“United States Marine Band” (1963)
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Essay by Patrick Warfield (guest post)*

I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist.

–President John F. Kennedy
Dedication of the Robert Frost Memorial Library, Amherst College
October 26, 1963

The promise of President Kennedy’s words ring loudly on this 1963 recording, but “The National Cultural Center Presents: The United States Marine Band” holds other echoes as well. Its story is one of arts fundraising, union negotiations, masterful production, and a musical ensemble at the height of its artistic powers returning, after a very long absence, to the recording studio.

*The National Cultural Center

By the mid-20th century, Washington, DC was hardly lacking for performance venues, but each came with significant disadvantages. The Library of Congress’s intimate Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Auditorium (1925) was intentionally limited to performances of chamber music. The Daughters of the American Revolution’s massive Constitution Hall (1929) lacked the backstage space needed for large theatrical productions. Opera could be mounted at George Washington University’s Lisner Auditorium (1946), but audiences were subjected to its poor air circulation. Plays could be seen at the aging National Theater (1923) and, of course, the military bands made use of spaces along the National Mall and Potomac River, none of which were ideal for attentive listening.
The dream of a unified center bringing together music, theatre, and dance goes back to at least the 1930s when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt led conversations about a theater to provide work for artists during the Great Depression. Predictably, congressional authorization for this dream of a facility followed in fits and starts. The House Patents Committee considered the issue in 1935 and two years later Congress went so far as to establish an Auditorium Commission. Nothing was built. In 1950, President Harry S. Truman endorsed a plan calling for an integrated federal theater. Again, nothing was built. In 1953, bills were introduced to establish a National War Memorial Theatre and Opera House, but fights over the facility’s location once again stalled the effort. Finally, in September of 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was able to sign legislation calling for the creation of a National Cultural Center near the Potomac River. Congress, however, had not provided a blank check. With the exception of some federally-owned property, all funds for planning, land acquisition, construction, staffing, and operations had to come from private donations. Making matters worse, the Center’s trustees would have just five years to raise funds sufficient to begin construction. Should they fail, authorization for the project would end.

By the time John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in January of 1961, it appeared that even this lease may have run out. A proposed nation-wide fund drive had never materialized, the cost of the project had swelled from $30 million to more than $75 million, there were continuing fights over its proposed design and location, and the Center’s planning staff had collapsed to just three employees. It was not even entirely clear that the President--confronted with crises both foreign and domestic--was particularly interested in a new palace for the arts.

One of the overriding challenges to a national center for the performing arts had always been around how to frame it as an asset of the nation rather than just another jewel for Washington’s social elite. To address this issue, the Center’s trustees had sought to fashion a fundraising effort that could involve the entire country rather than just a few wealthy families. An intriguing opportunity arrived in the spring of 1962 when the publicity director for the US Navy Band approached the National Cultural Center’s Executive Director Jarold Kieffer with an idea: the band would record a selection of military marches for public sale and all proceeds would go to the fundraising effort. Kieffer was intrigued and decided to approach the Defense Department about recording all four of Washington’s premier military bands: those of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. Unbeknownst to Kieffer this project would prove almost as difficult as the building of the Center itself. Understanding why requires a short diversion into the late 19th century.

Military Bands, the Recording Industry, and the American Federation of Musicians

In February of 1890, the Columbia Phonograph Company announced that it would begin selling recordings of Henry Jaeger, “the celebrated flute and piccolo soloist of the Marine Band.” The leader of the Marine Band at that time was none other than America’s March King, John Philip Sousa who later explained that engineers from Columbia began to visit the Marine Barracks “while we were rehearsing and put their machines into operation.” Sousa quickly arranged for a contract that allowed his Marine players to earn “a dollar an hour for playing selections into the phonographs.” The United States Marine Band had just become the first large musical ensemble to undertake the commercial recording of music.
“The President’s Own” would go on to record about 200 cylinders before Sousa left the ensemble in 1892, and by 1897 it had recorded thousands of cylinders with Columbia. In June of 1898, it began recording for the Edison Phonograph Company, and between 1906 and 1927, it also recorded 42 titles for the Victor Company.

Washington, DC’s musical life has long been complicated by the presence of military musicians, and labor unions have often objected to what they viewed as the unfair advantage government-paid players had in competing for civilian gigs. As early as 1888, the National League of Musicians had convinced the House of Representatives to consider barring government players from private employment. With the formation of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the issue became even more urgent and, in 1908, Congress instructed that Army and Navy musicians were not to “receive remuneration for furnishing music outside the limits of military posts, when the furnishing of such music places them in competition with local civilian musicians.” Similar legislation covered the Air Force Band when that service was created. The Marine Band was even more tightly controlled: “No member of the United States Marine Corps Band, as an individual, may furnish music in competition with any civilian musician or receive remuneration for furnishing music except under special circumstances when authorized by the President.”

It is unclear exactly when this legislation was expanded to prohibit recordings, but Kieffer was almost certainly correct when he noted that despite owning many records of military music himself, “they all were produced by foreign military or American civilian bands--not the US military bands.” After all, thanks to union objections American military bands had recorded virtually nothing for commercial release in more than 30 years.

And here lay the first challenge to creating Kieffer’s proposed military band series: how to get the AFM on board. He began with Herman D. Kenin, the union’s leader, who promised to at least explore the idea. Kieffer then approached record companies and a meeting with George Avakian of RCA Victor secured an agreement. If Kieffer could get the AFM to agree to the project and convince all rights holders to waive their royalties, RCA Victor would make the recordings. While they would not directly engage in promotion, the company agreed to handle individual orders and leave bulk sales to the Center.

On October 29, 1962, Kieffer got his answer from the AFM: they would support the project but insisted that no one except the Center make any profit from it. The AFM also required that the recordings contain only American military music so as not to compete with other recording artists. With the union and a record company on board, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara approved the project.

The Album

RCA Victor’s engineer, Herman Diaz, selected Howard University’s Cramton Hall for the sessions and he arrived with pretty low expectations. After all, he explained, if the players were skilled “they wouldn’t stay in the military bands.” He was quickly enlightened. The space proved both intimate and resonant, and the Marine Band, just back from its annual tour, was in fine form. Sousa’s “Semper Fidelis,” a piece written for the ensemble, sparkles, even if it lacks a
few repeats. Samuel Barber’s “Commando March” virtually flies through the air with stunningly clear articulations. The clarinets on F.W. Meacham’s “American Patrol” resonate with richness. Even RCA Victor’s much maligned Dynagroove process sounds impressive: highs and lows on Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” louds and softs on Louis Saverino’s “March of the Women Marines,” all sound clear and even. Diaz exclaimed: “these guys are fantastic, precision musicians!”

Upon returning to New York, Diaz was so enthusiastic that RCA Victor reversed course and decided to promote the recordings in the US and internationally. Of course, the federal government did its part as well. The recordings were presented to President Kennedy at a press event on April 23, 1963. Secretary McNamara urged the public to purchase the records. Stories toasting the project appeared in the press, on radio and on TV. Voice of America featured the recordings and copies were sent to members of Congress, military hospitals and veteran centers. Gen. Douglas MacArthur even accepted a set in front of the cameras and the four bandleaders appeared on the television show “What’s My Line?”

President Kennedy receiving the recordings from (left to right): Lt. Col. Albert F. Schoepper (U.S. Marine Band, director), Lt. Anthony A. Mitchell (U.S. Navy Band, director), Lt. Col. Hugh Curry (U.S. Army Band, director), Capt. Harry H. Meusser (representing U.S. Air Force Band director Col. George Howard), President Kennedy, George R. Marek (Vice President, RCA Victor), and Roger L. Stevens (Board of Trustees, National Cultural Center, chairman).
All of this work paid off, and on June 15, the Marine and Navy recordings entered the "Billboard" charts, where they were soon joined by the Air Force Band. The Marine Band record peaked at #22 and spent six weeks on the stereo LP chart. Despite the strong start, the
project collapsed with the assassination of President Kennedy in November of 1963. The National Cultural Center was quickly transformed into a memorial for the slain president: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. RCA Victor rebranded the recordings to feature the new name, but the fundraising campaign now had a new focus: to honor President Kennedy. The recording project fell by the wayside to such a degree that there are not even reliable records as to the number of units sold. Nevertheless, from the performance to the engineering, “The National Cultural Center Presents: The United States Marine Band” is truly one of the great band recordings of the mid-20th century.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.