

# BEING THE SPIRIT OF HOUSTON:

## THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON MARCHING BAND

*By La’Nora Jefferson*

Joining the University of Houston marching band when I arrived on campus as a freshman was a difficult but rewarding decision. In high school, I had thrown myself into the band life, participating in competitions, assuming leadership positions, and gaining some accolades, but by the end of my senior year I had had enough. Nevertheless, I could not imagine completely cutting music out of my life, so I joined the marching band, which offered a happy medium. As a new college student preoccupied with paying tuition and finding housing, I did not fully understand what that decision entailed until I arrived for the band’s spirit week. Never before had I seen so many people excited to be marching and playing their instruments. The UH marching band lives up to its name, “The Spirit of Houston,” and during my two-year journey with the band, I came to understand what that moniker truly meant.

### Background

The University of Houston marching band was founded in 1946. Any student could participate as long as they auditioned. Even in its early years, the marching band supported the Cougars at all football and basketball games, traveling to several away games. The band led the Frontier Fiesta parade and the first football parade, making its debut as a group that was ready and willing to serve its institution. This vigor has carried on and the Spirit of Houston continues to support the Cougars at football, volleyball, and basketball games. The band also makes campus and community appearances to show support for and represent the university.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the band only consisted of wind players and percussionists. Now, the Spirit of Houston has grown to include the cheerleaders, Cougar Dolls dance team, mascots, Frontiersmen, color guard, and twirlers. The band is open to all majors, and no auditions are required. Although some people play in the band voluntarily, members have an option to enroll in the band for one hour of course credit. All band members receive grants for participating in football games and other city or campus events.<sup>2</sup> Applications are not required; however, candidates must be in good standing with proper attendance to receive the grant. The availability of funds is subject to change each year and determines the amount of money given to each student. The Spirit of Houston Alumni Association donates a large portion of the grant money.<sup>3</sup>

### Band Activities

The band’s main performances are the pregame and half-time shows at football games. The pregame performance has, for the most part, kept with tradition. Since the 1970s



*William I. Shepherd (center) was the founder of the Spirit of Houston marching band. He is joined by drum major Tommy Mercer and assistant drum major Grace Sullivan of the 1947 marching band.*

Photo courtesy of Houstonian Yearbook Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

the band has entered high-stepping and then marched downfield, creating shapes and words such as “Cougars,” “Houston,” or “UH,” depending on the era. The band has always played “The Alma Mater,” the fight song, and “The Star Spangled Banner.”

In the new TDECU stadium, the band waits in the tunnel until the band video has played. At the signal of the whistle, the band high-steps from the tunnel to the sideline of the field with the train sound effects played by the drumline. Next the band runs onto the field while continuing high-knees as the drumline plays the roll off. The band then marches down the field, playing the pregame song, which includes the “Touchdown” fanfare followed by “The Horse,” when the band runs to form the word “Cougars” on the field. Lastly, “Deep in the Heart of Texas” is played followed by “The Star Spangled Banner” and “The Alma Mater.” Ending pregame, the band spins the “H” and plays the fight song while marching off of the field.



Halftime performances normally consist of a marching show from the band and then a performance from the drill team with the band playing in the background. The marching style used for halftime shows was an innovation of Dr. William Moffit, a director of the Spirit of Houston marching band from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Before Moffit arrived, the band marched into a formation, stood still, and played in place. Moffit introduced more movement during the halftime shows, making the band more interesting to watch.<sup>4</sup>

Although the band has the spotlight for the pregame and halftime performances, its job is more than that. During play the members of the Spirit of Houston take pride in keeping up enthusiasm for the Cougars, win or lose.

The basketball band, the Cougar Brass, started around 1966. Since then it has supported the teams at home games and, in some cases, traveled to away games. Many members that participate in the marching band in the fall also participate in the Cougar Brass in the spring, which functions as a smaller version of the Spirit of Houston, although members of the Cougar Brass audition.

As far back as the 1980s band members have yelled insults at the opposing team's players and coaches during basketball games. Most might be shocked to find out that this is not against the rules at the basketball games. The insults are all in good fun and a lighthearted way of showing support for the Cougars. Today on the University of Houston campus, you can spot Cougar Brass members on game day by their red and white jackets and long sleeve shirts.

In addition to playing for games, the band supports

other happenings on campus. When the band first began in 1946 it played all three nights of Frontier Fiesta.<sup>5</sup> When UH reinstated Frontier Fiesta in 1992 after a lengthy break, the band performed for the opening. Traditionally the band has played at pep rallies and other events leading up to homecoming since 1947, as well as the homecoming parade through 1963.<sup>6</sup> Since the late seventies the band has played at private parties and meetings of the UH Alumni Association and other high-ranking staff at the University of Houston. In the band's youth, it had few opportunities to play on campus, but by 1961 the band was deemed the most active campus group and has since been in greater demand.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the fall of 2014 the band performed for the opening of the new TDECU Stadium.<sup>8</sup>

The Spirit of Houston marching band is highly esteemed by the Houston community. From 1958 through the late 1970s, the band began every football season by performing with surrounding high school bands, bringing more than 1,000 students on the field.<sup>9</sup> From the early to mid-sixties the band hosted a regional high school concert in which more than 100 high school students participated.<sup>10</sup> Today the band participates in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo parade as well as two Martin Luther King parades in Midtown and downtown.

The band also takes part in small gigs that do not always appear in the band calendar. Since the late seventies small groups from the marching band have volunteered their time for last-minute events upon request.<sup>11</sup> Band members take pride in this, and it shows how much people in the community love and support them.

*The 1952 Cougar Band, under the direction of Bob Hammitt, provided halftime entertainment at four home games, marched in the Homecoming parade, and made the trip to Oklahoma for the Houston-Tulsa game.*

*Photo courtesy of Houstonian Yearbook Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.*







*Cathy Frank performed as a Cougar Doll with the Spirit of Houston marching band from 1976 to 1980. Today the Cougar Dolls perform separately while the band provides accompaniment.*

*Photo courtesy of Cathy Frank.*

## Atmosphere in the Spirit of Houston

The atmosphere in the Spirit of Houston adds to some of the best experiences and memories for its members. Cathy Frank was a member of the Cougar Dolls drill team from 1976 to 1980. The Cougar Dolls made their debut on campus in the early seventies performing with the band at football games. They now perform at basketball games as well. When Frank attended UH the drill team hosted the Texas State Cheerleader Competition and the UH Drill Team Invitational in 1980. Frank says that the band was a close-knit group of people, and she has

maintained friendships with many members to this day. Her love for the band led her to become an active member of the Spirit of Houston Alumni Association, serving as a board member. She recalls that during her time at UH, students stayed for more than four years and enrolled in extra courses to continue participating in the band. Frank still supports the University of Houston by attending football and basketball games.<sup>12</sup>

Also greatly affected by her band experience, Rhonda Pitts played the trumpet at UH in the late seventies and early eighties. Pitts remembers how the band used to parade around campus playing the fight song during spirit week. The band was like family to her, and now Pitts works with the band.<sup>13</sup>

Another tradition that has continued with the Spirit of Houston marching band is its unrivaled school spirit, particularly at football games. Cathy Frank recounts her memory of UH's second Cotton Bowl game against Notre Dame in 1977. Dallas had just had its worst ice storm since the thirties. The trees were frozen and the limbs were cracking but the band still showed up to play for halftime. When given the option of going back on the bus many band members decided to stay in the stands, despite the freezing temperatures, to support the football team for the remainder of the game. Likewise, in the 2015 Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl game, the weather was dreary, raining, and had temperatures below thirty degrees. Yet the marching band stuck it out with beanies, hand warmers, and scarves provided by the Spirit of Houston Alumni Association. This unfailing support of the marching band remains a constant.

*The Spirit of Houston marching band performs pregame at Robertson Stadium to pump up the crowd.*

*Photo courtesy of Brian Reading.*







*William Moffit came to UH as the director of bands in 1969. His musical arrangements and innovative marching styles revolutionized the band program at UH and other schools across the country. In 2004 Moffit attended a band alumni event where he met band member Kristin Deville who proudly displayed her Cougar spirit.*

Photo courtesy of Kristin Deville.

## Traditions

As the band has grown it has adopted several traditions, many of which originated when Moffit was director in the seventies. One custom is to name the band's brass bell after the band secretary of the time. This bell is rung for every point shown on the scoreboard after the Cougars score. Every freshman instrument group or new band member has to take turns loading the bell and bringing it to the stadium. The trick is to keep the bell from ringing so as not to bring bad luck. Taking the bell to and from the stadium is no easy job, but it is always rewarding when the bell is successfully transported.<sup>14</sup>

For both the band and Cougar fans, the songs the band plays represent important traditions. Since David Bertman's arrival as director of bands in the early 2000s, he has kept this tradition and added to it. The band plays the fight song after every touchdown and "Touchdown," a portion of the pregame music, after every field goal. Following marching rehearsal, except on game days, the band gathers around and sings "The Alma Mater" in a four-part harmony sounding almost as if it were a choir. Members raise their right hands up high and proud, making the Cougar paw. Win or lose, the band always plays the fight song and alma mater after football games and other sporting events.

The band members love to play "Eat 'em Up," a song arranged by Dr. Moffit that has become a standard played at all types of sporting events across the country. The brass play first and are joined by the woodwinds, followed by a chant: "Eat 'em up, eat 'em up, go Coogs go!" The band plays this song to honor highly esteemed staff, including the band directors, head coach, and the football team. It is unclear whether Moffit composed "Eat 'em Up" while he was director of bands at UH or at Michigan State University.<sup>15</sup>

The Patterns of Motion marching show became a tradition during Moffit's tenure. This show requires high-knee marching, an older style, which is still used by some institutions. The band members lift their knees with each step, and their feet touch the ground from toe to heel. Another unique feature of this drill is that it is squad based, with the band members divided into groups and marching onto the field in squads.

Today the band uses corps style marching, in which the movement of the foot is from heel to toe and the leg stays low to the ground. Each individual marches to his or her separate spot and receives separate directions as to where he or she should go on the field. This show always requires more work, but since 2005, Rhonda Pitts has helped with demonstrating this style of marching.<sup>16</sup>

## Memorable Directors

William I. Shepherd founded the University of Houston marching band when he put out a call for a 100-man band in *The Cougar* campus newspaper in 1946. During World War II he was director for the Army Air Corps band and later associate conductor for the U.S. Air Force band and orchestra. He also founded Trinity University's community band in 1976.<sup>17</sup> Although his time at UH was brief, his legacy continues to impact the university.

Moffit served as band director at UH from 1969 to 1981. He was the first band director to implement new traditions that have remained a part of the band for decades. He innovated the marching style by adding movement while the band played, creating different patterns and shapes on the field.

Moffit changed the type of music that the band played at games from military marches, mainly composed by John Philip Sousa, to his own arrangements of popular, contemporary songs. In doing so he became the first to arrange this music with wind parts that the band could play, making the marching shows more enjoyable. The band still uses some of these arrangements today, including the



*David Bertman is the current director of bands at the University of Houston.*

Photo courtesy of Sammy Butts.





*This headline appeared in the 1946 Cougar newspaper calling for a new band. The students wanted a band to bring more excitement to the football games and generate more spirit on campus.*

Photo courtesy of *The Cougar* newspaper, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

four-part alma mater and “Eat ’em Up,” considered the Cougars’ second fight song.

David Bertman, director of bands at the University of Houston from 2000-2016, has made sure that Moffit’s legacy continues. Bertman attended UH for his master’s degree in music and is now the interim associate dean of the College of the Arts and associate director of the Moores School of Music. Upon his arrival, he worked hard to re-establish some of the traditions lost after Dr. Moffit left the university.<sup>18</sup> Bertman has done this by using many of Moffit’s arrangements of important school songs and performing the Patterns of Motion show in his honor. The marching band members have loved Bertman and before rehearsals often played “Eat ’em Up” when he entered the room, sometimes breaking out in applause to honor him.

Marc Martin, the associate director of bands, attended the University of Houston for his master’s degree under Bertman’s tutelage. More hands-on with the band, he makes sure that the band performs to its best ability. He works out band logistics and is also frequently honored by the band with the playing of “Eat ’em Up,” and applause.


## Spirit on Campus

The purpose of the Spirit of Houston marching band is represented in its name — to increase school spirit. After all, the band was founded at the request of the students at UH in 1946. If the band is not at an event, then it is just

not the same. During football games, the band usually takes the lead in chants and cheers, keeping the mood of the crowd up with the songs that it chooses. The band also receives big cheers from the crowds when performing the pregame and halftime shows. In the first week of the fall 2014 semester, the band had gigs across campus almost every day. Many agree that the band has long established itself as an integral part of the University of Houston.

## My story

It is pretty easy to see how one can fall in love with the Spirit of Houston marching band. Many of my greatest experiences at the University of Houston happened while participating in the band. Being in the band has taught me about school traditions and what it means to truly support your school.

The University of Houston was my first choice when selecting a college, and it was love at first sight. The band in some ways made me love UH even more. It offered a place where people could join together, goof around, and go wild for their love of music and their school. The people in band were great, and I have made many friends that I know will be with me for years to come. No experience compares to running out onto the field for the pregame show or marching in a downtown parade and having people cheer for you. Nothing equals the feeling of people becoming excited when you tell them that you play in the band. Nothing rivals the feeling of hearing someone shout your name from the crowd or having people want to slap your hand as you go back into the stands. The Spirit of Houston marching band is an amazing organization led by hardworking people with a passion for what they do. I will forever love the Spirit of Houston marching band. 

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*Author, La’Nora Jefferson (smiling at right) and her band friends engage in pregame shenanigans before marching into the stadium to perform.*

Photo courtesy of author.