

A Look Back

An interview with former Spirit of Atlanta caption head Mike Back

BY GENE FAMBROUGH

For the better part of the 1980s, a prominent name in the area of marching percussion was Mike Back. Mike was percussion arranger and caption head for the Spirit of Atlanta drum and bugle corps from 1982–90, when the corps enjoyed the most success and stability. Along the way, hundreds of percussionists were fortunate to fall under his guidance, in turn sharing his teaching methods with thousands of high school and college students throughout many parts of the country.

Even under the rigors of summer touring, Mike remained one thing above all else: a teacher. There were certainly times when the percussion section needed to be pushed, but he always did so using the most constructive methods possible. One thing that impressed me was at some point during a tour, he would pull a week or two of marathon practice sessions on the bus (after the shows), just to make sure his hands were in shape. He was intent on being a model player for all of his students. Earning his undergraduate degree in Music Education from Morehead State University, he was one of the true teachers in the activity and an inspiration to those who knew him.

To be sure, many of his former students who are now teachers themselves have modeled their curriculum in part through his influence. As a member of the Spirit of Atlanta percussion section under Mike Back, all members received a copy of “The Book”—a compilation of exercises that would challenge anyone both physically and mentally. Parts of the 92-page manuscript still find their way into my own studio class from time to time. He also found time to experiment with electronic percussion and MIDI triggering with his high school drumline—certainly a unique approach in the late ’80s and early ’90s.

Mike’s highest achievement with the Spirit of Atlanta percussion section came

in 1984 at DCI finals, when the line came in third place in field percussion and fourth place in total percussion. This success did not go unnoticed; his line was featured in the summer 1987 issue of *Modern Percussionist* (Vol. III, No. 3) in an 8-page article by Lauren Vogel, and he was selected as the featured marching percussion clinician at PASIC ’89 in Nashville.

Mike has been teaching at Walton High School in Marietta, Georgia for 20 years. He was hired as the assistant band director in 1985 and became band director in 1999. His involvement with Spirit started in 1979 as a marching member, followed by two years on percussion staff under Tom Float before serving as caption head for nine seasons. These two career paths further demonstrate Mike’s character: stability and loyalty.

Gene Fambrough: *Why did you decide to join Spirit of Atlanta?*

Mike Back: I was marching in a small corps from my hometown, the Golden Knights [from Southgate, Kentucky]. I had marched there for three years, but I really wanted to march in a top corps. A friend of mine was going to Atlanta to audition for Spirit, and I decided to go with him.

GF: *What do you remember most about marching under Tom Float?*

MB: I have a lot of great memories from the year that I marched [1979]. Tom was a great teacher; he pushed us to work very hard and he made drumming a lot of fun. Another thing I learned from him was to get a deeper understanding of playing; it wasn’t just about the physical aspects of playing, but the mental aspect of learning and understanding the way rhythms are constructed and put together. Of course, having a better understanding of these aspects helped us to play better as a line.



Mike Back

GF: *What were your thoughts when you were first hired as caption head?*

MB: Like anybody going into a job for the first time, I was apprehensive, but excited as well. I had taught with Tom for two years [1980–81] and was excited for the opportunity to carry on what he had started with the Spirit of Atlanta percussion section. My first year, I tried not to make too many changes; I tried to do things the way they had been set up under Tom’s leadership for the past several years.

GF: *Of all the years you taught, which line was the most talented?*

MB: That is hard to say. We had a lot of great players in the percussion section the years I was teaching Spirit. Perhaps the highest achieving might have been the ’84 line. Many of those guys had been together for three years, and they had really learned how to play

well together and did a great job at 1984 Finals.

GF: *What was your favorite Spirit show from your perspective as percussion arranger?*

MB: It would be hard to pick an absolute favorite. One that stands out, though, from a writing standpoint is the year we did Gershwin's "Concerto in F" [1985]. It was a complete departure from what we were used to doing. It really challenged me as a writer but I really enjoyed doing something different.

GF: *What was the best overall performance by Spirit during your tenure?*

MB: I think 1986 was probably our finest show during my tenure teaching Spirit.

GF: *During your time as caption head, who were some other percussion arrangers whose work you enjoyed?*

MB: I continue to enjoy Tom [Float]'s work, I've always felt that he did a great job with writing, and I love what he did with the Blue Devils once he went out there. I always enjoyed the work of Fred Sanford as well; even before I started marching with Spirit, I followed the Santa Clara Vanguard and really enjoyed what Fred did. In fact, my first year as caption head, our corps director, Freddie Martin, allowed

me to have Fred come in as a consultant. He spent some time with us in the early part of that year and I was able to learn quite a lot from him. I also really enjoyed what Thom Hannum did during his years with the Cadets. He always did a great job of writing and helped expand the role of the pit, bringing more concert instruments onto the field.

GF: *What were your thoughts on the change from the "tick" system to the current judging setup of rewarding positive achievement?*

MB: I remember when this change was going into effect, and a lot of people were very worried. I have to say that I don't see any ill effects of not having the tick system. The performances these days are just incredible and the players just keep getting better and better, so I don't think there has been a downside to not having the tick system.

GF: *Did the change from plastic to Kevlar heads affect writing at all?*

MB: I don't think the Kevlar head changed my writing that much. It obviously changed the playing a great deal.

GF: *What was the impetus behind developing "The Book" of exercises?*



Spirit of Atlanta, 1989: "The Interstellar Suite" by Amin Bhatia. Notice the "pony" bass drums with tom mounted on top.

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are you in?

MB: We had a fairly large book that we gave the students that included all the exercises from our technique program. When I first came to audition for Spirit, I was introduced to many new exercises that I had never seen or heard before. I immediately wrote them down so I would remember them. When I became caption head, I felt that if the students had these exercises written down, they could learn them more effectively. Also,

relating back to some things I learned from Tom, many of the exercises were intended to help students with the mental aspects of playing, rather than just focusing on the physical aspect of drumming.

GF: *Since leaving DCI, what changes in the activity have you noticed?*

MB: One of the biggest changes is show construction; the show concepts seem to

be a lot more involved. When I was involved with the activity, we would just put together some tunes that we liked; the songs didn't have to have too much of a connection. These days, the themes of the shows are a lot stronger.

In terms of percussion, the playing just keeps getting better and better. It's amazing to me the types of rhythms that the lines are playing these days. The level of musicianship is also much

MIKE BACK'S INFLUENCE ON THOSE HE TAUGHT

As one of my earliest teachers, Mike Back had a very strong influence over my early development as a performer, future teacher, and as a person. My two years performing with the Spirit of Atlanta gave me a strong foundation as a percussionist and greatly aided me in my future studies. As I have gotten older, I realize how much my current teaching style comes from Mike's influence. I still use many of the same approaches, exercises, and concepts we used in Spirit.

One particular lesson comes to mind. Mike taught me that dwelling on mistakes during a performance will not help you; evaluating them afterwards will. I can't offer enough thanks to Mike for his great teaching and the role model he offered to all of us.

Brian West, DMA
Assistant Professor of Percussion
Texas Christian University

When I joined Spirit of Atlanta in 1987 I was obviously a "weak link." Mike understood my unrealized potential. He pushed me to the edge, but always knew when to pull back. Mike taught me a responsibility to myself, my fellow musicians, and to the audience. His positive influence will always be a part of me and I will always be grateful for his leadership, patience, and kindness.

Blake Tyson, DMA
Assistant Professor of Percussion
The University of Central Arkansas

Mike Back exemplifies everything truly wonderful about experiencing a great teacher. Mike was my instructor for the 1982 drum corps season when I was a member of the Spirit of Atlanta

playing snare. The one constant and consistent element of that season was Mike's firm, gentle, supportive, and persistent guidance in compelling that percussion section to achieve what it ultimately did. We all became better players and performed better as an ensemble. And along the way we had a gentleman model for us the very highest levels of character and integrity. Beyond the rudiments, beats, and whatever it was we did as drummers, seeing such a great teacher teach well and in such a positive and constructive way was what I remember most about Mike Back.

Neal Flum
Assistant Director of Athletic Bands
The University of Alabama

I was greatly influenced by Mike Back's dedication to teaching, at Spirit as well as in his public school positions. Mike communicated his ideas to students of many levels, and got great results from his groups. My experience with Mike at Spirit helped me greatly in my first college jobs—dealing with drumlines—and beyond.

Ken Broadway, DMA
Associate Professor of
Percussion Studies
The University of Florida

It is difficult to say in just a few short sentences how Mike Back has influenced my life. I first met Mike when I was auditioning for Spirit in 1980. I played in the Spirit drumline under Mike from 1981–85. I would have to say first and foremost, Mike Back is a great person. Mike was always positive and supportive during my days with the corps, and I learned a lot from him. But that was not Mike's only influence on me and my career. In 1992 I had the fortune of student teaching at Walton High School. I once again learned so much from Mike, both musi-

cally and personally. I have been fortunate to have a long personal relationship with Mike, from my early days in drum corps through my college career and beyond. I have learned more from Mike by just watching him teach and deal with others than I have from any other person. He has always been one of my greatest role models in life, and I will always look upon my studies and personal experiences with him fondly.

Tony Sawyer
Director of Bands
Elon University

To me, Mike is the consummate educator. I don't think I have ever respected a teacher more. As a matter of fact, I chose Spirit of Atlanta because of Mike. He taught both of my high school percussion instructors, and was always the percussion "guru" that I heard so many stories about. It always sounded to me like he was a brilliant teacher who knew how to have fun, too. When I had the opportunity to drum with him, he always knew exactly what he wanted to achieve in every rehearsal. He never belittled or demoralized a member, which had a major impact on my current teaching. We teach people "through" the vehicle of music; Mike never forgot that.

Matt Henley
Assistant Director of Bands
Western Carolina University

Mike taught me the art of being patient while expecting performance perfection. His attention to detail in performance was rarely overshadowed by his care of his students' well-being.

Chris Moore
Director of Athletic Bands
Director of Percussion Studies
Georgia Institute of Technology

higher and the arrangements are quite impressive.

GF: *What advice do you give students thinking about marching in a corps?*

MB: Obviously, make sure you have a lot of time to devote to it. I think drum corps is a great activity, but you have to be very dedicated and willing to work very hard to perform at that level. In the end, it is a very rewarding and worthwhile activity.

GF: *Any thoughts on the WGI percussion activity?*

MB: I attended the WGI finals in San Diego two years ago. I was very impressed with what I saw happening with the percussion units. It certainly has evolved over the last few years.

GF: *How was your use of MIDI percussion advantageous to your students and your program?*

MB: Back in the mid- to late-'80s, we started using a lot of MIDI applications in our percussion section at Walton. It

was a lot of fun; there weren't a lot of people doing it at that time, so it was something new and somewhat innovative and it gave us the opportunity to do some different things. It turned out to be a tremendous amount of work, but it was also a lot of fun for the students.

GF: *What advice would you give someone considering adding MIDI percussion to his or her program?*

MB: Do your homework! And be prepared for some challenges and headaches. Learn as much as possible about electronic instruments and sound amplification. On the musical side, spend a lot of time making sure the balance between electronic and acoustic sounds is satisfactory. In the end, adding electronic sounds can be very rewarding and a lot of fun.

From all of us who had the privilege of marching in the Spirit of Atlanta percussion section under the leadership of Mike Back, a huge "thank you" to Mike for teaching us how to drum, how to teach,

and how to be a role model in life. Words can only begin to express the impact that he had on so many of us.

Gene Fambrough, DMA, is Assistant Director of Bands and Percussion Instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He holds degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama, and has served as marching percussion instructor and arranger at each institution. He directs the UAB Percussion Ensemble and Steel Band, and serves as percussion arranger/instructor for the Marching Blazers. A published composer, he has written works for solo marimba, percussion ensemble, and rudimental percussion. Fambrough served as percussion coordinator/arranger for the Spirit of Atlanta in 1997 and has twice been on the staff of Southwind drum and bugle corps. As a performer, he appeared with the Spirit of Atlanta drum and bugle corps in 1989 and 1990. PN

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