

MARCHING BAND TO “MINI-MUSICAL”:
PERFORMANCE CHANGES IN THE PHILADELPHIA MUMMERS STRING BAND
DIVISION FROM 1968-2024

by

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Band Division From 1968-2024

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The Philadelphia Mummers are a performance group of working class white male residents of Philadelphia and South Jersey that performs annually for the New Year’s Day parade down Philadelphia’s Broad Street. Their String Band Division has transformed from marching band-style performances to “mini-musicals” over the past fifty years. This paper evaluates the path of innovation from marching band to “mini-musical” through an exploration of performance videos of the top five scored bands from each year from 1968 to 2024.

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Content

Introduction	1
“O’ Dem Golden Slippers”: A Brief Mummers History	5
The Tale of Two Fralingers: 1968 v. 2024	14
Midway Mummery: The Road of Innovation from 1971-2024	23
Conclusion: The Modern Mummer Musical	61
Bibliography	69

List of Figures

- Figure 1 : USA Today. *Jason Kelce Super Bowl Parade*. February 18, 2018. Photograph. *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1043392225863377/?type=3>.
- Figure 2 : Temple University Libraries. *Fralinger String Band 1968*. n.d. Photograph. *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/fralinger-string-band-1968-fralinger-string-band-wins-first-prize-in-the-mummers/998422763693657/>.
- Figure 3 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Fralinger String Band 2024*. January 7, 2024. Photograph. *X*. <https://x.com/PhilaStringBand/status/1744145735484940723>.
- Figure 4 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Captain Brad Bowen*. January 7, 2024. Photograph. *X*.
<https://x.com/PhilaStringBand/status/1744145735484940723>.
- Figure 5 : Greater Overbrook String Band. *1973 Ballroom Reflections*. November 27, 2023. Photograph. *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=900975021919665&set=pb.100060215264695.-2207520000>.
- Figure 6 : Avalon String Band. *The Sky's the Limit*. January 6, 1985. Screenshot. *Youtube*.
<https://youtu.be/qEw8LltTp1I>.
- Figure 7 : Ferko String Band. *Wise Guys and Jive*. January 1, 1999. Screenshot. *Youtube*.
<https://youtu.be/ZObfyL5G8L0>.
- Figure 8 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Ferko String Band 1998*. December 7, 2020. Photograph. *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1578810665654861/?type=3>.
- Figure 9 : Quaker City String Band. *That Old Gang of Mine*. January 1, 2006. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/JkGiOwJ1dsc>.
- Figure 10 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Bob Shannon Jr., 2006*. July 19, 2019. Photograph. *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1082270475308885/?type=3>.
- Figure 11 : Quaker City String Band. *A Viking's Quest*. January 7, 2007. Screenshot. *Youtube*.
https://youtu.be/3NOO5i_7V3s.
- Figure 12 : Hegeman String Band. *Hegeman's Household Havoc*. January 1, 2014. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/WCVLt4ZIBHw>.

Figure 13 : Fralinger String Band, *Scott Wray 2016*, 2016, Photograph, *Fralinger.org*, 2016, <https://www.fralinger.org/photos-2016>.

Figure 14 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *The Spinning Wheel of Death*. January 2, 2020. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1291259547743309/?type=3>.

Figure 15 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Danny Palandro 2024*. January 6, 2024. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=928130125338285&set=pb.100044239173492.-2207520000&type=3>.

Figure 16 : Philadelphia String Band Assn. *South Philadelphia 2024*. January 6, 2024. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=928130242004940&set=pb.100044239173492.-2207520000&type=3>.

Marching Band to “Mini-Musical”: Performance Changes in the Philadelphia Mummers String Band Division From 1968-2024

Every city has its cold inanimate monuments of historic and cultural interest: old buildings, bronze statues, and great boulevards. Philadelphia has a living, breathing memorial to its greatness: the Mummers Parade. Princes and clowns, columbines and 83 harlequins dance in the streets. Serpents and devils, angels and sinners, young and old blend into one massive, undulating brightly colored throng. Blue, red and yellow capes, white satin daisies, plush-red roses, laughter and life cover the city.¹

For many, the word “mummery” is a blanket term for performative celebration while others might think of the English plays that originated in the Middle Ages; some might connect “mummery” to Jim Crow era minstrelsy. However, when hearing the word “mummery,” the people of Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs of South Jersey will be taken back to nights on the boardwalk, college celebrations, and most importantly New Year’s Day. The Philadelphia Mummers have a history that traces back to the 17th century and they have stood the test of time, morphing into a modern performance spectacle that can only be found on the city’s Broad Street. The Mummers are primarily working-class white men from around Philadelphia and South Jersey who dedicate their free time to performing in extravagant costumes that are covered in sequins and framed with large feathers. Imagine a mix of the costumes featured in Carnival in Rio De Janeiro and Mardi Gras with a vaudevillian flare. Instead of the comfortable temperatures of New Orleans in February, the Mummers are greeted with a Northeast winter in a wind-trapped metropolis. Though their appearances occur across the calendar, the pinnacle for the Philadelphia Mummer is New Year’s Day as over 10,000 residents parade down Broad Street followed by a block party on Second Street, colloquially known as “Two Street.”.

¹ Welch, Charles E. (1970) 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania : Book Street Press, 3

The Mummers have five divisions: Fancy, Comics, String Bands, Fancy Brigades, and Wench Brigades. Each division has its unique style of performance. Starting the parade, the Fancy Division is known for its costumes and, as the name suggests, no expense is spared. Mummers in the Fancy Division strut along the parade route alone or in pairs adorned with hundreds of feathers, large backpieces, and occasionally a framed suit that extends several feet around the performer. They are followed by the Comic division, large groups of clowns that often satirize the happenings of the past year. The Wench Brigades also parade in mass but wear ruffled satin dresses, bloomers, and bonnets while bouncing parasols. They are often accompanied by brass bands. Wench Brigades have also been known for their satire; the two divisions spark the most controversy in the modern parade. The final marching division and most popular in the parade is the String Bands, costumed musicians with an assortment of string, woodwind, and percussion instruments put together “mini-musicals.” Performances from this division include themed costumes and are outfitted with moving scenery and musical theatre choreography. The last division and the only one to perform off the streets, is the Fancy Brigades. In essence, their performance is similar to the String Band, but without live music. The Fancy Brigades close out the day of mummery at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. Inside each of these divisions are competing Clubs with groups of performers that come together to create the festivities on January 1st. Many of these clubs are named for the geographical location where they were founded (Greater Kensington String Band) or for the person who began the Club (Fralinger String Band). For most of the parade’s history, the Clubs vied for a cash prize which only amounted to a fraction of what they put into the performance. Unfortunately, the prize money is now a thing of the past. That does not stop the clubs from pushing one another to further innovation now driven by one thing alone: bragging rights.

In 2024, Mummers began their march at 17th and Market and traveled towards City Hall. This is where the judged performance occurs. Live viewers experience the processional nature of the day, but the City Hall performances are where those watching from the comfort of their couch get to see their favorite performers. Once finished with judging, they finish by parading down Broad Street until they reach Washington Ave. This has been the parade route since 2015, a change from the tradition that did not go over well with most mummers. Originally, Mummers began at Oregon and Broad and marched north to perform at City Hall, parading through the diversity of South Philly to begin the festivities. Instead of starting with the judged performance, they waited until the end of their grand processional. There was a build-up to the grand finale that brought them together and gave back to the city that nurtured them.

The String Bands are the focus of this paper. They are the most popular division and account for a large portion of the community outreach done by the Mummers. Clubs have traveled across the world to showcase their talents in regional parades. Playing locally at carnivals, weddings, community events, and down the shore are other popular ways of fundraising for their New Year's Day performance. String Band Clubs work year-long to prepare for the extravaganza, beginning to plan themes for the following year at the end of January. From there a designer works on creating the concepts behind costumes, props, and sets that then get sent over to their respective builders. A music set list is decided on and an arrangement is created to fit the band's needs and by May members get together to begin rehearsing. In October the Bands begin drilling and rehearsing choreography so that by December they are running the performance in its entirety, polishing up in preparation for the big day.

Over the last century, performances by the String Band division have evolved from marching band-style processional shows in ornate costumes to full-fledged "mini-musicals."

Their performance can be categorized into three separate eras: Marching Band, Midway, and “Mini-Musical.” The first and last terms receive their names from the Mummers Museum’s description of the String Bands:

For many years bands would perform marching band-style drills for their presentations. This changed in 1976 when the first dance routines were present in their presentation. Today the bands use elaborate props and scenery along with Broadway-style choreography to put on four and a half minutes shows. These shows resemble mini-musicals.²

From this the Midway Mummer Era was born, a bridge between the two styles articulated by the museum. The majority of the Marching Band Era predates the scope of the paper, but a few performances within this period are dedicated to impressive drill and musical sound with classic Mummers costumes. Overall, these performances are rather uptight compared to the other divisions. On the contrary, the performances of the “Mini-Musical” era are five minutes of pure spectacle with stationary, episodic performances featuring choreography, props, and scenery. They notably lack any form of procession and normally include a *money piece*, a theme-related float that is the centerpiece for the grand finale. It is important to note that there is no relation to the American Musical style. Rather the museum associates the choreography and grand scale of American Musicals to spectacular and stationary Mummers performances. The years in between I have deemed the Midway Era, simply because of their position bridging the two eras (this term is not intended to denote a carnival sideshow performance style). Within this span of performance, the string bands create energetic party-like atmospheres through music and dance with small but effective props. They do however keep the processional aspect of the Marching Band style. With these eras as the building blocks, this paper aims to give a chronological history of the performative changes in the Philadelphia Mummers String Band Division from 1968 to

² Mummers Museum. n.d. “String Band Division.” Mummers Museum. Accessed 2024.

2024 to track innovation over the past half century and hypothesize the future of Mummies' performances.

“O’ Dem Golden Slippers”: A Brief Mummies History

The premier historical account of the Philadelphia Mummies was written in 1968 by Charles E. Welch in his dissertation entitled *The Philadelphia Mummies Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition*. He later turned this work into a book, *O’ Dem Golden Slippers: The Colorful Story of the Philadelphia Mummies* which was published by Thomas Nelson Inc. in 1970. A later edition was published by local Philadelphia company Book Street Press with information dating up to 1991. It featured a plethora of visuals of the parade throughout the years. Before the extensive sources collected by Welch, the only known attempt to capture the history of the Mummies was by Frances Burke Brandt in an article written for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* of November 17 to 22, 1930.³ Since Welch’s work, several scholars have written about the Mummies including dissertations by Corey Elizabeth Leighton⁴ and Andrea Ignatoff Rothberg⁵. These writings have leaned heavily into the anthropological study of the parade and will be lightly referenced throughout.

In an article published in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Welch speaks of the state of mummery in 1966:

One cannot help but notice, in studying the Philadelphia Mummies Parade, that it is entering a new and lamentable phase. Spontaneity is losing out to regimentation. Eighteen rules—sixteen written, two unwritten (the ban on political satire and the ban on using blackface makeup)—now regulate the Comic Division. In addition to these are

³ Welch, Charles E. 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummies Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition.” Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 13

⁴ Leighton, Corey Elizabeth. 2009. “Strutting It up through Histories: A Performance Genealogy of the Philadelphia Mummies Parade.” Dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.

⁵ Andrea, Rothberg. 1980. “Philadelphia Mummery: Individual Rewards and Social Interaction.” Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

twenty-nine rules covering the Fancy Division and twenty-five rules covering the String Band Division. Each year these rules, which are mainly restrictive, increase, and the paraders lose still more of their sovereignty. Thus a once spontaneous, loosely organized, vital parade is becoming a highly organized, highly controlled, somewhat sterile representation, and seems likely to remain so.⁶

This quote was the spark for this undertaking, examining how performance aspects of the parade have changed by focusing primarily on the most popular of the divisions, the String Bands from 1968 to 2024.

Welch concludes that the origins of the Philadelphia Mummers will never be concretely known. The tradition of going door to door as part of holiday celebrations is common among cultures around the world. The immigration of Swedish and English people to Philadelphia in the late 17th and early 18th centuries allowed for a mix of these celebratory traditions. The Swedish population of South Philadelphia was known to shoot guns to ring in the New Year, which is the most likely reason for the Mummer's original name, the Shooters. The English tradition of the Mummer play, initially a music and drama presentation performed house to house around Christmas time, intermingled with these New Year's Shooters presentations. Because literate upper-class people typically did not engage in these traditional practices, there are not many written records of these happenings. A diary entry by Christopher Marshall recounts the January 1st celebration in 1781, the earliest written record of the Shooters. One final early contributor to the parade history is the Scottish immigrants that brought over their Guisers.⁷ This style of performance was similar to the English Mummer Play but included men dressing as women among other masked characters. This tradition of cross-dressing for performance has lasted to this day even with the inclusion of women in the parade in 1975.⁸

⁶ Welch, Charles E. 1966. "'Oh, Dem Golden Slippers': The Philadelphia Mummers Parade." *The Journal of American Folklore* 79 (314): 532-533

⁷ Welch, 1968. "The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition," 20-23

⁸ Welch, 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*. 167

A large boom occurred after the Civil War as America turned toward pageantry and minstrelsy, setting the stage for the grandiose celebrations of today and the parade's troubled history with blackface. The performers dressed in their various costumes and celebrated with dance and cheers around the streets of Philadelphia. The addition of Italian immigrants in the 19th century introduced a layer of Carnival to the overall celebrations in the city. It was at this time that Comic and Fancy clubs began to arise and groups of Shooters organized together to plan festivities.

The Shooters are connected to the term "mummers" for the first time in the July 1881 edition of the *Scribner Monthly*: "This custom, doubtless a remnant of the Old English Christmas 'mumming' grows year by year in Philadelphia, and the mummers, becoming bolder, penetrate as far north as Chestnut Street."⁹ Welch identifies the first organized mummers parade seven years later with the addition of a cash prize. In 1888, \$25.00 was awarded to the Thomas Clements Sr. Club as the sole competitor marching down Broad Street.

The organization of the Mummers Clubs came at an opportune moment for growth. At the turn of the century, H. Bart McHugh brought the plan to have the City of Philadelphia sponsor the Mummers Parade to J. Hampton Moore, secretary to Mayor Ashbridge. Mayor Ashbridge agreed to the plan and on January 1st, 1901 the Mummers paraded down Broad Street in the first official Philadelphia Mummers Parade with clubs vying for \$5,000 in cash prizes provided by the city.¹⁰ In the first parade, only Fancy and Comic clubs marched, but the String Bands were not far behind. The 1902 parade featured the first String Band to march, Trilby String Band. They were not recognized as a separate division until 1916 with judging arriving another two years later. From there many String Band clubs came and went which is congruent

⁹ Welch, 1968. "The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition," 39

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48

with the current state of Mummersy. However, several bands have stood the test of time and will be mentioned throughout the paper including Fralinger, Ferko, Aqua, South Philadelphia, Quaker City, and Greater Kensington.

The early bands consisted of guitars, banjos, and mandolins and were judged solely on their musical performance. Trilby had eighteen band members march in the introductory parade. In comparison, the minimum number of band members required to be able to march in 1968 was forty-eight. Over the sixty years of marching, the sound of the groups changed as they began to add clarinets, saxophones, drums, bass, and most importantly the glockenspiel. This collection of instruments allowed the bands to amass a large sound that was unique to the Mummers without using any sources of amplification. Their musical sets included popular music of the day mixed with Mummers classics like “O’ dem Golden Slippers.” The song was written by James A. Bland, a black man, as a satirical black spiritual in 1879.¹¹ Its popularity in the parade for over a century has allowed it to become the theme song of the Mummers organization.

As time passed, the bands were no longer judged on their music performance alone, and by 1968 they were judged 40% on Music, 40% on Costumes, and 20% on Performance. Welch mentioned that, “Another important point made by many Mummers is that competition is great, and each band tries to outdo the other.”¹² At this time the bands were pushing each other to play the songs faster. This competitive nature also allowed for progression in both costumes and marching style. Early on, the bands would march in top hats and dusters, but by the 1960’s, band members were in sequin-covered costumes with large back pieces and a captain whose costume mirrored the performers in the Fancy division. Furthermore, the simple marching step of the

¹¹ Welch, 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition,” 125

¹² Ibid., 122

early String Bands transformed just like the costumes in “an equal advance in drilling and originality in theme.”¹³

The Fancy Brigades became their own division in 1978, breaking away from the Fancy Division and solidifying their path towards their unique performance style. In 1997 the Fancy Brigade paraded down Broad Street for one last time as they voted later that year to show off their spectacle inside the warmth and protection of the Pennsylvania Convention Center.¹⁴

For the String Bands, 1991 was a year of change. Due to the rising cost of production materials, the scored categories were changed for the first time since costumes and presentation were added. The new scoring gave an equal fifty points to music (split evenly between arrangement and playing) and presentation (twenty points for production, twenty points for performance, and ten points for costumes). In severely diminishing the weight of the costumes, the organization believed the String Bands could cut the costs that were heading towards six figures at the time.¹⁵ However, bands continued to push the envelope come the turn of the 21st century. The scoring changed again in 1998,¹⁶ keeping the five subcategories but equally weighting each at twenty points, and again changed in 2007.¹⁷ The 2024 scoring is split between Music, General Effect Music, Visual Performance, and General Effect Visual with the first two categories being weighed at twenty points and the latter at thirty points.¹⁸

¹³Welch, 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition,” 128

¹⁴Mummers Museum . n.d. “Fancy Brigade Division.” Mummers Museum. Accessed 2024. <https://www.mummersmuseum.org/fancy-brigade-division/>.

¹⁵Welch, 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*. 191

¹⁶String Band Judges. 1998. “Philadelphia Mummers Parade String Band Division .” *String Band Database*.

¹⁷String Band Judges. 2007. “Philadelphia Mummers’ Parade String Band Division - BANDS.” *String Band Database*.

¹⁸Powers, B., C. Kilian, G. Ulrich, B. Relyea, S. Hartman, B. Kenny, E. Kitchenman, et al. 2024. “2024 String Band Division.” *String Band Database*. Philadelphia Mummers String Band Association.

The newest Mummers to parade down Broad are the Wench Brigades, an offshoot of the Comic Division. Introduced as part of the 2003 parade, clubs today send anywhere from 150 to 1500 Mummers strut in their satin bloomers.¹⁹

To close out the newest edition of his book, Welch speaks about the ways the Philadelphia Mummers have crept into other forms of entertainment including a musical, drama, and video documentary produced throughout the 1970's. Likewise, the first quarter of the 21st century has seen references to the Mummers in popular media. *The New Year's Parade* (2008), written and directed by Tom Quinn, is a family drama that examines the effects of a divorce on two children.²⁰ The movie is set on the streets of South Philadelphia and the father and son are both members of the South Philadelphia String Band, opening on January 1st, 2004 and ending exactly a year later with their presentation of "Humanapatra - Egyptian City of the Dead." The film took some liberties with the scoring of the 2004 parade, saying that South Philly finished 13th when in reality they came in a respectable 6th. This allowed the father to focus his pain on the success of the band's future, neglecting his duty to his family. Though the movie is fictional and has a few errors in scoring order to help shape the storyline, it does touch on the lack of success South Philadelphia String Band historically has had. They marched four times between 1915 and 1936, but have not missed a parade since 1947 (excluding the 2021 COVID-canceled parade). At the time of the movie's release, the band had only taken the top prize three times (1959, 1966, 1975), and in sixty-three performances had only finished top five eighteen times. Coincidentally, since 2008, the South Philadelphia String Band has not placed lower than fourth and has won first prize in five of the last eight parades. The movie also gives an inside look at some of the String Band Clubs, rehearsal atmospheres, and the year-long preparation that takes

¹⁹ Mummers Museum . n.d. "Wench Brigade Division." Mummers Museum.

²⁰ Quinn, Tom , dir. 2008. *The New Year Parade*. Film. Two Street Pictures.

place to put on this experience. It includes real footage from their 2005 performance and audio clips of conversations leading up to and following the parade. *The New Year's Parade* won four awards out of eight nominations across several film festivals including Best Director and Female Supporting Actress at the BendFilm Festival.²¹

Sports media also have deepened the reach of the Mummers. When the city celebrated the Eagles' first Super Bowl Championship in 2018, future Hall of Fame center Jason Kelce dawned a Kelly green Mummers suit. The costume was designed by James May, whose connection to the Mummers began in 1971 when he created the costumes for the Duffy String Band. The outfit Jason wore combined a hat from Avalon String Band's 2008 Irish-themed



Figure 1. Jason Kelce giving a speech at the 2018 Super Bowl Parade in a Mummers Costume. (USA Today. *Jason Kelce Super Bowl Parade*. February 18, 2018. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1043392225863377/?type=3>).

²¹ IMDB. n.d. "The New Year Parade (2008) - Awards - IMDb." [Www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). Accessed 2024.

performance with another May original jacket that was large enough to fit the offensive lineman.²² Kelce's historic speech at the Philadelphia Art Museum steps (see fig. 1) in his Mummer attire embodied the drive and competitiveness that is synonymous with the city and provides the force of innovation in the club. Again, Kelce was tied to the Mummies in 2024 as he appeared in WWE's WrestleMania 40 at Lincoln Financial Field. Wrestler Seth Rollins entered the ring accompanied by Mummies from fourteen different String Bands playing his walk-out song, "Visionary." Rollins was adorned in a pseudo-wrestling Mummer's outfit with an eagle across the chest.²³ Upcoming in sports, the Philadelphia Phillies triple-A affiliate, Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs, will temporarily be called the Lehigh Valley Mummies on August 10, 2024, as part of their "yearly Salute to Philly Promotion." The uniforms are blue and yellow, an ode to the colors of the city flag. The nameplate is framed with a few feathers and the logo on the cap is a Mummer decked out with golden slippers and an ornate headpiece topped with feathers and a treble clef.²⁴ These cultural references passing through the twenty-first century show the deep roots the art form has within the city of Philadelphia.

The Mummies have had several internet documentaries recently produced detailing their work. Most notable was the video documentary *Strut* by MJ Media which follows Clubs across all of the divisions in preparation for the 2001 parade.²⁵ A large part of the video is dedicated to watching John Zachwieja, former captain of the Polish American String Band, suit up for their performance of "Empire of the Sun." MJ Media also released a shorter video before the 2017

²²Forman, Beatrice . 2024. "Jason Kelce's Iconic Mummies Hat Is Being Discontinued. You Have until April 30 to Buy One." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 2024.

²³ Carroll, Gabriela. 2024. "All the Philly References from Both Nights of WrestleMania, from Jason Kelce to the Mummies." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 8, 2024.

²⁴ Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs . n.d. "Meet the Lehigh Valley Mummies." MiLB.com. Accessed 2024.

²⁵ MJ Media, 2019. "Strut." YouTube. December 31, 2019.

parade discussing the backlash Mummers have received and the struggle to continue marching.²⁶ Popular media group Barstool Sports also published a mini-documentary on YouTube following the 2020 parade with an inside look at the Fancy Brigades.²⁷ These three videos among others are publicly available and give a deeper inside look at the work that goes into these productions and the atmosphere that is created in Philadelphia on the first of January.

With a history centuries old, it was not always growth and celebration for the Mummers. Traces of American Minstrelsy are still present in the theme song of the Mummers. Blackface was prominent in the first half of the 20th century, even though Black Americans participated in many of the early parades. The use of blackface was banned in 1963, though several Clubs broke the rule throughout the rest of the decade. For the most part, blackface has been completely eradicated in the 21st century, but in a community so large there still seems to be a racist individual every once in a while, especially with the spontaneity of some divisions.²⁸ This is where the Comics and Wench Brigades receive backlash across several minority communities. Their satirical presentations sometimes turn from funny to offensive and their size makes it impossible to reign in rogue individuals.

As previously mentioned, women were not allowed to participate in the Broad Street festivities until 1975. The Dick Crean String Band brought along two women to officially end the ban, however, the next decade was filled with pushback.²⁹ Women's inclusion in the parade

²⁶ MJ Media. 2016. "Here We Stand: The Story of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade." www.youtube.com. December 6, 2016.

²⁷ Barstool Sports. 2020. "Barstool Sports Investigates the Drunkiest Dance Party." YouTube. January 7, 2020.

²⁸ Billy Penn Staff. 2021. "Mummers 101: Everything You Need to Know about Philly's Infamous New Year's Tradition." Billy Penn. December 30, 2021.

²⁹ Welch, 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*. 167

did not begin to take off until the late 1980's and there are still Clubs that only roll out men to march on New Year's Day in the 21st century.³⁰

Today the Mummers continue to make themselves known around the Philadelphia and South Jersey area. Around 10,000 mummers battle the cold to parade down Broad Street each year even as funding support from the city has diminished. Before the new century, the city of Philadelphia would annually provide around a million dollars for parade support and prizes. In 2019 the funding was down to just \$361,000 and there is no longer a provided cash prize.³¹ The price of production continues to rise and most String Band Clubs are now shelling out over six figures annually in preparation for New Year's Day. This has caused a decline in String Band club numbers, an issue Welch pointed out in 1991 when only twenty-one bands marched, six fewer than five years earlier in 1986.³² In 2024, only fourteen bands marched. Similarly, audience attendance has also taken a hit in the last few decades as the judges and television production team are the dominant focus of the performance. The side audiences are left to watch from the seats obstructed by scenery. Viewership through the broadcast, however, has been on an upswing as the 2024 parade saw a fifty-two percent increase from the previous year. The resilience of the people from the City of Brotherly Love has been the driving force behind a tradition older than the city itself. The official 1901 parade only marks a midpoint in a history that is interwoven with that of Philadelphia.

The Tale of Two Fralingers: 1968 v. 2024

The deep examination of the past fifty years of String Band performances would not have been possible without Brian Hamburg and his work on the String Band Database, publicly

³⁰ Leighton, Corey Elizabeth. 2009. "Strutting It up through Histories: A Performance Genealogy of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade," 76

³¹ Billy Penn Staff. 2021. "Mummers 101: Everything You Need to Know about Philly's Infamous New Year's Tradition." Billy Penn. December 30, 2021.

³² Welch, 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*. 191

available online. Hamburg, a member of the Fralinger String Band since 2001, detailed how this resource was molded over the years in a conversation with the author:

For years we had an Excel spreadsheet that was passed around, mostly curated by Russ Coleman, also of Fralinger. But it predates him, and some older members of the string bands such as John Gilbert and Joe "Bagel" Strine helped get it to that point, often referencing old Show of Shows program books. Russ would then give that Excel file to Joe Fink of Uptown, who would add that data to his website at the time, making it accessible to a larger audience but not searchable or sortable. Then there's Brian Maher of Woodland, who keeps the String Band Record PDF up-to-date and has been a huge resource for filling in the blanks and giving some of the earlier parades better context. TJ Ferry of Quaker City has been the main mum curator in recent years and worked closely with me to add new features. I've basically handed the reins over to TJ once we had a solid base built. I really can't take any more credit than those guys who made it possible.³³

The database lists marching order, scorecards, and themes amongst other information on the New Year's Day activities. Beyond this, it has linked YouTube Videos of performances as early as 1967, with a complete list of band performances beginning with the 1976 parade (a fitting year as most of the bands themed themselves to celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of America). That being said, any performance mentioned moving forward can be found digitally through the use of the String Band Database.

In preparation for diving into fifty years of change, the following section is a description of a performance from both the starting point and current-day parade. Representing the Marching Band Era is Fralinger String Band's 1968 performance, themed "The Bells of St. Mary's," staying congruent with the writing of Welch's dissertation. Further, the Mini-Musical Era performance used for comparison will be Fralinger's "Beyond the Bayou" keeping the band consistent throughout.

³³ Hamburg, Brian . Email to Kirk Slingluff. 2024. "String Band Database." Email , March 18, 2024.

1968

Even though the last day of 1967 had left a few inches of snow on the Philadelphia area, the Mummers took their place parading down Broad Street bright and early on January 1st, 1968. That morning, the twelfth band to march out of twenty-two, The Fralinger String Band, had played themselves into the First Prize in the division with their performance of “The Bells of St. Mary’s”³⁴ scoring a 96.10 out of 100 total points. Fralinger received a perfect 40 out of 40 in Music, 37 out of 40 in Costume, and 19.10 out of 20 in Performance.³⁵ Their Captain, John J. Fralinger Jr. placed third amongst captains. They were awarded \$2470 and \$75 respectively for their efforts that day.³⁶

The twenty-eight rules and regulations that governed the String Band division for the 1968 parade are published as part of Welch’s dissertation. Many on the list at this time deal with parade routes, disqualifications, and timekeeping procedures. Among these traditional guidelines are some notable rules including the long-standing ban on women from marching (rule 17) and the very recent ban on blackface in the parade (rule 24). Further, in 1968 the String Bands were not allowed to have floats accompany their performances (rule 2) and could only display a banner of the band’s name (rule 12) which had to be smaller than six feet and not higher than fifty feet off the ground (rule 11). The band size is also governed similarly, with Rule 1 stating, “All String Bands must have at least 48 players in line of march and not more than 10 non-playing costumed members at any point of the compass, either vertical or horizontal

³⁴ thelonearranger1. 2015a. “Fralinger String Band 1968- the Bells of Saint Mary- First Prize.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1968; WFIL Channel 6. March 27, 2015.

³⁵ Howard, Winterstein, Barnett, Leon, Ford, Cathart, and Jenny. 1968. “1968 MUMMER’S Parade.” *String Band Database*.

³⁶ Welch, 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition,” 327

(including aides). Each band may have a maximum of 64 playing men plus 1 playing Musical Director.”³⁷ The rule goes on to give exceptions for weather delays.

Fralinger paraded that day in blue sequined Mummer suits piped with white. Their large back piece, similar to what might be seen in Rio de Janeiro during Carnival, was outlined in pure white feathers and featured images of bells. Each band member had a cape flowing behind them and wore a “mummerfied” version of a Bishop’s mitre. Fralinger Jr. was adorned in a matching costume with gold as the base instead of blue and a backpiece that outsized the band member’s version.



Figure 2. Fralinger String Band’s 1968 performance, “The Bells of St. Mary” (Temple University Libraries. *Fralinger String Band 1968*. n.d. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/fralinger-string-band-1968-fralinger-string-band-wins-first-prize-in-the-mummers/998422763693657/>).

³⁷ Welch, 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition,” 304-305

The televised performance was recorded from several angles, and as the judging occurred, the band was still marching down the street. Their footwork and synchronicity mirrored that of a marching band playing at half-time as they utilized a similar box drill technique. The only differences between the String Bands at this time and the common marching band were the uniqueness of the instrumental arrangements and the ornate suits.

As the band conducted their movement, John J. Fralinger Jr. (see fig. 2) did the Mummer's strut, the common two-step present during the festivities, at the forefront. Corey Elizabeth Leighton, during research for her dissertation entitled *Strutting it up through histories: a performance genealogy of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade*, learned the strut. The movement was described to her as a combination of a box step with a bent knee and a chicken-like flapping of the arms, as the chest is held high and the head bowed.³⁸ My favorite description comes from former Polish American Captain, John Zachwieja, when he said, "The strut is just what it is. It makes you powerful. You're like a peacock, and a peacock when it walks it struts. You know 'you're proud as a peacock.' You got your finest on, you got your feathers on, and then you start to strut."³⁹ The strut as a performance device for String Band captains originated with Joe Ferko, as his initial dance is described as being like that of an indigenous people's war dance. The addition of the bent knee occurred after Ferko's joint stiffened up before a performance and he could not straighten his knee; the stylistic change caught on with the crowds.⁴⁰ It is commonly performed with a cane or parasol to accompany the bounce of the movement.

³⁸ Leighton. 2009. "Strutting It up through Histories: A Performance Genealogy of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade," 6

³⁹ MJ Media, 2019. "Strut."

⁴⁰ Welch, 1968. "The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition," 126

Herb Smith Jr arranged Fralinger's set that day; it was his third year working with the band and his tenure would last until 2002 (he also returned to arrange their 2020 performance). It featured a mashup of three songs made popular from motion picture: "Get Me to the Church on Time" from *My Fair Lady*, "For Me and My Gal," and "The Bells of St. Mary's" (the latter two are the title songs from their respective films). The mashup was highly favored and well executed resulting in Fralinger's perfect score in the music category.

2024

The Mummies marching this past parade were given a much easier day than their brothers of 1968. Philadelphia saw cloudy skies with a high in the mid-40s on January 1, 2024.⁴¹ Fralinger was set to march second out of the dwindling fourteen bands slated for the afternoon. Unlike the 1968 band, they could not pull out the win this past year but still found their way to the podium with a third-place finish scoring 95.50 out of 100 total points.⁴² Fralinger received 19.35 out of 20 in Music, 18.80 out of 20 in General Effect Music, 28.75 out of 30 in Visual Performance, and 28.60 out of 30 in General Effect Visual for their performance of "Beyond the Bayou."⁴³ The band's musical dominance has transcended the half-century as they received the highest honor in the category.

As the bayou performance began, the audience was presented with a dock and fishing hut at the forefront, acting as a pseudo-proscenium for the duration of the spectacle. From there the opening stage picture consisted of four flats: two placed together creating a graveyard gate with

⁴¹ Kelly, Bill. 2024. "Philadelphia Weather: Mostly Cloudy New Year's Day, Chance for Light Passing Rain - CBS Philadelphia." www.cbsnews.com. January 1, 2024.

⁴² Powers, B., C. Kilian, G. Ulrich, B. Relyea, S. Hartman, B. Kenny, E. Kitchenman, et al. 2024. "2024 String Band Division." *String Band Database*. Philadelphia Mummies String Band Association.

⁴³ Philadelphia Mummies String Band Association. 2024a. "2024 Fralinger String Band – 'beyond the Bayou.'" YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2024; METV Channel 2. January 1, 2024.

“SHADOWMAN” written at the bottom and a spinning witch doctor head in the center with a flat on either side painted like the fog-filled graveyard within. As the music marked the start of this grandiose happening, four sequined black skeletons appeared from under the dock to pull the gate open as a fog machine spewed a layer of mist over Broad Street. The open gate revealed a large demonic head whose mouth opened allowing Brad Bowen, Fralinger’s captain, to enter. His suit was made of silver and black sequins in a zig-zag formation, red and purple feathers flowing from his shoulders, and a top hat finished with a skull and other voodoo imagery. As the demon head rolled away the entirety of the band was unveiled.

Fralinger was backdropped by a painting of a nighttime bayou, the water reflecting the trees highlighted by the glow of lightning bugs. Acting as wings on the sides of the street, two rich forest-green flats sit behind large spinning fans mimicking the back of the airboats used to traverse the water. In the center of the Broadstreet stage lies one final flat, a lighter green bayou scene. A line of saxophonists in blue and gold with mystic card back pieces begin a dance line led by Bowen with a snake-encircled staff; the athleticism and skill level give off hints of the dance break in a Broadway musical. As they part, the center flat swings forward allowing a group of saxophonists with alligator headpieces to begin bobbing their way forward through the marsh.

For a moment, the performance begins to feel more traditional in its movement. The performers are in a marching band formation moving as one, but those movements still have a flair of basic musical theatre ensemble choreography. Marching is replaced by step touches, sashays, and grape vines. Instead of standing tall and playing their instruments, they are shimmying in all directions emphasizing the sound they create and adding rolling movements that wave across the group.

The four sequined skeletons invite along four more friends to begin a dance line front and center with Bowen at the point. Their barrel rolls, kicks, and three-point turns are accentuated by the glittery fringe of the costumes. The choreography covered the entrance of a small shack. Eventually, Bowen throws dynamite behind the cabin, and as two puffs of red glitter escape from behind, the doors swing open revealing the banjo and bass players dressed as swamp vegetation and fish heads. As they made their way forward, the skeletons fished on the edge of the docks. They wrestled their catch as the band danced behind, and once caught the fish became puppets singing along with the band, the only use of words in the performance.

From here, the band parted to make way for a voodoo shop. The captain emerged from within and the top of the building folded down to become a twelve-foot tall voodoo doll. Bowen danced center as the skeletons twirled two tentacles each and the band returned to a classic box step on either side of the street creating one mesmerizing stage picture. This was elevated, as the



Figure 3. Fralinger accordionists being followed by a showboat (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Fralinger String Band 2024*. January 7, 2024. Photograph. X. <https://x.com/PhilaStringBand/status/1744145735484940723>).

band mellowed into their ballad, lowering themselves to a kneeling position and swaying. The voodoo doll turned around to become a pink lotus, and two jars, painted to look like they were housing a multitude of fireflies, flanked either side of the flower. A performer in a frog costume sat atop each jar first releasing a shot of yellow confetti, then opening the jars' lids to let hundreds of yellow balloons fill the Philadelphia sky.

The final episode of the performance was pure celebration and pandemonium. The flower cleared the stage so that a wheel paddle steamboat (see fig. 3) could parade down Broad Street. The boat houses downstage broke from their docks joining the jars in turning and creating the sides of the showboat which now took over the width of the city street. To close out, the boat separated down its center and an alligator head wearing a purple and gold crown rolled forward, sparks flying from its head and ridden by Captain Barry Bowen (see fig. 4).



Figure 4. Brad Bowen on top of the cajun alligator (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Captain Brad Bowen*. January 7, 2024. Photograph. X. <https://x.com/PhilaStringBand/status/1744145735484940723>).

This haunted bayou theme, the first of its kind, was designed by Russ Fama with help from costumer Ralph Tursi. Choreographer Dana Theil crafted the dynamic movement throughout the arrangement from Chris Farr.

...

From these descriptions alone, the differences in the magnitude of these productions are evident. The early performances were processional, even when the time came for judging. The 1968 video from Fralinger, though the only example from that year, exemplifies the box drill style of the parade in the 1960s. Instead, the current String Bands create a vast world for their mummer shenanigans and stop their parading to put on a mass spectacle. This is backed up by the production of the televised feed. Disregarding advancements in video production over this time, the early parade had many moving cameras following the performers as they marched through the judgment area whereas the recording of the 2024 performance is mostly stationary from the front with a few close-up shots mirroring the way live stage performances are archived. The costumes look less like the traditional suits presented in the Fancy Division and are now beholden more to the theme. Even the themes themselves have changed as innovation has allowed the mind's playground to become a Philadelphian's New Year's Day presentation. However, the question remains, what is the story of the in-between and how did the String Band performances reach the magnitude where they currently stand?

Midway Mummary: The Broad Street of Innovation from 1970-2024

Covering over a half-century of String Band performances is a daunting task as each year anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five bands march each performing a five-minute set. To maximize the search this section will evaluate the top five performing bands from each year. This will center the discussion around innovation through the lens of judging popularity. Overall, for

most of this history, these bands are competing for a cash prize, albeit small, and more importantly, bragging rights for the next year.

1971-1980

In the first decade of this exploration, seventeen different bands graced the top five. Of those seventeen, Ferko had the most success with eight years in the top five. Other notable bands from this decade are Fralinger (7), Harrowgate (5), Polish American (4), South Philly (4), Greater Kensington (3), and Quaker City (3). The only two bands to take top prize multiple times were Fralinger (1973 and 1980) and Harrowgate (1976 and 1977).

Early in this decade, two major themes dominated: music and ethnicity. The 1971 parade included titles such as “Rhythm and Beauty,” “A Latin Carnival,” “Echoes of Vaudeville,” and “Our American Holiday.” Themes like these gave bands the ability to find popular songs related to the style and add a unique flair to the costumes without disrupting the Mummer look. One other style of theme common at the time was Broadway as some bands would play selections from musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof* or *Music Man*. This use of popular culture was evident even in the 1960s with the musical selections played in Fralinger’s “Bells of St. Mary.” In 1976 the bands came together, almost exclusively doing performances centered around America, celebrating the country's 200th birthday. By the time the decade was coming to a close, early explorations into theme possibilities began. Quaker City won the 1978 parade with their performance entitled “Kaleidoscope of Colors,”. Though still dominated by the classic theming, the 1979 parade had performances entitled “Galactic Encounters,” “Black Magic,” and “A Game of Chess.”

Out of the decades that lie ahead, this is the most incomplete in terms of recorded history. The String Band Database’s video log is not comprehensive up until 1976, but most of the

performances that fit the scoring criteria are present. This decade can be categorized by its innovation in Costume and Choreography. It makes sense: the string bands had found their signature sound, though they were continuing to push the speed. The two other components of this marching band style of performance were the drill and their costumes. The String Bands had originally marched with top hats and dusters, but by the end of the 1960s were wearing vibrant costumes in line with the Fancies. This expansion into larger costumes brings about what I call the *costume-set*, a costume normally worn by the captain that acts as an object inside the playing space. The start of this movement was noted earlier by Welch when he wrote, “In the 1967 parade, Captain Frank J. Beatty, marching in his second parade as a leader, wore on his shoulders a Dutch Windmill fifteen feet high, and thirteen feet wide.”⁴⁴ This example came from the Dick Crean String Band and gives an earlier example of the costume-set. Further, bands continued to drill throughout the decade, however, in 1976 dancers were first introduced into the routines.⁴⁵ The addition of costumed dancers marks the beginning of the movement toward the “mini-musical” style that the String Bands evolved into.

Though this decade is marked by its costumes and choreography, the first notable observation is a set piece in 1971. It might be a stretch categorizing this under a set, but in 1971 Hegeman String Band used an easel with signs to track their journey down the Club’s memory lane in “Rhythm and Beauty.”⁴⁶ This might not have been the first time a band used this technique, but by the rules of 1968 provided by Welch, this would have been illegal. Several bands follow suit in years to come. The use of these signs is not significant in the movement of

⁴⁴ Welch, 1968. “The Philadelphia Mummers Parade: A Study in History, Folklore, and Popular Tradition,” 114

⁴⁵ Mummers Museum. n.d. “String Band Division.”

⁴⁶ thelonearranger1. 2010a. “Mummers Parade 1971- Hegeman String Band.” YouTube. Originally aired Jan. 2, 1971; WFIL Channel 6. June 15, 2010.

this history but gives an initial glimpse into how the performance eventually becomes in place and loses the processional nature of the early parades.

A costume-set makes its first appearance in 1973, during Greater Overbrook's performance of "Ballroom Reflections."⁴⁷ Captain Jim Driadon's costume (see fig. 5) initially looked normal among the mummies. The backpiece was made of a half sphere covered in silver, mimicking a disco ball. Near the end of the performance, a group of band members gathered around the captain and leaned forward, their feathers first acting as a shield, then like white rays of light from the captain's suit. The half sphere opened into a full disco ball with Jim Driadon completely encased inside spinning to create the illusion. This transforming sphere costume was refaced several times for various future themes.



Figure 5. Captain Jim Driadon in front of Greater Overbrook wearing the unopened disco costume. Greater Overbrook String Band. *1973 Ballroom Reflections*. November 27, 2023. Photograph. Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=900975021919665&set=pb.100060215264695.-2207520000>.

⁴⁷ Marty Rotindo. 2013. "Overbrook String Band 1973 Ballroom Reflections." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1973; WPVI Channel 6. March 16, 2013.

In 1974 the only video available is of the second-place performance “The Greatest Show on Earth” by Fralinger.⁴⁸ The circus theme was enhanced by various clown lazzi. Having costumed performers outside of the Captain and Bandmember was not new to the bands. In 1974 Aqua had Mickey Mouse and the Big Bad Wolf in their 1972 presentation.⁴⁹ However, the effectiveness of these performers differed between the two. Aqua’s characters were paraded down the street and were there for the spectators’ amusement whereas Fralinger’s clowns added to the overall performance and is the seedling for further episodic developments.

My favorite instance of a costume-set appears in 1975. Garden State’s captain, Ralph Anello, appears with what looks like a large crown floating above his head around eight feet in diameter.⁵⁰ For the early part of the performance Anello had difficulty keeping this large, mostly hollow structure balanced above him, however, when the time came he took his position in front of the band. Accordionists and banjoists surrounded and bobbed in a circular path around the captain as their back pieces lowered to display horses. Floating above Anello was not a crown, but instead the crest and bearing of a carousel. Ultimately, the size of his costume cost the band heavily on the effectiveness of the illusion, though the attempt was still beautiful and unique.

The Mummies Museum lists the introduction of choreography into the String Bands as 1976, though through my research I would more accurately place the beginning of dance as a core part of the parade a year earlier in 1975. Even in just the exploration of the top five bands, there are two examples of choreographed dance from that year. Greater Kensington’s “Let’s Face

⁴⁸ theonearranger1. 2015b. “Fralinger String Band 1974- the Greatest Show on Earth.” YouTube. Originally aired Jan. 5, 1974;

⁴⁹ theonearranger1. 2010b. “1972 Mummies Parade- Aqua String Band.” YouTube. Originally aired Jan. 1, 1972; WPVI Channel 6. June 21, 2010.

⁵⁰ TJ Ferry. 2017a. “1975 Garden State String Band ‘Calliope Magic’ - 4th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1975; WPVI Channel 6. November 23, 2017.

the Music and Dance”⁵¹ featured ballroom dancing in front of the band members while Harrowgate had their accordions and banjos stop playing to participate in a line dance during “The Thing.”⁵² The important change in 1976 was the introduction of an independent dance core that performed as an ensemble in front of the band with the Captain. Saying that choreography was first introduced in 1976 discredits the multitude of musicians who also danced a year prior. Yet, by far 1976 is the more significant year overall; it marks the beginning of the Midway Mummer Era.

This one addition branched out into separate changes outside of choreography that began to shape the Midway Mummer Era. Traditional mummies' costumes were too bulky for dancers to optimally perform in so they wore a thematic costume distinct from those of the other band members. Though they lacked the grandiosity of the musicians and captains, they were just as sparkly and allowed the dancers to be a small ensemble within the larger band. It also began the use of props and set pieces. Dancers started using stools, themed actor blocks, and other props to aid in their routines. Small set pieces begin to grow and the uniformity within the band's costumes begin to break as the decade heads towards a close.

Three performances highlight the innovations throughout the tail end of the decade and display a basic example of what is to come throughout the 1980s. The first is Fralinger's 1977 performance of “Yesterday in the Park” which placed second behind Harrowgate.⁵³ White feathers in mass paraded down the street with mummies in 1930s-style costumes. Fralinger again featured a set of happenings out front of the band as they had in 1974, but this time a

⁵¹ TJ Ferry. 2017b. “1975 Greater Kensington String Band ‘Let’s Face the Music and Dance’ - 2nd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1975; WPVI Channel 6. November 23, 2017.

⁵² TJ Ferry. 2017c. “1975 Harrowgate String Band ‘the Thing’ - 5th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1975; WPVI Channel 6. November 23, 2017.

⁵³ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2014a. “1977 Fralinger String Band ‘Yesterday in the Park’ 2nd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 2, 1977; WPVI Channel 6. June 30, 2014.

presentation of a hyperrealistic day at the park. An ice cream vendor and balloon salesman wandered as people sat on benches and waltzed around Broad Street as if they were in a wide-open park surrounded by trees. As the band filed off at the end of their performance, the banjo players sang. The audio quality and lack of amplifications (per the rules) make it hard to hear through the recording. However, this is just one example of the use of unison voice, whether in song or exclamation, in the String Band division. This will be a technique used off and on throughout the decades and, as recording equipment improves, television viewers get a better taste of the String Band's vocal abilities.

Greater Kensington's first-place performance of "Oz Odyssey" in 1979 featured vignettes from *The Wizard of Oz*.⁵⁴ The theme was most likely influenced by the movie release of *The Wiz* the year prior as they began their set with "Ease on Down the Road." A small shack sat downstage left, representing Dorothy's house. It spun in front of the band as they played tornado music. Dorothy and a stuffed Toto emerged from the shack, underscored by "Somewhere Over The Rainbow." She was later joined by Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion. They danced as Saxophone players in all gold surrounded them, symbolizing the yellow brick road. Captain Ron Moyer's back piece was outfitted with the mechanical Oz face on the rear and a rainbow above his head on the front. The four friends made their way to him where they received the gifts featured in the original story. Extensive celebration filled the street as the main characters in the story danced center and the band played the end of their set. The piece brought together a full artistic vision and represented a two-hour story in less than five minutes. It incorporated choreography and small props to produce a complete presentation.

⁵⁴ bandfan46. 2018. "1979 NYD Greater Kensington." YouTube. Originally aired Jan. 6, 1979; WPVI Channel 6.

The final performance brought Rome to Philadelphia when Greater Kensington performed “Veni, Vidi, Vici” in 1980.⁵⁵ Leaving behind Oz, Moyer became Caesar and wore a feather-covered chariot costume with a fake black horse leading the way. A group of saxophonists were dressed in togas with poles extending from their backs on either side where Roman columns arose. They formed a pseudo-court in the middle of Broad, making a semicircle with the majority of the band playing from behind. This open space was the stage for gladiator fights, trials, and dances as Caesar watched on from his chariot. Greater Kensington may not have had dance cores like some other bands but, for two years, they used their non-instrumented members to tell a story. A combination of these two styles will be used moving forward.

1981-1990

Only twelve bands scored in the top five throughout the 1980s, five less than the previous decade. Declining competition for the top spots is a trend that will continue in the future decades. The most frequent bands in the top five during this decade are Ferko and Quaker City, both only missing the top five one year. Fralinger was close behind making it eight out of the ten years. From there, Polish American and Greater Kensington finished in this grouping six and five times respectively. Fralinger and Polish American both took home the top prize three times in the decade. Quaker City came in first twice while Ferko and Greater Kensington each came in first a single time. Unfortunately, as the decades continue and the price of competing increases, powerhouses in the String Band division arise. Competition is always the driving force behind the changes, but some clubs tend to dominate in the division.

Animal themes were popularized in the 1980's. Before then, all animal themes were specifically bird-related. It is easy to theme around songbirds and peacocks with their

⁵⁵ TJ Ferry. 2020. “1980 Greater Kensington String Band ‘Veni, Vidi, Vici’ - 4th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1980; WPVI Channel 6. November 19, 2020.

feather-heavy costumes and beautiful music. In 1986 Quaker City performed “Showtime in the Key of SEA”⁵⁶ outfitted with ocean creatures while South Jersey became bears for “Thank God I’m A Country Bear.”⁵⁷ Unity within the band loses out to their dedication to the theme. Sections become separate personas and create characters amongst the players. Though simple face paint had been used in the 1970s, bands began to dawn elaborate makeup and masks to portray their characters further. Overall, this shift in costuming allows a variety of elaborate themes to emerge.

Performances during the first half of the 1980s were heavily influenced by experimentation with sets and props. Their incorporation into the performances in the latter half of the 1970s allowed for growth early on in the 1980s. String bands began setting their performances in front of backdrops with transforming props throughout the piece. This growth halted in the second half of the decade. Dancing took the front seat as dance breaks became more elaborate and tighter in execution while being set to the popular music of the time. These changes cause the parades of the late 1980s to become party atmospheres of mass celebration.

Quaker City’s performance of “Making Music - 1931” performed fifty years from the date of the theme provides a great example of the early transformable set pieces created by the mummies.⁵⁸ Risers were built to add levels to the band. When they were finished using them for that purpose, the risers folded up and became faux pianos that several dancers danced with. A year later, Ferko did an ode to the Bowery.⁵⁹ Newsstands and small skyscrapers were built on

⁵⁶ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011d. “1986 Quaker City String Band - Showtime in the Key of Sea.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1986; WCAU Channel 10. April 8, 2011.

⁵⁷ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011e. “1986 South Jersey String Band - Thank God I’m a Country Bear.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1986; WCAU Channel 10. April 8, 2011.

⁵⁸ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2014b. “1981 Quaker City String Band ‘Making Music 1931’ 5th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1981; WCAU Channel 10. July 3, 2014.

⁵⁹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013w. “1982 Ferko String Band ‘Golden Memories of the Bowery’ - 1st Prize.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 2, 1982; WCAU Channel 10. December 4, 2013.

flats and placed within the scenes. Backdrops were introduced by Polish American in 1983.⁶⁰ In their performance of “Thanks for the Memories, U.S.O.,” a small changing backdrop sat center and covered about a quarter of the total street. It switched between several different Armed Forces-themed looks including Army barracks, Air Force planes, and Navy ships. The corresponding costumed characters danced in front of the backdrop as the band played around them. Avalon followed suit in 1984 when they performed a tribute to Duke Ellington.⁶¹ They had a small backdrop of showgirls painted in an art-deco style. It was then removed to reveal a large set of piano keys.

A pirate ship sailed down Broad Street in 1984 when Greater Kensington String Band performed “Swashbuckling Showman.”⁶² Hundreds of brown and white feathers covered the ship that sat behind the band. The mast loomed over the performers. Near the center of the performance, a group of pirates rode the ship down the center of the street. They jumped out as they neared the bottom of the performance area and began dancing as the ship rolled off left. In 1985, Avalon took Philadelphians out of the ocean and placed them in outer space with a pop culture dump of sci-fi hits.⁶³ Costumes ranged from general aliens, Darth Vader, and E.T. while the music followed similar references. Behind the band, a short backdrop of a starry abyss sat and the finale of the piece featured a spinning UFO emitting smoke high above the stars (see fig. 6).

⁶⁰ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011a. “Polish American String Band 1983 - Thanks for the Memories--USO.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1983; WCAU Channel 10. January 19, 2011.

⁶¹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011b. “Avalon String Band 1984 - the Artistry of Ellington.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1984; WCAU Channel 10. January 27, 2011.

⁶² baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011c. “Greater Kensington String Band 1984 - Swashbuckling Showmen.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1984; WCAU Channel 10. January 27, 2011.

⁶³ TJ Ferry. 2018. “1985 Avalon String Band ‘the Sky’s the Limit’ - 3rd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 6, 1985; WCAU Channel 10. August 31, 2018.



Figure 6. Avalon's UFO from 1985 (Avalon String Band. *The Sky's the Limit*. January 6, 1985. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/qEw8LtTp1I>).

Those two examples show a push towards bigger and more experimental set pieces, but the second half of the decade does not follow. Bands begin mimicking the first few years of the decade utilizing cutouts for small scenes. During this time the dancing becomes even more important. Just as Welch mentioned the improvement of Drill Quality throughout the 1950s and 1960s, choreography in the late 1980s became the highlight of the performance. Captains began stripping off their backpieces after making their entrance to start the performance. This allowed them to participate in the dance breaks that were increasingly more difficult each year. The rapid improvement of the quality of dance marks the peak of the “Midway Mummery Era” for me. Dances become mastered and bands continue to distance themselves from the orthodox box drills in marching band which can be recognized as a fully realized style from the Marching Band Era presentations.

The culmination of these changes can be felt significantly in the 1988 parade. Each band in that year created well-rounded productions. Greater Kensington took first place followed by

South Philadelphia, Quaker City, Ferko, and Fralinger. All five clubs at the top put on energetic celebrations of song and dance. A fake piano was the only set piece for both Quaker City's "Go for Baroque"⁶⁴ and Ferko's "Ragg-Time"⁶⁵ while Fralinger's only props in "Musical Marionettes"⁶⁶ were unplayed brass instruments. What they lacked in scenery they filled with movement and jubilee. Quaker City performed a toy theme that year. The band had slightly more scenery than other bands of the year. They began their performance from behind a toy box facade that fell. Groups of clowns, cowboys, and toy soldiers danced in unison as the music flowed through the genres to fit the movement and type of toy front and center. In essence, the 1988 parade depicts a peak in this style of mummery with the String Bands reaching a new level of quality.

Fans in 1989 cheered so loud that they drowned out the bands through the television broadcast. This is a golden era for the String Bands. Crowds roared in admiration as they saw the spectacle that had been developed on the streets of Philadelphia. The piece that best represents the end of the decade comes from Fralinger String Band and their performance of "Stage Fright."⁶⁷ Brick pillars with a gate sat in front of the band as smoke poured out and gravestones on backpieces sat behind building the graveyard scene. As they began playing the theme from *Phantom of the Opera*, their captain emerged from the smoke as the Phantom. The well-known theme morphed into Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and the crowd erupted into cheers while dancers performed the choreography from Jackson's music video. The band was a mix of

⁶⁴ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011h. "1988 Quaker City String Bands - the Last Wound-Up." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1988; KYW Channel 3. April 13, 2011.

⁶⁵ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011f. "1988 Ferko String Band - Raggs-Time." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1988; KYW Channel 3. April 13, 2011.

⁶⁶ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011g. "1988 Fralinger String Band - Musical Marionettes." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1988; KYW Channel 3. April 13, 2011.

⁶⁷ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2011i. "1989 Fralinger String Band - Stage Fright." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1989; KYW Channel 3. April 13, 2011. <https://youtu.be/GjXgl9geZig>.

Frankenstein's monsters, skeletons, and ghosts. In a twisted turn, the ensemble of the dead closed out their set by playing "I've Had the Time of My Life." This performance found a lovely harmony between popular music, well-crafted choreography, and pointed scenery, neatly packaging the innovations made throughout the 1980s in one performance.

1991-2000

Variation in the top five bands reached single digits in the 1990s when only nine clubs took the fifty spots of the decade. Ferko String Band owned this ten-year span not missing the top five and coming first four times. Quaker City also won four times in the '90s but missed the top 5 in 1992. Fralinger and Avalon both qualified eight out of the ten years, neither getting to the top. The other two first prizes went to the Hegeman String Band. Half of Hegeman's appearances in this group were as the top prize winner. The other four bands to qualify were Uptown (4), Polish American (3), Woodland (2), and Greater Kensington (2).

Animal themes continued to be popular, helping turn Broad Street into a zoo across the 1990s. Swamp animals, ducks, bunnies, jungle cats, and barnyard critters all found their way into the parade. Antiheroes also rose in popularity as mobsters and "bad boys" strut through the New Year's Parade to arrangements of *West Side Story* and popular rock hits.

Now that the bands had begun to master their new style of performance, it was time to find a new avenue in which to expand. Their sights were turned back to scenery and props. This decade is marked by the craftiness of visual effects. Bands began to consider sight lines, working in ways to build episodic productions with reveals throughout the performance. Costume pieces continue to individualize within the bands, most becoming more apt to movement, while backpieces found an important place within the overall visual effect. The scenery also continues to develop as levels grow higher, and backdrop paintings deepen in quality. All of these qualities

were built on a strong foundation of music and choreography allowing the focus to turn back to the technical side of the performance.

The unfortunate side effect of continually going further with theme-inspired costumes in this decade is the use of brownface makeup. Ethnic styling of themes had continued popularity throughout the end of the 20th Century exploring cultures all around the world. When performing themes inspired by Latin America, Asia, or Indigenous cultures, bands would bronze the face as part of the costume in similar ways to how Hollywood would whitewash film and television. These traditions have been left in the past, but mark a controversial portion of the String Band's history.

Uptown String Band's performance of "I Love Paris" in 1992 is an early example of prop gags and visual effects with transforming scenery.⁶⁸ The opening stage picture featured Captain Jamie Caldwell as Napoleon underneath the Arc de Triomphe. As the band began to march, the monument folded in on itself and other panels of the backdrop joined its side to create a point perspective picture of the Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower. The road on the backdrop spread, connecting to Broad Street at the base, finishing the effect of the scenery traveling away from the band. The band continued to play as strips of white sheets were put together behind the band. As the band split, the white strips flipped and revealed a painting of a white horse. Caldwell was revealed to be behind the fabric riding a two-dimensional horse cut out. The next vignette featured smaller flats creating a cafe while waiters danced around the street followed by a flat two-story champagne bottle. A kickline closed out the performance. Though only six dancers participated, the line looked double in size because three of the dancers had female mannequins attached to them. Rods attached to either side of the mummer forced the mannequin to copycat

⁶⁸ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013a. "1992 Uptown String Band - I Love Paris." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1992; WHYI Channel 12. October 28, 2013.

their movements. Uptown's creative use of puppets, cutouts, and paneled backdrops are just the beginning of explorations that occurred throughout the 1990's.

Quaker City's 1993⁶⁹, 1994⁷⁰, and 1996⁷¹ presentations all featured costumes that masked a portion of the wearer's body. Their 1993 performance featured dancers wearing pants on their arms and shirts beginning at their shoulders with their bottom half hidden in an asphalt-colored sack. This technique allowed the performers to appear only a foot tall. The following year Quaker City performed a military theme entitled "They're Privates" that comedically went through the day at an army battalion. Two of the soldiers ran out in striped pajamas and nightcaps with their sparkly uniforms on hangers dancing behind. Black fabric was used to cover the faces of the clothing dancers. The final example, two years later, was set in a bayou. The few back pieces that were used for band members had alligators and crawfish emerging from within. When the alligator band members hinged at the waist, the audience was treated with a feathery marsh and its feared predator peering from inside. All three design choices by Quaker City exhibit the Mumpers' continued innovation within costuming.

The Lone Star State was brought to Philadelphia in 1994 when Uptown String Band performed "Deep in the Heart of Texas."⁷² Cowboys with cactus back pieces played banjos as lassos twirled in the sky backdropped by a wild west sunset. A line-dancing crew of oversized cowboy hats with pink hearts took the front of the stage while "Achey Breaky Heart" underscored their movements. The visual marvel comes as the captain, now devoid of his

⁶⁹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013c. "1993 Quaker City String Band La Quakeracha." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1993; KYW Channel 3. October 29, 2013.

⁷⁰ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013e. "1994 Quaker City String Band - They're Privates." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1994; KYW Channel 3. October 30, 2013.

⁷¹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013i. "1996 Quaker City String Band 'Runnin' This Bayou' - 2nd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1996; WPHL Channel 17. November 18, 2013.

⁷² baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013f. "1994 Uptown String Band - Deep in the Heart of Texas." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1994; KYW Channel 3. October 30, 2013.

traditional back piece featuring the silhouette of Texas, got on top of a horse cutout. A smaller background on a rotating track moved behind creating the illusion of movement. Later on, Uptown's male dancers laid their back on a bar that appeared stage left covering their top half with cowgirl mannequins. As they kicked their legs in unison to the music the cowboys transformed into a seated can-can ensemble. With the heart of Texas and the soul of Philadelphia, Uptown created a majestic cowboy extravaganza.

Fancier sets forced the innovation in lightweight backdrop panels, three-dimensional set pieces, and levels. Backdrops are enlarged and, being made up of several panels, begin taking up the entirety of the width of the street. Breaking up these scenery pieces allowed stagehands to change sets in record time by easily flipping around the panels. Examples of this technique can be found in Uptown's 1992⁷³ and 1994⁷⁴ performance along with Ferko's performance in 1995⁷⁵. By the end of the 1990s, most clubs were utilizing flats in this way whether in large squared-off backdrops, or cutouts made to look like objects. Three-dimensional set pieces, though originating much earlier in the 1970's, began to become commonplace as well. Bands would use these items as a way of revealing sections of the band midway through the performance. Quaker City's Cuban-themed performance "Havan-a Good Time" featured two Cuban cigar boxes fitting human-sized cigars. When the lid was opened the accordion and banjo section were greeted with cheers from the audience. Finding places to include levels in performance began hand in hand with the addition of the dance core. Clubs at the time utilized theme-painted actor blocks, faux pianos, and bars to get dancers high above the street. In the late-1990's however, bands wanted to

⁷³ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013a. "1992 Uptown String Band - I Love Paris." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1992; WHYY Channel 12. October 28, 2013.

⁷⁴ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013f. "1994 Uptown String Band - Deep in the Heart of Texas." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1994; KYW Channel 3. October 30, 2013.

⁷⁵ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013g. "1995 Ferko String Band - How the West Was Fun." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1995; WPHL Channel 17. October 30, 2013.

get higher as the scenery had developed into elaborate, structurally sound pieces. Greater Kensington in 1998⁷⁶ and Ferko a year later⁷⁷ had two-story building flats with an accessible second floor. A performer donning the persona of Evita mouthed the words of “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” from the second-story window as the band played below in Quaker City’s “Greater K. Down South American Way.” Ferko opted to have their levels on the front side of the building during “Wise Guys and Jive.” Mobsters stood on the fire escape hoisting money bags to their accomplices below (see fig. 7). These innovations paved the way for more extensive set designs leading into the 21st century.



Figure 7. Ferko’s two level set piece (Ferko String Band). *Wise Guys and Jive*. January 1, 1999. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/ZObfyL5G8L0>.

As scenery became easier to maneuver, the performance structure changed to incorporate a grand reveal of the band to start a show. This device was not new at the time; Quaker City in

⁷⁶ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013o. “1998 Greater Kensington String Band ‘down South Amercia Way’ 3rd Place.” *YouTube*. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1998; WPHL Channel 17. November 19, 2013.

⁷⁷ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013r. “1999 Ferko String Band ‘Wise Guy’s & Jive’ - 3rd Place.” *YouTube*. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1999; WPHL Channel 17. November 21, 2013.

1988 and Fralinger in 1989 had used similar techniques. However, by 1995 this opening episode was so popular that three of the top five bands had a reveal. A mylar-covered UFO was the opening picture for Quaker City's "Take Us To Your Leader."⁷⁸ Marvin the Martian appeared from the doors observing where he had landed as the band emerged flanking the sides of the spacecraft. Smoke billowed from the doors as the UFO split in two allowing Captain Bob Shannon Jr. to strut forward and join the band. Fralinger's New Orleans-inspired performance began with a slow march down the street. Bill Bowen Jr. was covered by a casket with his legs poking out as pallbearers carried it down the street. The rest of the band was shrouded with a sheer purple fabric the width of the city street. Though not as big of a reveal, Uptown's "Off the Wall With King Tut" began with a pyramid shielding a third of the band. The unveiling of the band and smaller sections within is a performance device that was popularized in the 1990s and continues throughout the 21st century.

Costume-sets also make a resurgence as it becomes common for captains to strip away their backpieces. Without the worry of impeding their dance, captains would come out in costumes reminiscent of the early 1970s. John Pignotti Jr donned the persona of a preacher for a church theme entitled "Hegeman Knows Hymns" in 1997.⁷⁹ Gold, white, and red sequins surrounded by white feathers encircle the captain creating a pulpit at his chest. A year earlier Woodland's captain, Dave Anderson Jr., led his band as Zeus in "It's All Greek to Me."⁸⁰ He carried along his blue and white chariot car, reminiscent of the Greater Kensington's 1980 performance, though Anderson's lacked a horse. Every club did not venture back into

⁷⁸ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013h. "1995 Quaker City String Band - Take Us to Your Leader." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1995; WPHL Channel 17. October 31, 2013.

⁷⁹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013m. "1997 Hegeman String Band Hegeman Knows Hymn 3rd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1997; WPHL Channel 17. November 18, 2013.

⁸⁰ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013j. "1996 Woodland String Band 'It's All Greek to Me' - 5th Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1996; WPHL Channel 17. November 18, 2013.

costume-sets, but most began to return to extremely large backpieces to start shows, holding onto tradition at the turn of the century.

The declining usage of backpieces for band members outside of the captain continues, but those that remain become more important during the 1990s. Performances begin to become episodic in nature because of the innovations in scenery. Sets become mobile, diverse costumes allow for characters to develop, and choreography works in tandem with skits to further the theme. String bands begin finding ways to use backpieces to create walls shielding the next sequence in their set. This is just another way the band is able to reveal new elements as part of their complete performances.

The best opening sequences of this decade come from the back-to-back first-place finishes by Ferko String Band in 1997 and 1998. “Fish Schtick” was an underwater adventure



Figure 8. Costume's from Ferko's 1988 "Choo Choo Ch-Boogie" (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Ferko String Band 1998*. December 7, 2020. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1578810665654861/?type=3>).

packed full of sea creatures.⁸¹ However, the story begins above the water where a clueless fisherman loafs in his dingy. Two blue satin corkscrew cylinders spun center covering the front of the band. White feather foam on the ridges offered a mesmerizing wave effect. Blue satin fabric covered the top of the band. Waves were created through the ripples and layering of the pieces. A boat sat in between the fabric with the fisherman on top of the band. The band marched down the street in this tight configuration until making it to the bottom of the judging zone where the coverings were taken away and the sea creatures revealed themselves. In 1998, Ferko traded in the ocean for a train station.⁸² Captain Bill Speziale Sr. led eight train flats down Broad Street. The largest of the trains was centered with the others descending in size outwards each being offset behind the other. This use of perspective elongated the street and was a grand opening for an ode to early modern transportation.

Recording technology improved by the end of the decade and at home audiences were treated with audible vocals. Bands at this time also become more willing to include singing in their presentations. Ferko⁸³, Fralinger⁸⁴, and Hegeman⁸⁵ all sang during their set and came out top three in the standings in 1997. Before these improvements were made, Ferko and Fralinger sang in 1993⁸⁶ and 1994⁸⁷ respectively. Quaker City included vocals in their 1998 parade

⁸¹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013k. "1997 Ferko String Band Fish Schtick 1st Prize." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1997; WPHL Channel 17. November 18, 2013.

⁸² baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013n. "1998 Ferko String Band "Choo Choo Ch-Boogie - 1st Prize." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1998; WPHL Channel 17. November 19, 2013.

⁸³ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013k. "1997 Ferko String Band Fish Schtick 1st Prize."

⁸⁴ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013l. "1997 Fralinger String Band the Kingdom of Swing & String 2nd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1997; WPHL Channel 17. November 18, 2013.

⁸⁵ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013m. "1997 Hegeman String Band Hegeman Knows Hymn 3rd Place."

⁸⁶ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013b. "1993 Ferko String Band Barnyard Boogie." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1993; KYW Channel 3. October 29, 2013.

⁸⁷ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013d. "1994 Fralinger String Band - Goin' for Gold." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1994; KYW Channel 3. October 30, 2013.

performance.⁸⁸ Fralinger found continued success and again sang in 2000 though this time in Spanish for “Fralinger Reigns in Spain.”⁸⁹

Avalon’s performance “Spike Up The Band” in 1999 acts as a lovely end to the decade and a bridge towards the 21st century.⁹⁰ An ode to Spike Jones, a comedic musician famous from the 1930s to 1960s, the performance highlighted many features of the 1990s techniques. The band did its grand reveal to open the performance, the wall in front produced by hundreds of feathers from the few musicians with backpieces. As they marched forward, a small stand was set up stage right with a sign “Spike’s Slide Show.” Performers stood behind the wall that had pants attached to the front. Wires puppeteered from behind made the pants drop to the prop ankles revealing boxers underneath. A paneled back curtain was erected where oversized hands and a matching Spike Jones caricature popped out. This large puppet is the seed for bigger *money pieces* that will take over the next decade.

2001-2010

The 21st century’s first decade is the Fralinger String Band Dynasty. They placed top five all ten years and won the String Band Division each year from 2003 to 2010, the longest winning streak in the String Band Division’s history. Two other bands also made the group every year: Quaker City (taking the other two top prizes in 2001 and 2002) and Ferko. Avalon came in with a respectable eight top-five finishes and South Philadelphia was right behind with seven. The remaining five spots that these bands left on the table were divided among Greater Kensington

⁸⁸ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013p. “1998 Quaker City String Band ‘Saddle Tales’ - 3rd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1998; WPHL Channel 17. November 19, 2013.

⁸⁹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013s. “2000 Fralinger String Band ‘Reigns in Spain’ - 2nd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2000; WPHL Channel 17. November 22, 2013.

⁹⁰ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013q. “1999 Avalon String Band ‘Spike up the Band’ - 4th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 1999; WPHL Channel 17. November 21, 2013.

(3), Polish American (1), and Uptown (1) resulting in only eight separate clubs ranking top five from 2001 to 2010.

The themes of the decade reflect the dynamic changes that begin to dominate the String Bands in the 21st Century. Clubs had the ability to create costumes and sets that could back up any theme. Original themes of the decade include golf, clocks, senior citizens, haunted disco, and fishermen. Among the decade's top fives, ethnicity themes still dominate. Hobo and hillbilly themes also rise in popularity and are featured numerous times in the top five throughout this decade.

This decade marks the beginning of the “mini-musical” as performances begin to resemble the grand scale that they have reached today. Improvements in scenery made in the latter half of the previous decade, rule changes, and a push towards spectacle shape this decade and the future of the String Band Division. However, these things didn’t click immediately and bands began to sacrifice choreography for larger sets or vice versa. The first few years of the 21st-century feature anticlimactic dances and overall feel stagnant. It comes nowhere close to the stunning movement sequences that dominated the late eighties and early nineties. However as the Mummies have done so many times in the past, they innovate and then master. By 2005 bands had revitalized the dance with scenery like never before. The mini-musical is born.

Such a bright decade starts with disappointment as boos rained down from the parade attendees in 2001 during Avalon’s performance of “Main St. Memories.”⁹¹ Musicians in striped suit jackets and boater hats paraded next to a three-dimensional cherry red street car made out of painted flats. Once the band got to the base of the street, a gazebo was constructed behind giving the street an old-town feel. Two minutes into the set, Avalon decided to erect a paneled painting

⁹¹ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013t. “2001 Avalon String Band ‘Main St. Memories’ - 4th Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2001; WPHL Channel 17. November 25, 2013.

of a row of houses completely blocking the view of the entire left side of the street. The Mummers got a taste of what it's like to be a struggling sports star in the city of Philadelphia, though receiving fourth in the judges' standings they were far from the fan favorite that day. The crowd was so boisterous that it was picked up in the television broadcast.

The money-piece steams ahead and show-stopping grand spectacle becomes the focus of the decade. Clubs doing whatever they can to one-up the competitors begin scraping the sixteen-foot height limit placed on the performances. Bigger was better, and a grand prop reveal to close a performance was the common closing technique. An early example comes from Fralinger's "A Festival of Knights" in 2002 when they featured two floats around twelve feet tall.⁹² The first was Merlin's head and the second was the top half of a dragon with a moving head. By 2005, the bands had reached their height limit. "Avalon's Arctic Adventure" ended with an appearance of the Abominable Snowman from *Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer*, peering over their iceberg backdrop.⁹³ Fralinger kept up with this growth; the end of their 2007 Indigenous-themed performance ended with an eagle that had to be a hair off from disqualifying the club.⁹⁴

Back pieces amongst the band phased out in 2004. Three of the top five bands of the year lack any traditional back pieces outside of the captain. By 2005, there was not a single club in the top five that had band members in the classic mummer attire. The leading factor in this change was the cost to supply so many feathers, though the change also affected the overall performance

⁹² baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013u. "2002 Fralinger String Band 'a Festival of Knights' - 2nd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2002; WPHL Channel 17. November 26, 2013.

⁹³ baritonesilver MARCHESA. 2013v. "2005 Avalon String Band 'Arctic Adventure' - 3rd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2005; WPHL Channel 17. November 27, 2013.

⁹⁴ PhillyMummers. 2008a. "Fralinger String Band: 2007." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 6, 2007; WPHL Channel 17. March 11, 2008.

to come. As more scenery was used in the decade, there was less of a need for convenient coverage. The space on the street was now valuable and in turn, the backpieces became obsolete.

The 2005 New Year's Parade marks the beginning of the “mini-musical” in my eyes. Features of innovation emerge to create a competitive structure to the overall performance. Music stays the number one focus, worth forty percent of the overall score, clubs that live at the top sound consistently impeccable. Drill, though affected by the addition of choreography, is tight and flowing throughout the piece. Choreography returns to the lively and professional nature that defined the premier performances of the Midway-Mummery era. Innovations from the 1990s begin to define the standard for scenery and props. There was a backdrop, engineered in different ways to fit the needs of the performance, that gave the general setting of the performance. Combinations of two-dimensional and three-dimensional scenery add depth to the street and act to hide the episodic nature of the show. Props highlight the theme and are



Figure 9. Quaker City setting up their performance before the judging begins in 2006. Quaker City String Band. *That Old Gang of Mine*. January 1, 2006. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/JkGiOwJ1dsc>.

incorporated heavily into the choreography, mostly for comedic effect. The color commentator in 2006, Jake Hart, updates the audiences of the recent rule changes stating, “Last year was the first time they permitted performers to get in the judging area before they began to play.”⁹⁵ Bands now could set the props in the judgment zone and preset themselves to start a performance (see fig. 9). This change removed the remaining processional elements in the judgment section of the parade, but is the final leap to bringing on the “Mini-Musical” Era of the String Band division. For the first time, entire environments are created on the city street.

A year later two performances highlight the expansiveness of this new form of mummery: Quaker City’s “The Old Gang of Mine” and South Philadelphia’s “That’s Enter-TRAIN-ment.” Both performances incorporated the above features of the “mini-musical” while highlighting the decade’s innovation. The opening street picture included half of Quaker City’s band members standing upstage by large flats depicting 1920s Chicago, as the other half sat in a downstage cafe reading a newspaper or playing their instruments.⁹⁶ As the performance began Captain Bob Shannon Jr. (see fig. 10) rolled out downstage from behind the cafe in a real 1939 Buick. The rules only allowed functional wheels to be as large as nine inches, so the car was gutted and placed on a dolly for the performance. Building front flats acted as doors allowing a bank vault to move forward and reveal the robbers inside. Smaller buildings opened up to oversized champagne bottles and playing cards. A casino interior rolled in from the center doors, two dice flats flanked either side of the band, and two of the building flats turned revealing slots machines all while the band played “Luck Be a Lady Tonight.”

⁹⁵ TJ Ferry . 2017d. “2006 Quaker City String Band ‘That Old Gang of Mine’ - 2nd Place.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2006; WPHL Channel 17. December 30, 2017.

⁹⁶ TJ Ferry . 2017d. “2006 Quaker City String Band ‘That Old Gang of Mine’ - 2nd Place.”

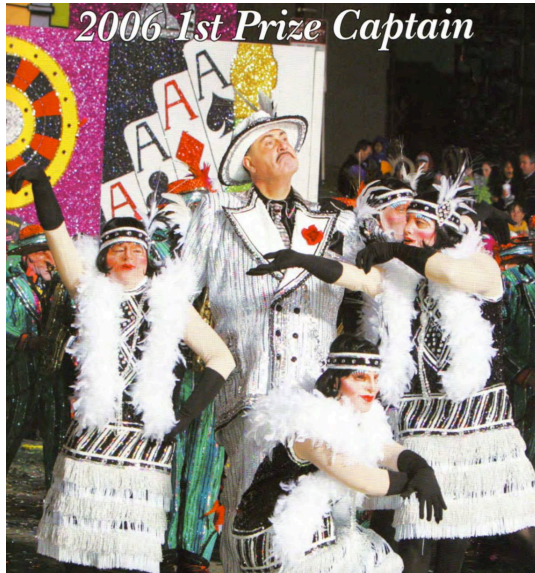


Figure 10. Bob Shannon Jr. in 2006 mob boss costume. Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Bob Shannon Jr., 2006.* July 19, 2019. Photograph. *Facebook.*

South Philadelphia’s “That’s Enter-TRAIN-ment” is the first performance where a band covers the street in a tarp to further immerse themselves into the environment of the theme.⁹⁷ Below their feet lie railroad tracks surrounded by green grass. They used this technique for the next two years, with Avalon joining them in 2008.⁹⁸ Their performance was backed by a multilayer hillside, lined with tunnels and railroad tracks, allowing train puppets of different sizes to run along. The train grew until it disappeared one final time and appeared from a tunnel arch stage right. This moving beast of a scenery piece included an engine and three train cars and was around ten to twelve feet tall and nearly as long as the width of the street. The train sat up center for the duration of the piece completing the expansive environment for their performance.

⁹⁷ 69mets86. 2008. “South Philadelphia String Band 2006- That’s EnterTRAINment.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2006; WPHL Channel 17. October 16, 2008.

⁹⁸ PhillyMummers. 2008b. “Avalon String Band: 2008.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2008; WPHL Channel 17. April 24, 2008.



Figure 11. A viking ship takes on the street of Philadelphia in 2007, an example of the money-piece (Quaker City String Band. *A Viking's Quest*. January 7, 2007. Screenshot. *Youtube*. https://youtu.be/3NOO5i_7V3s).

With these innovations came one final structural change that seemed to take over the String Band Division throughout the latter part of the decade. The money-pieces continue, but some bands use their appearance for one last grand reveal of the Captain. In 2010, all five captains from the best-scored bands rode in on an object near the end of the performance. Thomas D'Amore from Fralinger⁹⁹, Anthony Celenza from Ferko¹⁰⁰, and Jack Hee from Avalon¹⁰¹ all caught a ride from a train to end their performances while Quaker City's Charlie

⁹⁹ 69mets86. 2010e. "Fralinger String Band 2010 Mums Parade Wide Angle." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2010; WPHL Channel 17. June 24, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ 69mets86. 2010d. "Ferko String Band 2010 Mums Parade Wide Angle." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2010; WPHL Channel 17. June 24, 2010. <https://youtu.be/l81i6lpzlVI>.

¹⁰¹ 69mets86. 2010a. "Avalon String Band 2010 Mums Parade Wide Angle." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2010; WPHL Channel 17. June 23, 2010.

Roetz opted for a horse-drawn chariot¹⁰² and South Philadelphia's Denny Palandro chose an owl.¹⁰³

Fralinger capped off their eight-parade winning streak with "Fralinger's Feudin', Fussin' and Fightin'."¹⁰⁴ Possibly due to the 2008 recession, the latter years of this decade display a slight decline in the use of scenery. Still as detailed as before, many performances in 2009 and 2010 feature fewer pieces than in the four years that began the mini-musical era. This is highlighted in Fralinger's performance. The street was filled with outhouses, log cabins, and cornfield flats as hillbilly mummers danced in unison. A truck float was used to carry on mummers at the start of the performance, then again from the side to reveal banjo players in rocking chairs. It was utilized a third time as its backside was equipped with a spinning saw blade. This began the workday section of the performance as the dancing crew jumped over and around saw horses. The music slowed as paneled quilts were erected behind the band. Hillbillies swayed in choir formation as their instruments rang the "Tennessee Waltz". The quilts parted for the train engine mentioned above as the music swelled to a boisterous finale. Though it lacked some of the extravagance of previous years, the String Bands had solidified their new style of performance.

2011-2020

One less band breaks the top five as eight clubs drop to seven. Fralinger loses steam after their eight-parade winning streak and only takes home first place in 2013 and 2015, though still placing top five all ten years. South Philadelphia improved on their seven finishes by not missing the top five in these ten years while winning three times (2016, 2018, and 2020). The gold medal

¹⁰² 69mets86. 2010b. "Quaker City String Band 2010 Mummers Parade Wide Angle." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2010; WPHL Channel 17. June 23, 2010.

¹⁰³ 69mets86.2010c. "South Philly String Band 2010 Mummers Parade Wide Angle." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2010; WPHL Channel 17. June 23, 2010.

¹⁰⁴ 69mets86. 2010e. "Fralinger String Band 2010 Mummers Parade Wide Angle."

leader was Quaker City who spread out four victories in ten years but missed the top five in 2016. Woodland String Band took the last remaining victory and placed in this group nine times. Ferko's unrelenting dominance began to wane as they missed out on a top-five finish in 2014, the first time not placing in the group since 1987. They went on to fall out of the top five again in 2019 and 2020 totaling only seven appearances in the decade. Avalon (3) and Hegeman (2) were the only other bands to finish top five between 2011 and 2020.

For the most part, theme choices do not change much throughout the decade. Ethnic themes still dominate the parade with an increasing number of regional American themes. Throughout the ten years, there was the debut of gnomes, Greek gods, and bakers as theming choices. By the end of the decade, bands began to bring back pop culture-driven themes with performances that reference *Alice and Wonderland*, *Batman*, *The Godfather*, and *Jurassic Park*.

String Bands begin to strive for more, testing the limits as to what can fit in one five-minute performance and their street stage. The seeming decline at the end of the previous decade does not continue over to the 2010s. Props and scenery become more detailed. Years of innovation provided the backbone for the use of a variety of techniques moving forward. Bands were able to utilize their discoveries from previous parades to prepare performances that were geared directly to the theme at hand. As the decade progresses, technology begins to creep into their performances as well, building visual effects unimaginable a decade prior. However, just as scenery and choreography began its infancy in exploration, so too does technology only scratched the surface of its possibilities throughout these ten years.

Between 2011 and 2014 the barn door backdrop becomes standard for the bands. Normally the backdrop was split into two or four-wheeled flats spread out across this street. This design allowed clubs to utilize the backdrop as entrances for reveals during the performance.

Their versatility allowed them to be reused across several parades, saving resources for other parts of the show. Because of this, a convention begins to emerge where props are funneled in through the center and downstage. Once they were through with that particular section they would either be moved off through the outlets downstage or around the sides and back behind the backdrop.

Foreground pieces begin to increase in popularity as well. Starting as small props to fully encapsulate the space, by the end of the decade bands begin to experiment with themed stages that run along the front of the judging zone. Along with a growing use of three-dimensional side pieces, the Mummers finally begin using the complete space that they are given, deepening the immersion into their fantasies. Mossy caskets housing undead band members in 2013,¹⁰⁵ white picket fences covered with rose bushes in 2014,¹⁰⁶ and large machine pipes in 2015 lined the front of the street are some examples of these early pieces.¹⁰⁷ The forward momentum culminates in the 2016 parade where all five top bands have foreground pieces. Hegeman¹⁰⁸ and South Philadelphia String Bands¹⁰⁹ each had a platform along the front acting as a stage and framing the performance. With a stage that is bookended by skyscrapers, proscenium arches become unrealistic. Mummers instead create a *proscenium fence*, framing the foreground of their performances with themed scenery and stages.

¹⁰⁵ mummersparade. 2013. "Frailer String Band Mummers 2013." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2013; WPHL Channel 17. January 1, 2013.

¹⁰⁶ mummersparade. 2014a. "Hegeman String Band Mummers 2014." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2014; WPHL Channel 17. January 5, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Mr Mummer. 2015. "Frailer String Band - 2015 Mummers Parade - Philadelphia Mummers." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2015; WPHL Channel 17. January 1, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016c. "16-13 Hegeman." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2016; WPHL Channel 17. January 2, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016b. "16-9 South Philadelphia." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2016; WPHL Channel 17. January 2, 2016.

Fralinger's first prize performance in 2013, "Back From the Dead," is my favorite String Band performance of all time.¹¹⁰ As a twelve year old this performance was ingrained in my mind and sparked my love of the Mummies. Saxophonists emerged from the downstage rose-covered coffins as other band members rolled out from cracked crypts and tombstones. Skeletons emerged from a haunted stagecoach and danced with Captain Thomas D'Amore to the theme from *Phantom of the Opera*. This was followed by a demented version of the wedding march with pairs of Frankenstein and Frankenstein's Bride marching down the street. A gold and purple organ rolled to the center of the playing space and the band crowded around to play "Music of the Night" as D'Amore pretended to tickle the ivory of the massive instrument in front of him. This all culminated in an electric grand finale featuring a fifteen-foot smoking skull. This style of String Band performances had begun to flourish, and bands were on the precipice of mastering a way to combine high-level music and dance with grand spectacle.

The decade's main source of exploration comes from technology and the ways it impacted visual effects. These advancements come in all shapes and sizes. The most popular is the addition of confetti and multi-colored dust guns to the long-standing use of smoke machines. For the most part, they just add to the grandiose performance, but in some instances are cleverly used for visual effects. One instance of this is Quaker City's "California Here We MUM" in 2014.¹¹¹ Yellow confetti rained down on gold miners as the set switched from the mines to piles of gold. Instead of just being part of the grand spectacle, the confetti added to the story and incorporated a striking visual to hide the change of scenery upstage. In addition to these two, the String Bands also begin to experiment with filling the sky with balloons. This did not take off

¹¹⁰ mummiesparade. 2013. "Fralinger String Band Mummies 2013."

¹¹¹ mummiesparade. 2014b. "Quaker City String Band Mummies 2014." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2014; WPHL Channel 17. January 5, 2014.



Figure 12. LED Screen in Hegeman’s 2014 performance (Hegeman String Band. *Hegeman’s Household Havoc*. January 1, 2014. Screenshot. *Youtube*. <https://youtu.be/WCVLt4ZIBHw>).

like confetti, dust, and smoke. However, some clubs develop crafty usages such as Fralinger’s use of balloons referenced in the previous section.

The second largest movement in technology was the introduction of the LED screen. It was first introduced in 2014 by Hegeman String Band in their performance “Hegeman’s Household Havoc.”¹¹² For most of the performance the screen resembled an old tube television (see fig. 12), displaying scenes from hit movies throughout history as the band played music from the respective soundtrack. Clubs took this and ran with it. Ferko and Hegeman both utilized visual displays as part of their performance in 2016. Screens filled the width of the street creating a flowing underwater background for Hegeman’s “The CODfather The SEAquel”.¹¹³ Conversely, Ferko did not dive as deep utilizing smaller displays to show a wizard duel between Captain Anthony Celenza and the performance’s villain in “Field of Screams.”¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, Celenza

¹¹² mummiesparade. 2014a. “Hegeman String Band Mummies 2014.”

¹¹³ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016c. “16-13 Hegeman.”

¹¹⁴ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016d. “16-17 Ferko.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2016; WPHL Channel 17. January 2, 2016.

reappeared from behind the video before his virtual double disappeared, taking away from the effect. The following year Fralinger’s “Spellbinding” utilized small screens similar to Ferko, acting as a transforming spellbook, magic ball, and a clock that controlled the band’s tempo.¹¹⁵ To end the decade, the South Philadelphia String Band featured the technique in 2019 as color-changing butterflies flew about center amongst a myriad of other set pieces.¹¹⁶

Other avenues of technological advance have been explored on less significant scales. Lights have been used sparsely in the past, but the advent of LEDs made their addition easier. They found their way into both costumes and scenery throughout the decade. It becomes



Figure 13. Scott Wray on an moving creature in “Undiscovered” (Fralinger String Band, *Scott Wray 2016*, 2016, Photograph, *Fralinger.org*, 2016, <https://www.fralinger.org/photos-2016>).

¹¹⁵ Stephen Fritz. 2017. “Mummers 2017 String Band 12 Fralinger.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2017; WPHL Channel 17. January 3, 2017.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Fritz. 2019. “Mummers 2019 String Band 12 South Philadelphia.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2019; WPHL Channel 17. January 1, 2019.

customary for money-pieces of the past to integrate moving parts, no longer relying on just the wagon-wheeled entrance to provide extravagance. Large static animals are replaced by animated creatures through the use of large-scale puppet techniques and electric motors (see fig. 13). Mummies also found themselves in unimaginable positions throughout the decade. Early on, Captain Carlie Roetz of Quaker City was lifted into the sky flying as a toy superhero.¹¹⁷ This stunt was framed by an oversized Etch-A-Sketch and backdropped by a painting of the sky that switched from day to night giving the perception of movement for the flying Mummer. In 2015, Fralinger's banjo players were strapped onto cogs and rolled onto the street.¹¹⁸ They played parts of the set completely upside down. The final interesting one-off feature of the decade was Fralinger's use of drones to create flying ghosts in 2016.¹¹⁹ If history tells us anything, the Mummies will continue to experiment with these techniques to derive their potential within parade performances.

As 1988 is a peak for the Midway Mummer, 2016 acts as the paramount for the "Mini-Musical". A beautiful harmony of techniques arises across the top five that plateaus near the end of the decade. The 2016 parade featured Aztec adventures, haunted cornfields, dinosaurs, and underwater mobsters among countless other hybrid themes. All five of the top performances exhibited flawless executions of choreography, music, and scenery while beginning to utilize technology to create full-stage pictures to an elite degree. Less than four points separated first from fifth place with all five of these bands receiving a score higher than ninety. The Mummies had confidently mastered this new form of parade performance after eleven years of growth.

¹¹⁷ Quaker City String Band. 2020. "2012 Quaker City String Band 'a Toys Night Out' - 2nd Place." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2012; WPHL Channel 17. March 30, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Mr Mummer. 2015. "Fralinger String Band - 2015 Mummies Parade - Philadelphia Mummies."

¹¹⁹ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016a. "16-3 Fralinger." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2016; WPHL Channel 17. January 2, 2016.



Figure 14. The spinning wheel of death. (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *The Spinning Wheel of Death*. January 2, 2020. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/PhillyMummersSBA/photos/pb.100044239173492.-2207520000/1291259547743309/?type=3>).

From that point through the end of the decade, the performances begin to plateau and the Mummers relish in the mastery of this performance. South Philadelphia’s first-place 2020 performance, “CarouSPELL”, is an over-the-top carnival nightmare.¹²⁰ A Zultar-esque fortune teller sat center masking the band, and as the music started he peeled away to reveal carnival tents and trailer center with Captain Palandro in fortune-teller attire atop surrounded by LED lightning clouds. He waved his arm, conjuring a collection of circus peanuts, cotton candy, carousel horses, and balloons. The performance consisted of a whirlwind of amusement park amenities. Roller coaster cars ran around the street, a mummer attached to a bullseye spun midair (see fig. 14), and a Ferris wheel came off its axis to crash from sidewalk to sidewalk. This amazing display ended with the release of the bears: two running on balls surrounding a third that was just a head as tall as the two full-bodied bears.

¹²⁰ Stephen Fritz. 2020. “Mummers 2020 String Band 04 South Philadelphia.” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2020; WPHL Channel 17. January 1, 2020.

2021-2024

Our current decade of String Band performances began like none before: without a New Year's Day Mummers Parade. The Coronavirus Pandemic did not affect the 2020 parade, but the lockdowns that began in March forced the cancellation of the 2021 parade for the first time in over a century. Returning in 2022, Mother Nature forced the Mummers to wait one extra day as rain caused the parade to occur on January 2. The City of Philadelphia made changes in the year off and when Mummers came back to Broad Street they had gone through required sensitivity training, an effort to keep controversy out of the Mummers.¹²¹

With the cancellation of the 2021 parade, only forty-five top-five spots are available in this decade. Currently, the fifteen spots are all occupied by the same five bands in different orders: South Philadelphia, Quaker City, Fralinger, Avalon, and Woodland. The last three decades have each decreased by one band, so if trends continue there should be at least one more band to reach the top five in the next six years. Ferko, who has yet to make an appearance on the list, has not gone a decade with less than seven top-five showings since the 1960's. Expect them to break up the monotony at the top.

New themes have dominated the decade so far. Half of the fourteen themes in 2024 were original for that parade: Christmas, Hillbilly Animals, Inventor, Museum, Video Games, Twisted Candy, and Voodoo Bayou. Bands have also returned to leaning deeper into pop culture to source their theme choices similar to the 1970s and 1980s. Beetlejuice, Audrey II, and the Grinch all make appearances as well as most of the characters from the *Super Mario* franchise. Hopefully, this trend of pop culture references will continue for years to come and influence a shift in music back to modern hits.

¹²¹ Donyéa, Tennyson . 2022. "As Mummers Parade Returns to Mark 2022, Philadelphians Hopeful for the New Year." WHYI. January 2, 2022.

Performances on January 2, 2022, looked a little different than those of recent years. Bands were limited to one box truck for any props or scenery in their presentation. This stipulation reverted the style to the Midway Mummer era. Movement was stellar and the street was no longer packed with scenery. Explorations with the barn door pieces proved important because their two-dimensional construction saved space for the clubs. Nearly all set pieces from this year were two-dimensional, but they all left enough room for a three-dimensional money piece in the truck, keeping the grand finale that is customary to modern audiences. Unfortunately, the effects of Covid kept the stands relatively barren throughout this parade and audiences missed out on the most crowd-friendly performance in decades.

There was only one notable innovation so far this decade: pyrotechnics. Unlike smoke machines and confetti cannons, sparklers have not taken over every performance so far. The three times that they appeared in the top five were split between two in 2023 and one in 2024. Quaker City had sparks fly from the top of a two-dimensional chandelier in “Monster Movie Mayhem.”¹²² Avalon String Band, without as clever a use, had them go off in the foreground to end the performance.¹²³ The 2024 Fralinger performance described in the previous section rounds out the pyrotechnics list. In terms of the technological advancements made in the previous decade, COVID-19 has slowed the process of innovation. LED screens have not scraped the top five yet this decade, though I know they were used in 2024 from viewing the parade on New Year’s Day. Many clubs have opted instead to lean heavier into LED lights as it becomes more common to find them in scenery or costumes to start the decade.

¹²² Philadelphia Mummers String Band Association. 2023b. “2023 Quaker City String Band - ‘Monster Movie Mayhem.’” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2023; METV Channel 2. January 1, 2023.

¹²³ Philadelphia Mummers String Band Association. 2023a. “2023 Avalon String Band - ‘All Hands on Deck.’” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2023; METV Channel 2. January 1, 2023.



Figure 15. Danny Palandro as the Grinch (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *Danny Palandro 2024*. January 6, 2024. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=928130125338285&set=pb.100044239173492.-2207520000&type=3>).

And this brings us to the final parade of this exploration. Like many live art forms, slowly the Mummies are building back from the pandemic. Performances have begun to resemble the Pre-Covid Mini-Musicals. South Philadelphia won the 2024 String Band Division with their performance of “Christmas Bizarre.”¹²⁴ This was a String Band’s first attempt at theming their New Year’s performance around the holiday a week prior (some bands have layered Christmas themes on top of others, this is the first sole Christmas themes according to the String Band Database). Judges must not have been fatigued from the holiday season; the band did not lose more than eight-tenths of a point in any one category for a total score of 97.10 out of 100. Captain Denny Palandro dressed as the Grinch (see fig. 15) sat atop a white Christmas tree screaming “I hate Christmas.” The band began with “Carol of the Bells.” An array of candy canes, trees, gold ornaments, string lights (see fig. 16), and gingerbread men filled the street as

¹²⁴ Philadelphia Mummies String Band Association. 2024b. “2024 South Philadelphia String Band – ‘Christmas Bizarre.’” YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2024; METV Channel 2. January 1, 2024.



Figure 16. String Light Costumes (Philadelphia String Band Assn. *South Philadelphia 2024*. January 6, 2024. Photograph. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=928130242004940&set=pb.100044239173492.-2207520000&type=3>).

new takes on classic holiday tunes rang in the audience’s ears. The scenery was designed to look like it was stolen from pages in a Dr. Seuss book starting as a wintery scene and then transitioning to a dark house. Palandro raised his arms and the lights on the flat house upstage lit up as Handel’s “Hallelujah” played from the band, a nod to *A National Lampoons Christmas Vacation*. Later, a storybook with pop-up pages appeared displaying worldwide landmarks. South Philadelphia started playing the traditional “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” but as the pages turned the musical style of the well-known melody changed to mirror the landmark. This performance was a dazzling display of the ongoing build-back that the Mummies are currently experiencing.

Conclusion: The Modern Mummer Musical

“It means celebration. It means family. It means tradition. It means folk art and expression. It means freedom and it means doing good things for the community. And the thousands of mummies I have gotten to know, they do so many good works for their community,

the entire city, and the region.”¹²⁵ This is how the long-time television voice of the mummers, Steve Highsmith, answered the question “What does Mummary mean to you?” These features of the work have allowed the craft’s preservation and innovation across centuries of performers. As a young performer the mass spectacle that the String Bands created entranced me, as a current theatre practitioner the communal nature of the creation amazes me, and as a theatre historian exploring decades of innovation enthralled me. New Year’s Day in my house was marked by two things: the smell of slow-roasting pork and sauerkraut and the sights and sounds of the String Bands. Though, unlike other holiday traditions, the String Bands find themselves emanating life throughout the year. Their music elicits memories of performances from years past when my grandmother would tell me stories of the days when all band members wore feather backpieces and lacked the sets of today. I now hold a new appreciation for those stories.

Though 10,000 people march, some String Bands struggle to keep membership and rules have lowered the minimum musicians required in order to keep clubs on the street. Similarly, in person attendance has decreased. In the episode of Mumtalk where Highsmith answered the above question, he asked some questions of his own as well.

The innovation that’s going on in the Fancy Brigades and in the String Bands is really kind of interesting. I mean, how they’re trying to use technology to be able to drive an entertaining performance. Again, one of the changing landscape issues in mummary is what do people find entertaining? What will bring them out onto the street? What will they like to see on television? What will they like to see inside the Pennsylvania Convention Center? But there is a competition and there is a drive.¹²⁶

I fear that these questions are not always at the forefront of the String Bands' minds. Striving for larger performances has obstructed the view for attendees on the sides of the streets. All performances are geared to the judges and television crew at the front. Watching videos of over

¹²⁵ Philadelphia String Band Assn. 2017. “Mum Talk | Episode 1 with Steve Highsmith .” www.facebook.com. December 26, 2017.

¹²⁶ Philadelphia String Band Assn. 2017. “Mum Talk | Episode 1 with Steve Highsmith .” www.facebook.com. December 26, 2017.

fifty years of parades was not only a study into the performances but the crowd reaction as well. Audiences were the most rambunctious in the 1980s and 1990s, a golden era of String Band popularity. Performances were energetic, had movement throughout the street, and brought in music that roused the crowd. The number of clubs on the street and the original construction of the parade route caused the parade to push into the night. Across the String Band Clubs, costumes would transform from being highlighted by the sun to being spotlighted by the streetlamps. On the other hand 21st-century performances have half-full bleachers and clever music compositions not crafted for the general audience. As someone whose experience with the parade performances has come primarily from behind a screen, this is quite hypocritical, but Mummers need to find a way of getting audience members back onto the street to preserve the history of the trade.

Returning to Welch's thoughts on the rules' role in the parade "becoming a highly organized, highly controlled, somewhat sterile representation,"¹²⁷ I believe that it was the String Band's own competitiveness that changed the complexion of the parade for their division. The String Bands have been and seemingly will continue to be the most popular mummers division. The combination of live music and grand spectacle captivates audiences, but now more than ever it is from the couch. Welch touched on this premise in 1992 quoting Philadelphia Daily News reporter, Rose DeWolf, during the 1988 parade saying "The problem is this: The Mummers Parade isn't a Parade anymore. It's become a TV show — and not even a great TV show."¹²⁸ These trends were evident even at a time when audiences were loudest through the broadcast. In over thirty years since then, the bands continue to focus primarily on the judged performances disregarding sight lines for parade attendees. Recording technology has improved televised

¹²⁷ Welch, 1966. "“Oh, Dem Golden Slippers’: The Philadelphia Mummers Parade,” 332

¹²⁸ Welch, Charles E. 1991. *Oh! Dem Golden Slippers*, 190

broadcasts, making the viewing experience at home more pleasurable than that Dewolf experienced and adding another challenge the Mummers must overcome. How do they return fans back to the street?

Out of the hundreds of performances I have watched for this project, the lines of the three eras emerge. The beginning of the Marching Band Mummer Era lies outside of this paper's scope but ends in 1975. This era can be categorized by the uniformity within the band and dedication to the musical performance and drill formations. The addition of the dance core in 1976 marks the beginning of the Midway Mummer Era. This was the era of the festival, eventually peaking in 1988. The bands' style was dominated by the party-like atmosphere they created. Choreography grew to become crisp and professional, while bands fell away from their costume uniformity to better express their theme. Small props and scenery pieces were used but did not hinder the viewing pleasure of the on-street attendees who can be heard loudly on broadcasts as popular music played. I believe this is a golden age for the String Bands, finding a satisfying mix of performance elements to create a grand celebration while keeping the parade about those in attendance. Pushes toward greater scenic elements dominated the latter years of the Midway Mummer Era that ushered in the "Mini-Musical" Era. Structural changes within judging in 2005 allowed clubs to pre-set scenic elements, props, and performers. Though this cut off the processional experience in judging, it brought about the current era of the String Bands. Bands are filling the street with full-fledged environments, utilizing special effects, and creating episodic movements within their mass spectacle performances.

This only leaves one question: what is next for the Mummers' String Band Division? Realistically the pattern will continue, the bands will innovate and then master. The piece of their performance that is currently in this phase is technology and its use in creating visual effects. For

around the past ten years, clubs at the top have been experimenting with the use of light, video screens, and technically challenging visual effects. As technology improves, the Mumpers will continue to adapt and soon technology could be seen regularly throughout the parade. Full-on LED backdrops might be on the horizon as they provide versatility and can be used several years in a row; a technique that was tested by Hegeman String Band in 2016.¹²⁹ This could also be a ploy to get people back out to the streets since screens like this are better viewed live than through television.

Following technology, the next innovation that I see on the horizon is the band's use of storytelling within their four-and-a-half-minute time limit. They have the ability to make episodic masterpieces that all relate to one broad pun-based theme along with a built-in protagonist in their captain. With these pieces, I believe they are in a position to begin adding a plot to these episodes. Clubs have experimented with storylines in the past. The small lazzi presentations of the late 1970s were the inklings. Most notably, Greater Kensington's "Veni, Vidi, Vici" in 1980 showed Caesar enacting his court power. In recent years, clubs have turned to pop culture amongst their theming bringing in characters like the Joker, Mario, and the Grinch that are recognized among a younger audience. These characters also have storylines known to the crowd that bands are able to build from. String bands also have a common style to their arrangements: energetic movement and dance that flows into a ballad sequence and then heightens to their grand finale. In my notes, I have coined the "Mummer's Moment" as this use of a ballad three-quarters into the performance. It is not found in every performance across every year, ebbs and flows occur (there was a time in the height of the Midway Mummer Era that it was nonexistent), but most clubs now use this pattern to craft the musical arc. This is the groundwork for a story arc that matches the flow of music. Bands have even begun using

¹²⁹ EDWARD HAYWOOD. 2016c. "16-13 Hegeman."

technological elements to foster change in the sound using moving elements to dictate the tempo. In 2017, Fralinger's tempo was controlled by a clock displayed on an LED screen with arms that changed speed.¹³⁰ The following year South Philadelphia sped up their music in time with the piano roll on a self player piano.¹³¹ These interconnections between set, sound, and theming are the groundwork for deepening the storytelling as a performance element for New Year's Day.

Patterns emerge from evaluating the Midway and "Mini-Musical" Eras of the String Band history. Both eras begin with a significant structural change to the overall performance propelling the specific style of the generation. The early years are then marked by growth, testing the limits of the street until they ultimately reach the peak. For the Midway Era, it was 1988, twelve years in, and for the "Mini-Musical" Era, it was 2016, eleven years in. From there the performances plateau as the String Bands relish in the style that they have created. But competition continues and mummies need to one-up their fellow clubs so innovation begins again. Bands start to press boundaries ushering in the next era of creation. This is where the String Bands currently stand, the early stages of innovation.

With the String Bands on the tail end of the "Mini-Musical" Era, what can the current and projected spheres of innovation tell us about the next generation of performances? Taking into account the length of the previous era, I predict that there will be a significant structural change within the next ten years. If the bands push forward on a path of story-telling, we could be on the precipice of the Modern Mummer Musical. In a way I think the term "mini-musical," though most likely used because of the length of performance, is a little demeaning as there is nothing "mini" about what occurs on the street on New Year's Day. Instead, the Modern Mummer Musical is an ode to the English Mummer Play that provided much of the early seeds for the

¹³⁰ Stephen Fritz. 2017. "Mummers 2017 String Band 12 Fralinger."

¹³¹ Stephen Fritz. 2018. "Mummers 2018 String Band 08 South Philadelphia." YouTube. Originally Aired Jan. 1, 2018; WPHL Channel 17. January 1, 2018.

Philadelphia Mummers. In *Mummers' Plays Revisited*, Peter Harrop gives a general description of the performance style of the early English Mummers Play, "A group of players arrive at a private home or public house to perform a short play of some five- or ten-minutes duration."¹³² Alongside this, he adds that they are commonly in verse and include costumes, music, dance, and stock characters. These come together to form a loose story arc between hero and villain that results in death and the appearance of a Quack Doctor to help with the cause. In Philadelphia, the public house has been replaced by Broad Street while costumes, music, and dance have been elevated beyond compare. Now it is time for the String Bands to use pop culture icons as a source of stock characters in conjunction with an increase in well-known music to provide a loose plot to their pieces, ultimately building off of the random array of episodic wonders currently displayed. The groundwork is laid; it is just up to the Mummers to move in that direction.

This hypothetical new era satisfies the Bands' lust to improve and more importantly one-up the other clubs. I believe there is a key structural change that could also be implemented improving fan experience. Judges that are in charge of the performance points should be spread to the three sides of the show. This style of parade performance is unique and for the people. It should be viewed accordingly by the judging. These spectacles are a part of a procession so they should be playing to all sides again. Before it became the norm, bands were booed for blocking the side view. This could be the invitation to refill up the sides of the street and not just the sections sitting with the judges as they currently stand. Combining this structural change with a hopeful return of popular music to the set list would do wonders improving the inperson turnout and pull towards a younger audience.

¹³² Harrop, Peter, and Taylor. 2021. *Mummers' Plays Revisited*. Routledge, 2

Working class people from around the Philadelphia area come together year-round in pursuit of one common goal: a New Year's extravaganza. The development of this unique performance style from a folk history older than America through generations of communal innovation should be an inspiration for artists across the country. Mummers have been fighting rising costs and lowered public interest for decades, but continue to persevere and grow. Competition has protected the parade from becoming a stagnant representation of the past and has instead harbored several styles of performance among the String Bands alone over decades of change. No one truly knows what the next fifty years will do to the String Bands, but if I know one thing it will be sparkly, loud, and entertaining. It is only fitting that this paper ends with the sentiment heard across the Philadelphia area by Steve Highsmith as he closes out the New Year's Parade, "Thanks for the Mummeries!"

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