

CHAPTER 12

THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

“There is music wherever there is harmony, order, or proportion.”

~ Browne

carved above the entrance to the
Michigan State University Music Building

Oh, for the band trips of times past! Crammed into passenger seats was a brotherhood there for the having, swapping apples and peanut butter sandwiches for cookies and pop and passing the time playing games, sometimes, even, with Leonard’s girls, Mary and Cece (who were just little tykes then), or sleeping or singing silly songs made up on the way to every Big 10 game MSC ever played. Even now, in moments of quiet, many still hear the echo of voices filling those buses and train cars with harmonies while the sun rose and the rattling ker-thunk-thunk-thunk of the roadbed marked a steady beat through the softness of an early Michigan morning.

*Minn a so tah, where is your team?
Nowhere on the field to be seen.
Minn a so tah, hang up your shoes.
You’re all done, and you’re all through,
We will beat you next year too!
Three cheers for MSU!*

—to the tune of the “Minnesota Rouser” (see Appendix I)



THE 1950s WERE SURELY FALCONE'S GREATEST YEARS at Michigan State. For one thing, after WWII, the number of students tripled as the school became a major university. This translated into a similar growth in the music department and a higher percentage of music majors in the band. Though Leonard predicted that a leveling-off in the bands' growth would follow, it did not, and the band continued to expand as the college's enrollment grew.¹

In spite of the annual winter concert on March 5, 1950, having a discouragingly small audience, especially considering it was the musical highlight of the year, 3,500 concert goers showed up for the first spring concert, and the band's reputation continued to develop. State's Marching Band had been impressing national football audiences for years, and now annual out-of-state trips and televised games were spreading its recognition well beyond state and local acknowledgment.²

A performance of the Concert Band at the North Central Division of the Music Educators' National Conference at Fort Wayne, Indiana, on April 7, 1951, for an audience of 5,000 musicians, was the first of several of its significant appearances, and occurring as it did just one month after the nation's leading bandmasters unanimously elected Falcone to lifetime membership in the American Bandmaster's Association, it confirmed his national stature as a conductor, teacher, and musician.^{3*} The acclaim given the Band at the North Central meeting reinforced Falcone's own growing opinion that the Concert Band, a group he recognized as "the heart of the music department," was no longer merely an equal of the Marching Band, it was slowly but surely surpassing it.⁴

The band's excellence was due to a number of things, of course, but certainly one of them was the respect Leonard inspired in his students—a respect which caused them no little fear in their quest to do better.

Keith Stein: *You bet he was demanding. I've had kids call me up and say, "I've overslept! I can't go on back (to Leonard's office)!" And I would say, "Yes, you go on back. You face him. You'll be all right. Don't worry." But they were that frightened. He never*

*was rough to anybody. But they learned a lot of discipline out of that, for living, for life.*⁵

Burton Bronson, tuba, 1946–1950, 1952–1953: *You learned out of respect for him. I was always afraid to go to a lesson. Not afraid of him as a man, but of not doing well enough to please him.*⁶

Robert Sack: *He strove for perfection, and didn't accept any excuses for not playing awfully darn good. I sat in the front row of the clarinet section, and I always thought, "Boy, you know, if I ever squeak, I'll be sure to not look up!" One thing you'd never want to do is look up, because you'd get those laser blue eyes coming down right at you.*

*He demanded great things from the band. He was in no way a mean person, just highly professional. Top notch all the way around. We all respected him so much because of his professionalism, his integrity, his honesty. He had a furiousness, but not a meanness.*⁷

A "furiousness, but not a meanness," with something of the volcanic fire of Vesuvius glowing in his heart. Yes.

In 1952, the band did its part in welcoming Gen. Douglas MacArthur to Lansing. MacArthur, fired during the Korean War for insubordination, returned to America to a hero's welcome. When he gave his "old soldiers never die, they just fade away" speech to Congress, he received massive public adulation, which aroused expectations that he would make a run for the presidency in the 1952 election. Though he in fact endorsed Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio and never wanted to be a candidate himself, it seemed the nomination was his for the asking. He was so wildly popular he looked like a shoo-in.

Fritz Stansell, 1950-1954, baritone: *He decided to conduct a national tour of appearances, and Lansing was on the list. When he arrived at MSC, the band was lined up at the main entrance*

on Grand River. MacArthur followed us in an open convertible as we marched all the way to the State Capitol steps, where he gave a very hawkish speech. I remember we played the "US Field Artillery March" by Sousa over and over and that there were crowds all the way along both sides of Michigan Ave . . . probably a distance of 2 or 3 miles.

Leonard was for Eisenhower in 1952, (when I went into his office for lessons that fall, he always wore his "I Like Ike" button) so undoubtedly he was also supportive of MacArthur's visit.^{8} Not that he let his political views influence his response to requests for the MSU band to perform. The marching band also played for Harry Truman at the train station when he came through on a whistle stop tour campaigning for Adlai Stevenson in fall of 1952, some months after the MacArthur parade and speech.⁹*

On January 17, 1953, a banquet held in the Union Ballroom at Michigan State honored Falcone "Not only for his 25 years of service here but for his courage and persistent goal in the American way up the musical ladder."¹⁰ Knowing his great modesty, the committee, headed by James Pino ('40) and Richard Snook ('46) kept the event a secret until three weeks prior to the occasion, as they knew Leonard would have tried talking them out of holding it. The state's musical leaders, representatives of the MSC music and athletic departments, administrative staff, and former "band boys," as Falcone affectionately called his players, spoke in his honor and presented gifts which, among others, included a new Baldwin spinet piano (positioned behind stage curtains and dramatically revealed during the banquet) and a tape recording of the evening's events.¹¹ The recording, which includes the extemporaneous speech closing the banquet, is interesting to listen to if for no other reason than that it clearly reveals Leonard's much imitated idiosyncratic pronunciation—clear, but delightfully somewhat "off," as though he'd learned English from an ancient sequestered Florentine academic or nobleman. His vocal nuances mirror who he was as a man: sincere, proper, measured, unique, at once both gentle and authoritative. And so do the words of his speech, which clearly reveal his humility and sense of humor.

Leonard Falcone: *I have been told by a good many people at different times that I have a very expressive face. If my face has been showing the feelings I have been experiencing for the past half hour, then I don't need to tell you that I have been very embarrassed, fidgety, and very uncomfortable. In fact, I have been feeling quite uncomfortable for quite some time, since I first began to hear rumors that this event was being organized. You see, most of my life I have been on the other side of the fence. By that I mean that I have always helped pay tribute to other people. So to be on the receiving end is a new experience for me, an uncomfortable one. Nevertheless, I would not be honest with you if I did not admit that I'm very grateful and I certainly appreciate the tribute that you people are so kind to pay toward me this evening.*

*Being in one place for 25 years has many advantages, but I can think of at least one disadvantage: people will remind you of that fact. And they'll ask you about it in a very peculiar way, as if asking, "How old are you anyway?"*¹²

He went on to relate amusing stories about his experience at Michigan State, and in a closing remark had this to say: "Whatever advancement the band has made in size, music, and attainment, the credit belongs to the players."¹³

Though more than 800 invitations had been sent and 200 reservations were confirmed for the evening, a near blizzard kept all but 120 from attending. But dozens of former students and giants in the music field had sent congratulations by telegram or letter. His old friend Edwin Franko Goldman honored his valuable contribution to bands and band music, and Clarence Sawhill, President of the College Band Directors National Association noted that "The loyalty which prompted this occasion is evidence of the high regard in which you are held by your students. In the teaching field, no man can ask for a higher recommendation than that his students respect him."¹⁴

Appropriately, the banquet honoring Leonard's courage and 25 years of service was held during what was to be a perfect storm of events that occurred from 1950–1954 that was to revolutionize how the country viewed the band and Michigan State, what programs the

band presented at half time, the way the band felt about itself, the level of recognition it received—everything. The outward symbol of the thrilling realization sweeping campus that there was “a whole lot of shakin’ goin’ on” at MSC was personified by the football team.

Robert Sack: *Early in my freshman year (1950) after winning the first two games we lost badly to Maryland (7–34), and we thought “Oh, dear. Things are bad. The team isn’t going to be any good.” But then we went on to win 28 games in a row. We were unbeaten for the rest of the year and for the two and a half years after that.¹⁵ * It was an exciting time.¹⁶*

Unfortunately, while State’s football team was winning glory for the College on the field, the Marching Band, though it sounded exceptionally good, looked about the same.

Fritz Stansell: *At the time, the MSC Band still dressed as a military band because of campus-wide required ROTC. The entire male student body was required to take it for the first two years at MSC. The band played for reviews, held on Old College Field, in spring term (every Tuesday?), involving perhaps as many as 4,000 uniform clad ROTC members. It was quite a sight to see all these students in uniform marching from Demonstration Hall to the large area behind the Field House. At any rate, our band uniforms were fashioned after army officer’s uniforms of WWII with Sam Brown belts. They were drab. The only thing dressy about them were the white gloves and spats. In contrast, the U of M uniforms, with the cross belts, capes, epaulets, etc. were flashy.¹⁷*

And so it was that in the fall of 1950, the *State News* began a campaign for the band to have new uniforms, uniforms that “everyone will be proud of.” But at least one very important person was not supportive of the idea—at least not initially.

Earle Louder, euphonium, MSU 1955: *We’d been wearing an army tan with a regular style army hat. The overcoat was a*

trench coat. A “horse blanket” we called it. It was okay in the cold weather sometimes. When there was a push for the band to update the uniforms, Mr. Falcone originally resisted it.

*Tradition was important to him. He liked the military look, like that at the University of Illinois.*¹⁸

James Niblock: *Leonard was adamant that such items were irrelevant to the band’s performance.*¹⁹

Leonard Franke, MSC Band 1940-1941: *He used to tell us, “I don’t care what you look like. . . but we’re going to sound good!”*²⁰

James Niblock: *After I spoke to him and suggested he give this some thought at leisure, Leonard came back to me with his decision that this was “a good idea.” He was most amenable to changing his mind after he had thought things through.*²¹

So it was that beginning early 1951, polls were conducted, design contests were sponsored, and contributions were solicited from various organizations. Finally, after the Board of Agriculture appropriated funds to cover the complete cost of the new outfits, a “new uniform” committee was composed of the head of the music department, the director of athletics, the comptroller of the college, the secretary of the State Board of Agriculture, the college purchasing agent, a professor of military science and tactics, a student representative, and Falcone. But all did not go well.²²

Leonard Falcone: *We had quite a time agreeing on the uniform. I had proposed a certain style, and we had a lot of discussions and a lot of proposals and two members of the committee were quite set in their opinion of what the uniforms should be. And then, of course, there was the military (who suggested minimal changes such as a pouch to carry music and white canvas puttees) . . . Mr. Underwood suggested we adopt Spartan helmets—and I wouldn’t hear of it from the first, from the beginning. And so we*

*had all these ideas. I said my idea is to have a uniform in the colors of the school, green and white, and have a regular band uniform and get away from these other things. From the point of the ROTC, we'll play ball, but there's no reason we have to be in the same uniform as the other ROTC regiments. Finally (pounds table) they began to find faults with (the uniform I wanted). They claimed that the stitching wouldn't hold, and so forth and so on, and I'll tell you I have had some experience myself in tailoring! I was an assistant tailor in Ann Arbor when I was there. We had samples of the uniforms sent to the Home Economics Department and I stuck to my ideas and said it basically has to be a band uniform . . .*²³

It surely helped Falcone's position that students were complaining about military style uniforms, but apparently not enough to move the committee along toward making a final decision. Frustrated with the procrastination and in need of new uniforms by fall, Leonard, with solid brass conviction, took matters into his own hands.

Leonard Falcone: *We couldn't come to a clear decision and so I went to the president (John Hannah) and he said, "Leonard, what do you want?" I said, "This is what I want." And the president said, "If that's what you want, go ahead. You're the director of the band."*

*After all that! And then they criticized us for being dogmatic and so forth. (Raps table) But if you have a position, make it! I had to have them (the uniforms) for the next fall! The next time we got new uniforms (in 1964) no committee, no problem—nothing.*²⁴

Beryl Falcone: *Leonard always had a good relationship with John. A professional, warm friendship. John's wife, Sarah, was the daughter of his predecessor, President Shaw, and Leonard had been close to President Shaw's family. They always came to all the concerts.*²⁵

New uniforms had a larger importance to the band than the public would ever know. In addition to being morale boosters, new uniforms meant that the band could provide more contemporary halftime shows. Since World War II, some bands across the nation had replaced their usual gridiron performances of stagnant pictures and simple block-letter formations with clever scripts, movements, and themes. Several schools, among them the University of Michigan, even had been offering their audiences dance routines as early as the late 1940s. But the military uniforms of the MSC band required military-type maneuvers which, out of respect, could not include dancing or loose movements. Even the military cap was a problem that prevented a more modern show: it fell to the ground if its wearer bowed to the audience.

Not that State's band committees hadn't tried to modernize by following pop music trends. They had—whether their director “got it,” or not.

Ted Thompson, clarinet, MSC Band 1949-1953, 1956-'57: *One of my friends from the 1945- 1950 marching band told me a story that demonstrates how Leonard didn't always “get” things. This may be partly because he had spent his youth in Italy and so didn't quite understand American culture, but I also think it was just in his nature.*

In the late '40s, those in the jazz community used the term “hep-cat” for anyone who was really “cool.” This was soon shortened to just “cat” for anyone of the male persuasion. During that time, a small group of band members often met with Leonard in his office to come up with ideas and plan half-time shows. The shows back then were basically picture formations with a story of some sort to connect them. At one of these brainstorming sessions, the students' ideas were taking shape when one of them said, “At this point, we can have a “cat” walk in from the end zone and join the formation.”

When the ideas for the show seemed complete, Leonard, totally perplexed, said, “I like this show. But I don't understand why would we have a cat come onto the field. . . and how are we going to train a cat to join the band formation?”²⁶

John Underwood, clarinet, MSC 1946-1950: *During the 1946-'50 period, as I recall, a short be-bop jazz number was a part of a football half-time show. Dr. Falcone, during an inside rehearsal, innocently asked the band to play the "Bo Peep!"*²⁷

But a new day dawned on September 2, 1952, when at the Michigan State-Michigan game (State 27, Michigan 13!) the 120-member band, the largest ever, appeared for the first time on the field in magnificent new kelly green uniforms with white trim, cross belts, shoulder knots, trouser stripes, arm bands, spats, and a hat with a green and white plume.

Fritz Stansell: *When we ripped out onto the field at Ann Arbor with flashy new uniforms, a fast tempo, updated arrangements, kick turns, high steps, etc., etc., the MSU fans gave us a terrific reception. The attitude that the band was out of date changed*



Charting a show

~ courtesy of Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections

*overnight. But the U of M student body groaned and laughed derisively, assuming that MSC was stealing the U of M band brand. Of course, what they didn't know was that Revelli, a few years earlier, had hired Jack Lee, his assistant band director for marching, away from OSU, where the fast tempos, high steps, and eight to five had first begun.*²⁸

Joe Dobos: *Revelli created this aura that Michigan was the first to do something, when actually they weren't the first. . . though they did it very well.*²⁹

Meanwhile, over at the Oldsmobile plant in Lansing, new leadership was being ushered in as Jack Wolfram took over as general manager in December, 1950. Wolfram, a friend of the gregarious John Hannah, had earned the nickname "Black Jack." And not without cause. An authoritarian, died in the wool engineer, "Mr. Wolfram," as he was addressed by subordinates, was not only a taskmaster but also something of a character. In 1949, when famous Indy winner Wilbur Shaw drove a Rocket 88 convertible pace car at the Indianapolis 500, it was Olds' then chief engineer, "Black Jack" Wolfram, who rode shotgun. Perhaps this experience developed a taste for speed in the new general manager, as he went on to test Rocket V-8 refinements by using the streets of Lansing as his proving ground. Wolfram would pair with the new chief engineer, Harold Metzler, in one prototype, while former general manager Sherrod Steele and assistant chief engineer Lowell Kintigh rode in a second. As the two cars roared down South Logan Street side-by-side, Wolfram's remained safely (all things being relative) on the right, leaving Steele and Kintigh's in the left lane to dodge oncoming traffic. Wolfram got a big kick out of it all, but Steele anxiously recalled a few near misses.³⁰

One Saturday when Wolfram attended a State football game as Hannah's guest in his press box, he posed a question to the university president.

Beryl Falcone: *Wolfram became interested in the band at half-time and asked John what he could do for the university.*³¹

Leonard Falcone: . . . and President Hannah said, “What would you say if I asked you to sponsor the band on some of its trips?”^{32*} Suddenly, I was approached by the president and Oldsmobile with the idea, and we agreed. We accepted their proposal.³³

Arrangements were quickly made, and on June 11, 1953, it was announced that the Michigan State Band would appear at the Minnesota and Ohio State games the following fall, courtesy of Oldsmobile. That same month, Excalibur, a senior men’s honorary, gave its annual award to “the faculty member who has contributed most in the interest of the students during the past year” to Leonard.³⁴

Leonard Falcone: *The next thing that happened was that (Olds) felt the band should play the Oldsmobile song at games. There was some sort of printed edition of (it) for dance band, but I wanted one special for our band and so I contracted to have an arrangement made. We played it, tried it out during the summer. The officials from Oldsmobile came to hear, and they were just delighted with it. And so they paid for the trips we made out of town, even to Ann Arbor. We played the song sometimes during time outs. That’s the only request they ever made. They were very considerate, very, very, cooperative, and they were a tremendous help.*³⁵

Not only had the annual search for financial assistance and the last minute scheduling of trips ended, but more importantly, because of post WW2 enrollments, new uniforms, and Oldsmobile funding, the band was poised and ready to play a significant role in MSC’s long climb to the apex of countrywide recognition.^{36*}

All it needed now was opportunity, and that opportunity presented itself that fall 1953, when MSC started competing in the Big Ten Athletic Conference.

Fritz Stansell: *It was the first football season MSC was eligible for the Rose Bowl, and when the team came through with a series of wins and tied for the Big Ten football title, it was chosen (on a Sunday night, November 22) to go to Pasadena.*³⁷

Leonard Falcone: *The trip we made to the Rose Bowl the first time—I don't know how many meetings we had, but there were 10 or 15 people, the top people at Oldsmobile. In many instances they would simply pick up the telephone and contact someone in San Francisco or Denver and say, "We need this or that, will you arrange for so many buses and trucks to meet the band at this time and have a police escort and food for everyone?" It was just amazing. And dependable. No question about it. It was done.*³⁸

Fritz Stansell: *The band traveled West by special train, all paid for by Oldsmobile.*³⁹

The train, bearing banners marked "Michigan State Marching Band Enroute to Rose Bowl," was a 12-car Rock Island special with 7 Pullmans, 2 lounge cars (one with a glass vistadome), two diners, and a baggage car painted green for the occasion. As it pulled out of Lansing's Grand Trunk station on Saturday, December 26, at 11:55 p.m., it carried 120 band members, 10 alternates, one drum major, three baton twirlers, six cheerleaders, one "Sparty" mascot, and several managers and officials.

Robert Sack: *(It) was an exciting experience. We slept and ate in style, and the food was wonderful. It was just an awful lot of fun—a neat trip. I remember a lot of nights playing cards on the train. There was wonderful camaraderie.*⁴⁰

Ted Thompson: *With the exception of two nights at Occidental College in Pasadena, we lived nearly two weeks on that train. The cars converted into sleeper cars at night, and the meals in the dining car were outstanding.*⁴¹