

Mega Halftime Shows

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Q&A With the Macy's Great American Marching Band

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BY GREGORY M. KUZMA



HALFTIME SHOWS

When it comes to marching band halftime shows, does size really matter? Halftime shows have started to go above and beyond as bands include guest artists, video, extra marchers and audience involvement.



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James G. Hudson, the director of the Arizona State University (ASU) Sun Devil Marching Band since 2006, is no stranger to preparing his band for mega halftime shows. Not only did he do one in 2015, he did two.

On Feb. 1, 2015, the Sun Devil Marching Band performed at Super Bowl XLIX, in what has become an epic tradition. The band played its own versions of "Uptown Funk" by Bruno Mars and "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift during pregame and then also participated as extras in the Super Bowl halftime show in front of millions with Katy Perry, Missy Elliot, and Lenny Kravitz.

While that Super Bowl performance was a major gig for the ASU band, the group did not stop there.

ARIZONA STATE CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

In the college band world, the Sun Devil Marching Band ranks as one of the larger bands in the country with more than 400 members. But when students combined with alumni for the band's 100th anniversary homecoming performance in November 2015, more than 850 participants swarmed the field in what turned out to be the largest homecoming band in the school's history.

"We had about 500 former band members participate in this year's special homecoming performance," says Travis Breedlove, former president of the band alumni group that organized the event.

"Although it took over three years to plan, coordinate, and get the word out to our alumni, it was worth it as many of them want to come back and do more for the current band program."

The alumni band performed first by itself, then with the current band in a medley of past year's tunes that many had played when they attended ASU. "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, for example, was appropriate as more than 100 people in the alumni had met their spouses in band, Breedlove says.

The biggest challenge, according to Breedlove, was finding enough band instruments, such as sousaphones, for the hundreds of alumni who signed up for the performance. Fortunately, local high schools lent wind instruments while The Academy Drum and Bugle

Corps let the band borrow percussion instruments.

Normally, about 50 to 80 alumni come out to the annual homecoming game, but this year's alumni turnout was huge, according to Anthony Acevedo, current tuba player.

"Our director told us that we needed to put on an amazing show, with complex drill moves that would be talked about for the next 100 years," Acevedo says.

That they did. "When we say band is family, we really strengthened the connection by building upon our homecoming tradition for years to come," Breedlove says.

MICHIGAN STATE "GOES TO WAR"

As the old saying goes, "All's fair in love and war," and the Michigan State

University (MSU) Spartan Marching Band decided to "go to war" by performing a mega halftime show on November 14, 2015, that explored ancient Chinese music, folklore, and conflict.

"The Art of the March: Cues from Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War'" featured more than 600 performers, smoke cannons, Chinese drums, and an original 12-minute video that complemented the performance on the field. This was also not your ordinary "sit and watch" type of show as more than 1,000 audience members participated in card stunts to form images that were also shown on the stadium's Jumbotron screen.

"We worked together to strike a balance with our school's tradition and entertainment with the cultural celebration," says John Madden, director of the Spartan Marching Band. "This

was a great opportunity to celebrate the China initiative on campus with this particular halftime show on the university's biggest stage."

Typical marching band halftime shows are usually solely designed and arranged by the band staff, but this production was a little more involved. Through a collaborative effort between the music department, the Cultural Engagement Council, and creative consultant Jennifer Wen Ma, the complex and intricate show evolved from an idea from the Michigan State University's China Initiative to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

"Coordinating a complex production like this is always a challenge, but the biggest concern for us was one-time-use smoke canisters," Madden says. "Fortunately, the halftime show went according to plan, the



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weather cooperated, and the audience witnessed something we've never done before. It also gave the performers an opportunity to be a part of something different and creative that connected to the rest of the campus."

Wen Ma, a New York-based visual artist, served as creative designer for the halftime show. Her experience with many outdoor exhibits include being the chief designer for visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Her role at MSU involved conceptualizing the production theme with a narrative and script for the video and working with the band director and staff to tie all the pieces together. The planning took about five months of weekly meetings and about three weeks of rehearsal.

"Although I've never been to a college football game, I looked at this as an opportunity to work with the MSU band because the artistry of what they do is amazing," Wen Ma says. "We found a close connection with the military metaphor of war and the conflict of two teams playing football that helped us bridge this cultural idea of China with a football audience of 80,000."

As MSU's mega show came together, the marching band's budget did increase due to the magnitude of the production. However, thanks to the partners in the Cultural Engagement Council as well as additional funding and support from the university and academic departments, the show came to fruition.

TEXAS PLAYS THE BLUES

Many college bands team up with a visiting performer, and this past season was no different. Guest appearances included Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash with the University of Southern California Trojan Marching Band, New York Philharmonic brass players with the University of Michigan Marching Band, and blues guitarist Jimmie Vaughan with the University of Texas (UT) Longhorn Band.

The 385-member Longhorn Band teamed up with Vaughan for its halftime show on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 26, 2015.

The marching performers played and danced with Vaughan and his band to a medley of his hits.


"We are excited beyond words about this opportunity to perform with Jimmie Vaughan and to show that Austin is the 'Live Music Capital of the World,'" said Scott Hanna, UT band director, in a press release. "For our students, this is an incredible opportunity to connect with their Texas musical heritage through a living legend."

The Texas House and Senate had named Vaughan the "Texas State Musician" for 2015.

Fortunately, for a halftime performance with an award-winning artist, it did not take much extra preparation time to get the show ready to go. Prior to the week of the Jimmie Vaughan show, the Longhorn Band prepared the music and worked out the logistics.

"As a performer showing up to your college marching band rehearsal and having a rock star be there was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience," says Haley Culpepper, a trumpet player in the Longhorn Band. "Vaughan's love for our music and what we were doing, plus our love for his music, is what we got to show our fans during that halftime performance. We got to share the field and give our fans something truly exciting!"

Although the weather did not cooperate and rained during the performance, the show continued on as scheduled, entertaining thousands of fans in the stands.

"I've been asked to perform with a lot of great bands in my life, but this is definitely the biggest, and probably one of the most exciting," Vaughan said in the press release. "It doesn't get any more Texas than this." 

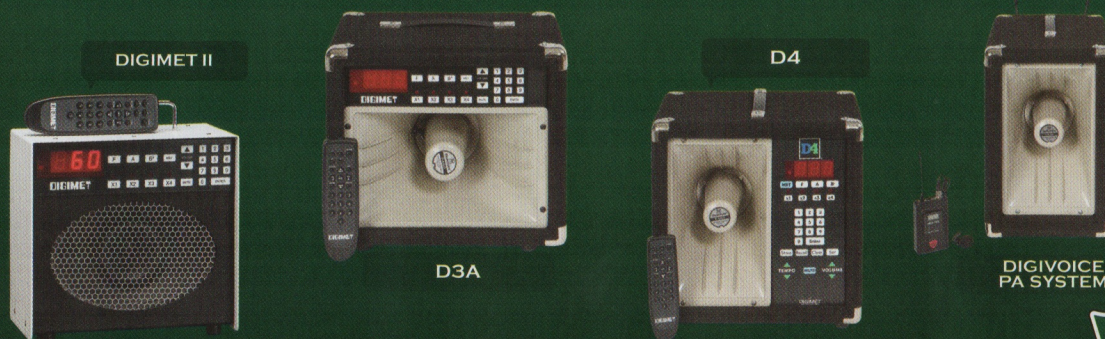
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory M. Kuzma, who simply goes by "GM," is a freelance writer and author of the book "On the Field From Denver, Colorado ... The Blue Knights!," which highlights his 1994 summer tour adventures as a drum corps member. He is a 1998 graduate of the University of Central Florida with a degree in communications.



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