in the Grand Street Boys during the 1930s and was one of the original New York Skyliners. Sciarra firmly believed that with the right direction, attitude and instruction,



Blue Rock, 1969 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

many variations, remained part of the corps' repertoire through the rest of its history.

Also in 1968, the corps achieved its first national title at the premier U.S. Open. The horn line was strong in 1968, remaining nearly undefeated against all eastern competition. This is credited, in large part, to the addition of Elmer "Red" Winzer as brass instructor. While Kerchner continued to write the charts for another year, Winzer was responsible for the instruction that took the corps through its best years. The 1968 season ended with Blue Rock again finishing seventh at VFW in Detroit.

The 1969 season began slowly, but quickly improved with significant changes to their



Blue Rock, 1972 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

both exciting and colorful in its execution."

The corps finished the season in eighth place at VFW in Philadelphia. Besting a number of the top East Coast corps, Blue Rock's impressive performance laid the groundwork for the remainder of the 1969 season as two weeks later the corps was named the New Jersey American Legion State Champion for the first time.

The 1970 season was significant with the formation of the United Organization of Eastern Corps, a precursor to Drum Corps

corps of the 1960s.

Recognizing the corps needed new blood to successfully progress into a new age of drum corps, the man who had founded and directed the corps through its first 10 years handed the reigns to Larry Seeney.

Almost immediately, Ralph Pace and John Worstell were brought on staff as marching instructors and designers to finish out the season. Their enthusiasm and approach effected an immediate turnaround and, in early September, Blue Rock successfully defended their New Jersey American Legion State Championship, defeating several corps that only weeks before had placed in the upper echelon at VFW.

The 1971 edition is remembered among drum corps fans as one of the finest shows of all time. The design and instructional team



Blue Rock, 1972 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

show. An article in a July issue of *Drum Corps News* read, "Blue Rock sprung a surprise in Clifton, NJ, with what appeared as a crisp new M&M from off-the-line to concert. It was daring in its concept and

International. A founding member of UOEC, Blue Rock began the season on top of the East Coast with a victory at the early season "Preview of Junior Champions" in Bridgeport, CT, and remained on top of all eastern corps through late July.

Whether it was a matter of peaking too soon or failure to improve significantly through the season, Blue Rock failed to capitalize on its early season success and dropped consistently in placements throughout August. The corps finished a disappointing 11th at VFW Nationals.

More significantly, the VFW show marked the end of Sciarra's tenure. Always successful in marching training, the corps' drill design had become somewhat stale and dated by the 1970 season. Times were also changing in terms of instructional technique. Teens responded less positively to the more militaristic, physical discipline that was typical of



Blue Rock, 1970 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

consisted of two future Hall of Fame members -- drill writer Pace and drum line arranger and instructor Joe Marrella -- along with brass arranger and instructor Winzer.

In a year when "total show concept" became popular, Blue Rock maintained its "variety show" style, with little concern given to tying together the various pieces of its program. Even so, the corps was not immune to the idea of props, which were making an entry into the world of drum corps for the first time.

The addition of a bright pink baby elephant head, trunk and all, draped over the bell of a contra bass during the ever-popular *Baby Elephant Walk* and the use of horse heads on the ends of flag poles to simulate ponies during *Camptown Races* won positive



Blue Rock, 1974 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Blue Rock, June 17, 1972 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

reviews from fans and the judges.

Blue Rock won the first major show of 1971, CYO Nationals, by nearly three points. Two nights later, with a different judging panel, the corps dropped to fourth place at the World Open.

The corps found itself the victim of two-point American Flag penalties twice during the season, both at major shows. At the "Shriners International" in Toronto, this penalty dropped the corps from first to fourth, and at the National Dream the penalty dropped the corps to second.

Summer 1971 ended with a second-place finish at VFW Prelims, dropping to fourth place at finals. The drum line, however, won the coveted national champion drum trophy, garnering what was then the highest score ever earned in the caption. The corps went on to defend its New Jersey American Legion State Championship for the final time.

The 1972 season started with a sense of energy and renewal. Coming off the corps' most successful season, all indicators pointed to another growth year. The entire staff from 1971 was back and, while the corps had suffered a significant turnover in membership from age-outs, recruiting had been successful and Blue Rock would field a full corps.

Deciding to retain the bulk of the program from 1971, the staff made only minor changes to the musical

selections and drill. Whether this was the right decision is debatable. The excitement of the award-winning show was muted the



(Above) Blue Rock, 1971, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Blue Rock, 1966, at American Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C. (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



second time around. Other corps, particularly those from the West Coast, had begun to make the move toward more professional music training and show concepts, something that Blue Rock had failed to adapt to at the time.

Two significant events occurred in 1972. First, Pace resigned. Second, the year marked the beginning of a financial decline. Never having been on a solid financial base, the corps experienced significant money issues as it struggled to maintain its national ranking.

While the corps continued to do well competitively, placing fourth at CYO Nationals and the U.S. Open, financial matters deteriorated to the point that funds were not available to travel to Whitewater, WI, for the first DCI event in 1972.

The decision to withdraw from DCI was a big disappointment to the members and fans. Based on the season's results, a spot in finals was almost assured and, most likely, Blue Rock would have placed in the top seven or eight. Unfortunately, the decision also resulted in additional financial strain as DCI fined the corps \$1,000 for failure to appear.

The corps struggled to regroup for 1973. Once again, recruitment went well and the corps was ready for the season. The only staff members remaining from 1971 were Winzer and Worstell. Blue Rock alumnus Lou Davis taught the drum line.

The season began disappointingly, with a rude awakening as to the long road of hard work that lay ahead. With Winzer's resignation, corps alumnus Mike Dennis would finish the season as brass instructor.

The corps never recovered from its early season struggles and continued to be challenged throughout the year, finishing 23rd at the DCI Championships, barely edging out the all-girl Audubon Bon-Bons.

The 1974 season started with a lot of promise and an entirely new instructional staff that included Doug

Denisen (St. Paul Scouts and Argonne Rebels) on brass, Gerry Shelmar (Boston Crusaders) on drums and George Lindstrom (Kilties) on drill. Though a well-written and well-designed show, it was extremely challenging to the members at this point and took most of the season to gel.

The decision was also made to make a West Coast tour, the first of its kind by any modern East Coast corps. Plagued by transportation problems almost from the start, the trip was disastrous, both competitively and financially.

The corps managed to regroup in time for the DCI Championships at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, finishing 14th and missing finals by less than two points.

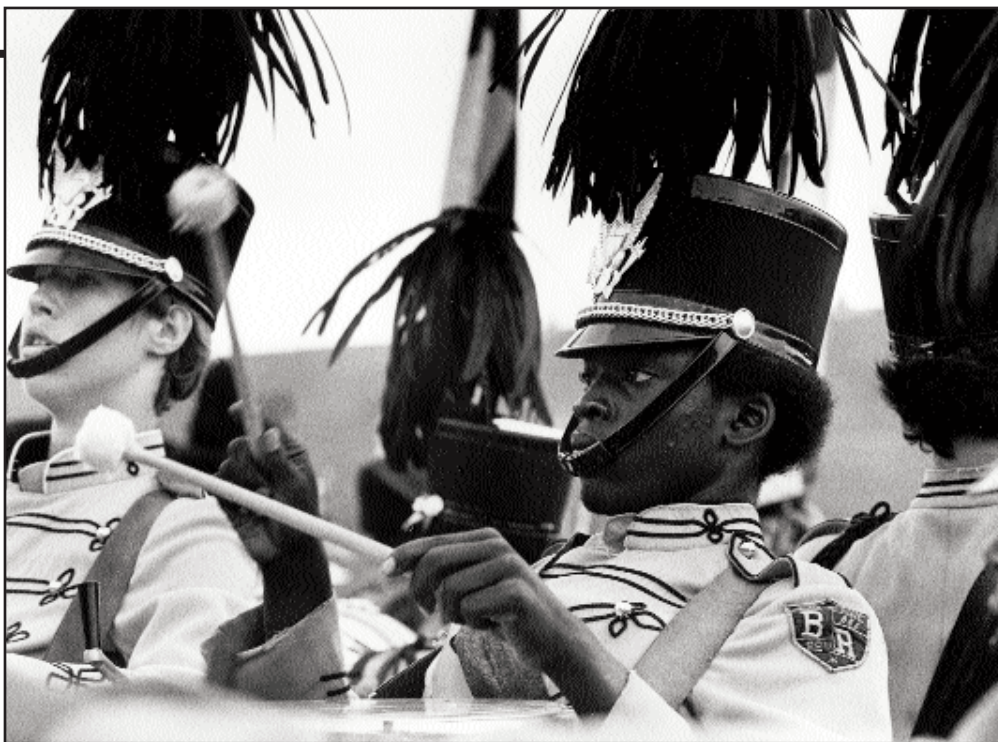
Beyond all of this, though, was the impact on the members. By the end of the 1974 season, corps morale was so poor that fewer than a dozen or so members returned to begin the 1975 season.

In January 1975, management met and decided to pull the corps from the field for the upcoming season in hopes of regrouping financially and from a recruiting standpoint.

When this announcement was made to the remaining members, it led to a takeover by a group of parents inexperienced in the workings of drum corps and resulted in the resignation of the management team.

So 1975 saw the corps leave the junior ranks and move into Drum Corps Associates and senior corps. Playing music from the corps' junior era, it was an effort to keep the program alive. It was doomed to failure due to ongoing financial issues. The corps folded forever following the 1975 season.

Blue Rock will be remembered by its fans as a special corps that brought a special



Blue Rock, 1973, at the DCI Championships in Whitewater, WI (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

magic to the field. The music of Blue Rock will be played on recordings for years to come. Memories of the class of Blue Rock's well-known drum majors, Betty Ann Long and Vicki Drummond, will last a lifetime.

As co-writers of this brief history of Blue Rock, with a tenure spanning from 1963 through early 1975, it is difficult, even now, nearly 30 years later, to write this eulogy. But we're sure that the late "Ted" Sciarra would be proud to know that people remember and care enough to preserve the memories for those of us who knew -- who still know -- the magic of Blue Rock.

At a formal reunion dinner in 1989, an

item in the program read, "In the beginning was the word *and*. Perhaps all stories should begin with the word *and*. Perhaps they should end with the word *and*, too.

It would remind us that no experience ever begins by itself and that there was always something that preceded it. At the end, the word *and* would remind us that no story really ever ends; something more will happen after. There is always more to start with than we can take into account. There is always something more to end with than we can imagine."

And then there was Blue Rock.



Joseph "Gerry" Flynn joined Blue Rock's feeder corps, the Vanguard, in 1963 and moved up to Blue Rock in 1966 where he remained until the end of the 1974 season. Since that time, he has remained active in the pageantry activity and is the founder and director of Paradigm Winter Guard from Lake City, FL.

He also serves as webmaster for the Blue Rock Alumni Web site at www.blurock.us.



Harry Jenkins started in drum corps in 1960 at the age of 10, marching in Blue Rock 1966- 1971. He continued on staff from 1972-1974. In 1976, he moved to Arizona and served in management and instructional roles with Sun Country Wranglers and the Arizona Musketeers. He has judged marching and visual design for winter guards, marching bands and drum corps in Arizona, Colorado and California.

Returning East in 1987, he marched in the Yankee Rebels Alumni and helped found the Blue Rock Alumni Association and Scholarship Fund and is now the president.



Blue Rock, 1973, at the DCI Championships in Whitewater, WI (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).