

A COVID-19 Concert Series
By David Hare, Manager
St. Johnsbury Band

In 1920, Vermont was still recovering from the Spanish Flu pandemic, more commonly referred to then as Influenza. Still, the St. Johnsbury Band started its 1920 summer concert season in Courthouse Park in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. The local newspaper, The Caledonian-Record, reported that police department helped with the parking of 171 cars and 15 teams along Main Street and Eastern Avenue. Many people from surrounding communities attended the concert.

Bass drum player and researcher Nola Forbes found that the band was active in the prior year in a parade welcoming troops home from WWI held July 5, 1919, although some concerts in both 1919 and 1920 were canceled due to unspecified illness. There were hundreds of references to Influenza reported by the paper in 1919 and 1920. Unusual and unsubstantiated “cures” for Influenza were advertised in the paper along with the news articles.

Like other community bands, the St. Johnsbury Band shut down our rehearsals in March of 2020. I later proposed an extensive set of safety protocols which were approved by the State of Vermont, and the band resumed limited rehearsals again inside the Courthouse in June. Most of our band members are older and considered themselves or their loved ones at high risk from COVID-19. Thus, some rehearsals had fewer than ten participants. As Safety Officer, I did the screening before allowing band members to enter. After each rehearsal, I submitted the sign-in sheet for contact tracing and a report to the State. Good communication between the band and the State helped both parties.

Several band members and our Music Director Gary Aubin wanted to perform at least one concert this year to mark our 190th season. The band was formed in 1830 and has been in continuous existence since then. We asked ourselves, “Is a band still active if it doesn’t perform a concert?”

I submitted a proposal to the State which detailed how I felt we could do an outside performance while following Governor Phil Scott’s directives to keep both the public and band members safe. This plan was approved and we held this concert August 3, 2020 from the parking lot behind the Courthouse. A few band members who did not feel comfortable rehearsing inside joined us outside for the concert. Both our Musical Director Gary Aubin and Assistant Musical Director Kirsten Harter choose pieces the band had rehearsed before the shutdown, so those who didn’t attend rehearsals were familiar with the music the band performed.

There was no advertising for this concert; just two short announcements, and public attendance was light. The band performed with 20 members, less than half our normal complement, but we were relieved that the audience members followed the direction of our announcer and wore masks.

Several pieces from Karl King's "Marching to Victory" booklet were performed because they were designed to be played by smaller ensembles. King put this collection of easy marches together originally in 1942, early in our involvement in World War II when band composition was very fluid. For us they also had the benefit of being familiar to band members who were not at rehearsals but played the concert.

With this success, we planned another concert two weeks later with this one being held in Courthouse Park, just like it was 100 years ago. For this concert we did some advertising and a press release with a photo of our August 3rd concert which was published by The Caledonian-Record.

We encouraged the public to attend and suggested they park along Main Street just like the audience did 100 years ago. In the opening concert in 1920, The Caledonian-Record reported the band played R.B. Hall's "S.I.B.A" so we made that part of the 2020 program. It is a familiar march and was fun to perform again.

Our band has a special connection to "National Emblem" because it was written by E.E. Bagley, the uncle of Lifetime member of the band Reginald Bagley, and the St. Johnsbury Band was probably one of the first bands to perform it. We perform it only once each concert season and this concert was it. We played some easy arrangements of Rogers & Hammerstein like "Oklahoma!" (an old out-of-print version) and "The King & I," arranged by Stephen Bulla/Hal Leonard along with a new concert band arrangement of "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" by Freddie Mercury and arranged by Paul Murtha/Hal Leonard.

"The American Red Cross" march by Louis Panella/Ralph C. Jarrett was published in 1918 to honor the frontline medical workers of WWI, and we performed it to honor the frontline medical workers of today. This march is available today as an arrangement but our music library has the original version, which for me, gave a special connection to the music knowing that the band did it just this way 100 years ago.

To remember a lifetime band member who passed suddenly this past spring, we played "At a Dixieland Jazz Funeral" by Jared Spears.

This concert series was only possible because individuals in State government were willing to support the band if we could show them how we could do it safely. It would have been easier for them to simply say "no." Instead they allowed us to submit safety protocols and we made sure they knew they were being followed.

It felt great to play together in front of an audience again, but probably the most moving thing I witnessed were members of the audience who got out of their cars to stand as we played our National Anthem at the close of the concert.