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2007 US Open Brass Band Championships

Postcard from Chicago

The US Open once again had plenty to offer - especially now the Dollar is in free fall!

Chicago is such a wonderful place to visit that anyone coming here is faced with a problem – you've got to prioritise what you want to see and promise yourself you'll go back and do what you need to do again in the future.

What a great place to go for a brass band contest too, and what an impression the good folk of the USA want to leave you with – they know what hospitality is all about. It's not over the top hospitality either, just genuinely warm and friendly.

Over in the USA at the moment, they're building up to Thanksgiving Day – which always occurs on the fourth Thursday in November. The day traditionally celebrates the giving of thanks for the autumn harvest and as it's a public holiday it includes the consumption of a turkey dinner and pumpkin pie. It's a significant day and for those Brits initially walking around with bemused faces as to why they were hearing Christmas carols, they soon got the message.

The contest itself takes place in Arlington Heights, which according to the flags attached to the concrete posts at the side of the roads here is defined as a village. Arlington Heights is not a village as we know in the UK though – no village green or cricket pitch for starters, whilst we are sure, Little Upper Ramsbottom in the UK doesn't have a huge Walmart store (although Tesco are getting there). It does have fantastic horse racing track.

The US Open Brass Band Championships also creates a friendly atmosphere that just puts a smile on your face. This year, the contest reached its fifth birthday and everyone celebrated the fact. Progress is being made, and those who have been here from the start of the venture will attest to the fact that the standard of playing has improved year on year.

By inviting an overseas entrant, the US bands get an idea of what British style brass banding is all about.

The result is in the history books now, but the audience, players and conductors thoroughly enjoyed Wingates, from their fine playing to Andy Berryman's shirt – well there's nothing like embracing the locals is there?

Wingates were fine ambassadors for the UK banding movement and although they might not have won, they made many friends and a huge impression with everyone who met them.



Star Spangled Banner: Andy Berryman flags up his credentials

The only thing possibly missing was the chance for the organisers to get Wingates to perform another concert and to use them to broadcast the brass band message further away from the contesting arena. Whilst Wingates had organised their own concert on the Sunday, perhaps this was an opportunity missed?

Talking of opportunities, the organisers did hint to 4BR afterwards that they're looking at the potential of other things for the event and still fit the banquet in with the awards ceremony. If that is the case then things are really looking up here.

As to the eventual winners of the 2007 US Open, you've got to give it Fountain City. This is a band that's made an impression at the All England International Masters and Whit Friday and now at this contest. They have radically overhauled their musical approach to playing and now produce a rounded, traditional British brass band.

Fodens' Helen Tyler has been working minor miracles here with the band and their plans for future and the cross Atlantic partnership has worked splendidly well. Fountain City is a band to look out for in the future.

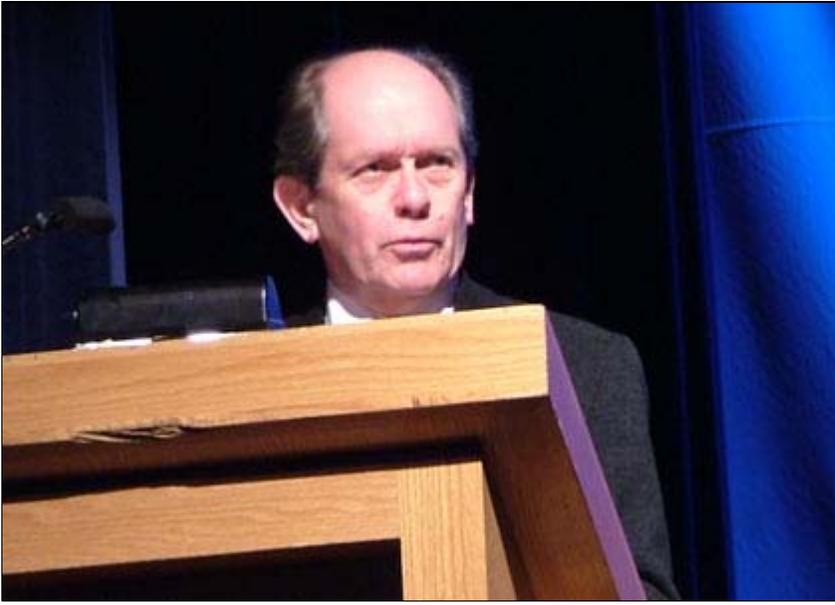
Defending Champion, Brass Band of Central Florida, gave it everything to make it four in a row here, but they never quite sounded as if they were going to do it and accepted their lot with good grace and smiles, as well as congratulations to the winners.

There may be some debate about the composition of the judges panel (all three this year were marching band judges), but even if you didn't agree with the results (and quite a few didn't) the judges do put their thoughts onto a CD which is given to the bands afterwards for a critique on the Sunday morning.

Written notes are given as well (although from what 4BR saw these were minimalist) but the CD idea works well and is seen as an integral part of the overall adjudication process by all the bands – even if some bands have to accept the findings through gritted teeth!

Where the US Open does score heavily in relation to other contests though is the fantastic 'Buskers' event. This is fabulous and one that any entertainments contest should look at and give a go. Fancy hearing Roger Webster and a few of the Grimey lads do a star turn in the hope of a few bob in a top hat at Brass in Concert? Sounds good eh?

The US Open also scores heavily with Frank Renton acting as MC and compere for the day. Dubbed the 'Voice of the US Open', Frank was once again in his element – all part of a day's work for the maestro but he loves it, especially at the post contest banquet.



Lecturn lecture: Frank Renton tells it as it is...

That banquet brings the day's official proceedings to a close in an informal atmosphere before the after-dinner, post-contest party.

It was great to see the likes of John Rogers from York Instruments (even if he had to do a double take with your correspondent dressed smartly (honest) for the dinner and a host of other traders looking to generate business. Helen Tyler, the principal baritone of Fodens, who also looked very smart as always, was also enjoying herself too and the praise from people for her work with Fountain City Band was forthcoming from many quarters.

Overall for this first time visitor to the US Open, it was a great experience. There's immense pride at the level of commitment and performance from the bands and enormous respect for Clark & Dallas Niermeyer and the home band, Prairie Brass Band for the level of dedication throughout the year in making the event a success.

If you ever get the chance, come and enjoy it all. I for one will hopefully be back to fit in more sight seeing and enjoy the ever improving American brass band scene.

Malcolm Wood.

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