


Spirit of Atlanta

by Mark Whisenant

Established in the fall of 1976, Spirit Drum and Bugle Corps was the creation of brothers Freddy Martin, a successful suburban Atlanta band director, and his wife, Lynda. That summer, they and Bob Hoehn partnered with a local network television affiliate to realize their dream of an Atlanta area junior drum and bugle corps.

The original corporate vision of the organization included new drum and bugle corps across the country, wherever sister television stations to the one in Atlanta were based. This dream was short-lived and, in fact, Spirit was on its own by 1979.

The members of the new organization participated in a contest to name their corps and so it was dubbed Spirit of Atlanta in

While "Southern Jazz" was the label applied to Spirit's books from these early years, the real Spirit style was an emotional performance level which transcended genre.

In 1978, Spirit placed an amazing sixth at the DCI Championships, missing the brass title by only 0.05. The 1979 season saw Spirit in fourth and, in 1980, another fourth-place finish (less than a point from the champions) produced a tie for the drum title.

By the rules of the day, the drum trophy was presented to the Bridgemen based on a general effect score.

In a tragedy that echoes to this day, Jim Ott was killed in 1980 while on tour with Spirit. His memory is still revered in the Spirit organization and the corps proudly continues to play his concert music.

The 1981 and 1982 seasons witnessed Spirit proudly in the top 12 and new



Spirit

early 1977.

That first year was a mish-mash of styles as the corps sought its identity, but a respectable 23rd-place finish at the Drum Corps International Championships in Denver, CO, was achieved (there were many more corps in those days). Freddy Martin was corps director, a position he held through the 1993 season.

Indeed, for those 26 years, the story of Spirit was the story of the Martin family. Freddy assumed creative and organizational leadership in those years and only someone who has done that job can know what it entails. Lynda ran the organization behind the scenes. Older son Christopher, now the principal trumpet for the Atlanta Symphony, toured coast to coast with Spirit as a pre-schooler. Chris won soprano individuals in 1993 as a marching member of the corps. Son Michael was a soprano soloist in 2000.

Interestingly, given future developments, Spirit, from the very beginning, had a significant membership base from Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, AL, 100 miles to the west.

After that season, Spirit management hired two established caption heads -- Jim Ott from the Blue Devils for brass and Tom Float from the Oakland Crusaders for drums -- and veteran Spirit staff member Dave Bandy for visual, who combined with Freddy Martin to form an amazing staff that moved Spirit right to the top of the activity.

traditions took hold that lifted the corps again. Mike Back took over the drum caption, continuing for nine years, and his influence was felt by a generation of Spirit of Atlanta drummers.

Along with Jim Clark and Brad Caraway, they formed a management nucleus which allowed Spirit of Atlanta to "grow up" into a mature organization whose hallmark is survival.

Spirit rose again to the top 12 in 1983 and 1984 and, under the leadership of the beloved, late Tam Easterwood, Sal Salas



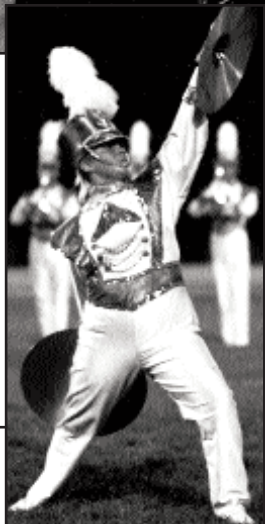
Spirit of Atlanta at DCI Midwest prelims in Whitewater, WI, 1978 (photo by Wilson Leong).

and Scott Chandler, invented a new powerhouse guard that won Spirit of Atlanta's first acknowledged caption title in 1985.

In 1986, Spirit had been one of the most competitive corps of the 1980s and another guard title followed in 1987. Excepting a heartbreaking 1989 season, Spirit made the top 12 every year of the 1980s.

Spirit saw a top-12 finish with 1990's

(Top to bottom) Special artwork designed by Atlanta artist Jeff Gundlach for the corps' inaugural season in 1978; the 1980 corps (photo by Dave Page); two members pose before their 1987 finals appearance at DCI in Madison, WI (Orlin Wagner); the 1989 corps at a show in early July (photo by Ed Ferguson). All photos in this article are from the collection of *Drum Corps World*.



"Gone With the Wind" theme. That placement was not to be repeated in the 1990s, despite several popular shows, including their 1991 offering of "Glory."

In 1994, Martin, director since 1976, departed and a new management team took over. The organization didn't field a corps in 1994, but returned to competition in 1995, smaller, but still alive. After a rough season in 1996, both competitively and organizationally, the 1997 through 1999 seasons were ones which helped rebuild the corps while performing enjoyable shows instantly recognizable as typical Spirit productions.

In 2000, while the corps was using



The 1984 Spirit of Atlanta at the hometown DCI Championships in Atlanta (photo by Orlin Wagner).

Jacksonville State University for badly-needed rehearsal sites, the organization brushed with disaster when management sought, in an early-June surprise, to fold the corps.

Dedicated alumni, staffers and parents, including founding director Freddy Martin, came together and took the corps on tour. The members saw a 30-point improvement in score over the course of the season, for a respectable finish at the DCI Championships in College Park,



A radical uniform change saw the delta dropped in 1981, here at the DCI Championships in Montreal (photo by Dale Eck).

MD.

The parties responsible for saving the organization forged a formal relationship with JSU after the 2000 tour and the corps came out in 2001 as Spirit from Jacksonville State University to place 13th at DCI in Buffalo, NY.

In 2002, the dreams of so many



More white on the uniform, including white shoes, gave a bright look to the 1990 Spirit of Atlanta at Montclair, NJ (photo by Dale Eck).

involved came true and Spirit found its way back into the Saturday night show at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI, on the occasion of DCI's 30th anniversary.

The revitalized organization, under director Ken Bodiford, director of bands at JSU, now enjoys a bright future.

Spirit has traveled the long road from upstart, to competitive greatness, then struggle, survival and rebirth. All those involved are proud and humbled to take their organization again on the path of success and service to youth.



Spirit at the 1985 DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Orlin Wagner).

In addition to many Spirit of Atlanta members and staff who helped provide information, I would like to particularly acknowledge the help of Alan Armstrong in putting this material together.

Mark Whisenant was a charter member of Spirit and marched contra bass bugle in 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981. He toured in 1982 and 1983 on the support staff.



He is a longtime employee of Delta Air Lines in the Information Technology division.

Whisenant is active in the Spirit of Atlanta Alumni Association and his wife, Nora Bierce Whisenant, marched cymbals for Spirit in 1978, 1979 and 1980, and is president of the alumni association.

Son Aaron is five and likes drum sticks and guard rifles.

(Top) The 1993 version of Spirit of Atlanta (photo by Sid Unser); (middle) another major uniform change for the corps during the late 1990s (David Rice); (bottom) back to the traditional look for 2002 (David Rice).

