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P.C. High School Marching Band dredges up the 60s with 'Tommy'

By Casey Watts, Reporter

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Crawford Park was filled with rhythmic stomps and loud counting in the morning and bursts of music in the evening during the second week of Port Chester High School's marching band camp which ran from Aug. 22 to Sept. 1. The first week was held at Port Chester Middle School. Those who listened closely might have been able to pick out a popular 1969 hit from the English rock band The Who.

But those who recognized the songs were in the vast minority, as most of the marching band students could barely name more than the '69 hit "Pinball Wizard." That didn't stop the band from forging onward and

practicing their arrangement of The Who's rock musical "Tommy." Knowing that this music was far from the Queen arrangement the band jammed out to last year, Assistant Band Director Madeline Rende was prepared.

"We do ask that all of the students go home and look stuff up about what "Tommy" is all about and what we are bringing to life with our musical design," Rende said, referring to herself and Bob Vitti, the band director who is currently on leave following an operation.

The Who is relatively unknown to 20-something Rende. She could pick out "Pinball Wizard" and "See Me, Feel Me" but could not name any of the other songs hidden inside David Deon's "Tommy" arrangement. Because the songs are not listed on the sheet music, this confusion was a common theme at the camp—no one seemed to know what hits they were playing and where one song changed into the next. But Rende stands by Vitti's decision to stick with classic rock groups and knows that doing so broadens her students' horizons. She explained that everyone can just pull out their phones and listen to the songs they do know in order to play them to the best of their abilities, and being exposed to The Who and their genre of rock is good for the kids.



Senior drum major Elizabeth Montemurro gets her arm exercises in as she conducts the Port Chester High School Marching Band during their band camp practice session on Monday, Aug. 29 at Crawford Park. Casey Watts|Westmore News

The music also serves as a throwback to adults in the audience who might have grown up listening to "Pinball Wizard" or other hits from the English group.

A drum major's dad will definitely appreciate the selection as 15-year-old Grace Simmons grew up with her father playing The Who on his stereo. Because of that exposure, Simmons knows their style well, even though she might not know their songs.

"The music isn't motionless or square; it allows us to swing and march to a fun beat," Simmons said.

The first-time drum major has a little bit of a leg up because of her dad, but it isn't an easy job.

"I like it a lot, it's a lot of fun and hard work, which some people don't recognize," she said. She has to set up and tear down the set every day and lead the band as well as try to keep them in check. "We're the person of authority."

"My arms hurt a lot," she joked. "I'm also on the swim team and have practice after this, so my arms really hurt sometimes. But I'll be ripped by the end of it."

The junior alto saxophone player is excited for everything that is to come. She's been attending band camp since 8th grade and can't imagine a summer without it. She will also be a drum major next year.

"It's exhausting but rewarding," Simmons said. "There is fulfillment in learning the music and seeing the show, it's not all about winning.."

The senior drum major also spoke about how much of a workout it is to stand in front of the band and conduct for hours on end.

"I feel like my arms are going to fall off halfway through," Elizabeth "Liz" Montemurro, 16, said. Despite the pain, she is really enjoying being a drum major for the first time.

She tried to convince Vitti to let her first time leading the band be to a selection of Disney pieces or show tunes, but her pleas were ultimately shut down. Montemurro said she was initially in shock when Tommy 1, Tommy 2 and Tommy 3 were dropped in front of her, but after spending hours poring over the music in her room with The Who blasting through headphones in her ear, she came to appreciate Vitti's choice.

Even with all the time she spent trying to figure out what songs were in the arrangement, she could only pick out "Pinball Wizard," a song she first heard because the television show "Glee" showcased it in episode 21 in season three. But back then, Montemurro had no idea who wrote the song. Now, that piece is her favorite part of the band's performance.

"When the entire band comes in, that is when it is the most fun to conduct," Montemurro said. "I like how into it the entire band gets."

During this section, the band is allowed a pause, which means they don't move on the field and can really connect with the music without worrying about where to place their feet. That is why the assistant band director loves that part as well.

"All the pauses and plays make a great visual," Rende said. "Students can sit back and groove and the audience can jive with them."

A freshman baritone player does just that, especially in "Tommy 1." Tyler Langeneach, 14, loves the upbeat tempo and how fun it is to hear. But that doesn't mean he knew exactly what he was playing.

When asked if he knew The Who, he responded with "Who?" Langeneach thought the "Tommy" arrangement was by someone named Tommy and had no idea it was a composition of The Who songs. But now that he knows, he promised to look them up and give them a listen, exactly what Rende believes Vitti wants his students to do.

The marching band first performed their "Music from the Who" field show for parents on Thursday evening, Sept. 1 as the culmination of their two-week camp.

Their first competition is Saturday, Sept. 17 at Northern Highlands High School in Allendale, N.J. The time will be announced closer to the event.