



DRUMMING UP A STORM

After 43 years, Drum Corps is still the heartbeat of school spirit

Story by Katharine Yao
Photo by Horatio Wilcox
Design by Amanda Brantley

THE BEAT GOES ON
Drum Corps hypes up the student section during the EHS game.

Friday night home football games boast a number of off-field traditions – Lower School kids running around the playground, tiny wannabes fangirling the cheerleaders in front of the bleachers, Upper School fans clad in jungle- or fluorescent-themed outfits – and all of it to the drumbeats in the background, courtesy of the SJS Drum Corps.

The seven percussionists that make up the Drum Corps play for lunchtime Upper School pep rallies and home football games, where they sit at the top of the bleachers above the student section. Drum Corps captain Thomas Center said that drumming helps them feel more connected with the football games.

“When I’m in Drum Corps, I’m not just going to sit and watch this game,” Center said. “I’m going to spend time with my friends, do something that I like doing and watch this game.”

Drum Corps usually meets before school once or twice a week in the first-floor hallway of the science building, where the captains lead the crew to drum quietly on the carpet. They wait for pep rallies and actual games to haul the toms, snares and bass drum out of the drum closet.

“Drum Corps are the ones who make the most noise to hype students up,” sophomore Bianca Sieler said. “It adds an element that would definitely be missing if we didn’t have them, and it’s unique from other schools because they don’t have that as a part of a football game.”

A group of Upper School students with a shared love for percussion founded Drum Corps in 1980, a revival of the St. John’s Drum and Bugle Choir from the 1950s.

James Martin (’82) played for Drum Corps for

the first three years of its revival, practicing a few days a week after school and, once the program gained more traction, during PE in lieu of playing a sport. Martin likened his group to the irreverent Marching Owl Band at Rice University, known as the MOB.

“We were essentially making noises – nothing polished, nothing together – just being goofs to try to get some spirit going,” Martin said.

“We were essentially making noises – nothing polished, nothing together – just being goofs”

**JAMES
MARTIN (’82)**

These casual get-togethers turned into a more integral part of school spirit. Before long, Drum Corps was attending football games and traveling to away games on the cheerleader bus.

In the 1980s, the drummers and cheerleaders did not run in the same social circles, yet everyone was willing to work together in the name of school spirit.

“We realized we were on the same team,” Martin said. “You do your thing, we’ll do ours, and we’ll work together.”

By the end of the 1980s, Drum Corps entered a kind of heyday.

“Mostly, we were all just playing the basic stuff,” former Drum Corps member Katherine Center (’90), mother of Thomas, said. “But then

the people who really knew what they were doing would throw in extra things and add to it, so it became this very rich, layered set.”

Students introduced hip-hop-inspired music to Drum Corps’ repertoire during this time.

“It felt like a sneaky way of bringing hip-hop music to the mainstream at St. John’s football games,” said Gerard Choucroun (’89), who played for the local band Banana Blender Surprise with several other students on Drum Corps. “We were all very proud of that.”

Among the beats introduced during Choucroun’s time is Drum Corps staple “Tricky,” which originates from hip-hop group Run-D.M.C.’s 1986 song “It’s Tricky.” This beat usually accompanies cheerleaders at pep rallies.

Choucroun was surprised to learn that “Tricky” was still part of the Drum Corps repertoire.

“It was just one of the songs that we were hearing in our heads and tapping to in class, and then we played it on the drums,” Choucroun said. “We’re very appreciative that it’s lasted.”

Choucroun never thought he was building an enduring legacy. His thought process was: “There’s a drum. I have a stick. I’m going to hit it.”

In the 1980s, even Middle School had a Drum Corps offshoot, run by math teacher Kim Keany, who had performed with her high school’s flag corps and the Rice University MOB. Keany was the sponsor from its founding in 1987 to its final year in 2006.

Drum Corps beats are passed down from year to year through the captains, who teach the beats to younger members.

“They’re still playing a lot of the same beats that we were playing back then,” Katherine Center said.

Center remembers plenty of songs that have been lost over time. The Center family recently borrowed drums from St. John’s to record videos of Katherine playing some beats. Thomas stood on a chair and held a phone over their mother’s head to get a bird’s-eye video of the song being played.

Thomas now has a collection of videos of slowed-down beats for new drummers to follow at home, which they hope to expand into a proper, continuously updated catalog so Drum Corps does not have to worry about songs being forgotten as captains graduate.

After being away from the drums for so long, Katherine was thankful for the opportunity to play again.

“Whenever I would hear them playing, I had to physically restrain myself from wanting to sit down in the stands and join them,” she said. “There was something really special about Drum Corps – it was a really cool thing to be a part of.”

DRUM CORPSE, REVIVED

In 1980, nine students revived Drum Corps, playing at both home and away football games.

