

They Had Rhythm: Gender, race, and music and the WAC 404th band

The Starting of the Band

In 1941, the US Government created the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corp, but at that point they were not a part of the official U.S. Military. Though 440 women were accepted, more than 30,000 applied to be in the first WAC training class. In order to qualify for the , women had to be between 21 and 45 years old, with strong aptitude scores, good references, and professional, skilled experience. African Americans, as well as both mothers and married women were allowed to apply. The NAACP immediately advocated for the WAAC to be integrated into the Military. “Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council for Negro Women and good friend to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, recruited black women along with the N.A.A.C.P. with the message that military service was a way to serve one’s country and further the fight for equality”. Hagen, C. (2019, March 28). There was a white band on the Des Moines base, and black women advocated that there be a band for them as well, or that they be allowed to join the existing one. Thus, the 404 band was formed on the Des Moines base, and because there was the 400 band, a division of the WAC already there, the white band taught the black band. Leonra Hull Brown was the first band master, and the women were trained on voice first, to learn how to read music. Instruments were provided by the U.S Government and the women worked for 6 weeks before their first concert.



Full Score

Washington Post March

JOHN PHILIP SOUSA
(1854 - 1932)
Arranged by Andrew Salento

Bright march tempo (♩ = 120 - 130)



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404th Band Repertoire

The band was made up of about 30 instrumentalists: 3 trombones, 4 horns, two euphoniums (or tenor horns), 2 percussionists, two sousaphones, 4 trumpets, 4 saxophones, 4 flutes, 4 clarinets, and a conductor. The music they played varied widely. According to newspaper reports, they often played popular music of the time such as “Begin the Beguine,” and music of Cole Porter, as well as arrangements of classical music for band. These classical pieces included the 1812 Overture, Hungarian Dances, and symphonies by Brahms. Of course, the band also played American marches such as Sousa’s Washington Post March. Other selections mentioned by name included: "Colonel Minor" by Rosenkrans, "Concert Overture in G Minor" by Lillya and Isaac, "None but the Lonely Heart" by Tchaikovsky, "Valse Triste" by Sibelius, "Pavone" by Morton Gould, "American Patrol by Meacham, and Tiger Rag by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

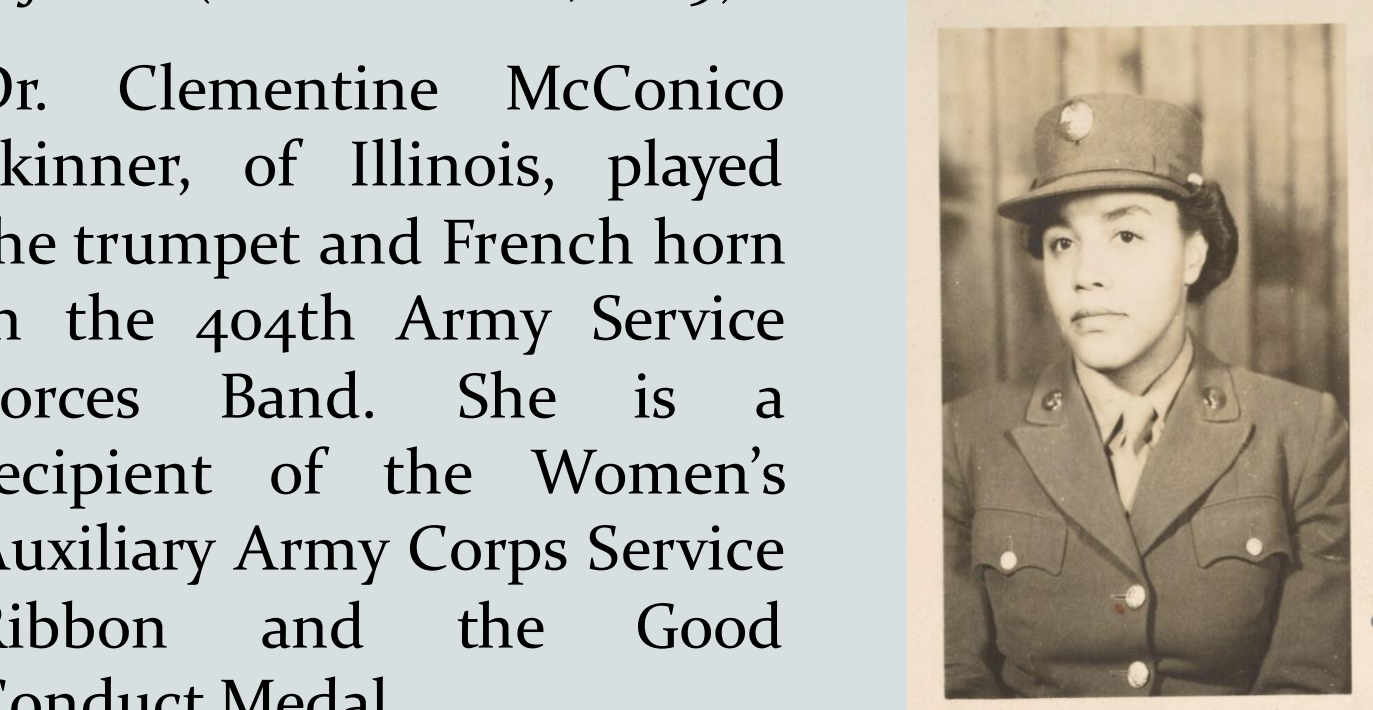
"They made us feel like celebrities. Many of the young girls sought our autographs as if we were famous." Clementine Mcconico Skinner. (Sims-Wood).

A SELECTED TIMELINE OF

WAC 404 BAND

- DECEMBER 1943**
The band is formed under the jurisdiction of Charity Adams Earley.
- JUNE 9, 1944**
June 9th, 1944 Gala opening of the "Invasion Show" Sponsored by St. Louis WAC recruiting Division
- JULY 1944**
NAACP Conference, Chicago. Parade and concert.
- AUGUST, 1944**
The band is disbanded due to the financials of having two bands on the Des Moines Base.
- MARCH 1945**
Band is reinstated on the Des Moines Base as "The 404 ASF Band"
- MARCH 24TH, 1945**
Knoxville TN, and surrounding area; held rallies to recruit war workers
- MAY 20TH, 1945**
Seventh War Loan Drive for the Negroes of Chicago. 100,000 people in attendance
- JUNE 12TH, 1945**
Presents the annual musical program of the Dilettante Club of the negro Community center at 8pm
- AUGUST 26TH, 1945**
Played in the Gala opening for State Fair in the fourth division of the parade.
- SEPTEMBER 22ND, 1945**
Gen John CH Lee visited fort Des Moines and mentioned that the 404 Couldn't go overseas because they stopped sending WACS.
- LATE 1945**
Band disbanded for the last time

"I don't think anybody ever heard of a black women's military band before, and that to us was really something," said Lieutenant Ernestine White, one of the band's leaders. "As a matter of fact, most people had never seen black women in uniform before." (Cronk-Farrel, 2019).



Leonra Hull Brown joined the WAC in 1943, and became the commanding officer of the WAC 404 Band. After the war she taught at the collegiate level. (Sullivan, Jill M.. Bands of Sisters).



Lt Thelma B Brown was the 404th Band conductor and director for the first half of it's career



Race in WWII America and Race Relations at Fort Des Moines

"Now is the time to change the 'present procedure' of the army. If we can't have democracy now, when in heaven's name are we going to have it?" -Spokesperson from the National Council of Negro Women, 1942. (Cronk-Farrel, 2019).

Mary McLeod Bethune was a high-profile activist, and her advocacy is what started the WAC Base at Fort Des Moines. Des Moines was the first WAC Base where Black WACs were allowed to serve. They arrived in July 1942, first to maintain the concept of “the 10% rule” (10% being the percentage of black people to white people in America). The requirements to join were straightforward. One must be over 100 pounds, stand taller than 5 feet, and be between the ages of 21 and 45. Victory Abroad championed military success against fascism overseas, and Victory at Home demanded equality for African Americans in the United States. (Double victory. National Museum of African American History and Culture. (2021, November 21). Retrieved April 20, 2022).

Race relations and racism on the base

“Step Sideways if you Must, but Never Retreat” How the Women’s Army Corp 404 Military Band Dealt with Racism. - (Cronk-Farrel, 2019).

On the Des Moines Base, there were women of all races, but Black WACs were required to use separate dormitories, lunchrooms and swimming pools. The women reported that when they left the training camp and went into Des Moines, they faced discrimination and sometimes hostile comments. Black organizations like the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the YMCA protested the segregated facilities. In November 1942, the use of separate eating and sleeping arrangements ended. This was before the bands were formed so mess halls and dorms were not segregated, but swimming pools were. Members of the 404th band were frustrated with their Saturday afternoon-only swimming time and began to swim when they wanted to, when the pool wasn't full. “I broke down desegregation-I desegregated the swimming pool at Fort Des Moines and to my knowledge, as long as I was there, it was still desegregated.” -Martha Putney, commanding officer at Des Moines. (Cronk-Farrel, 2019).

ROSTER OF THE 404 BAND

Majorie Daly
Elsie Davis, played timpani later on with the Boston Women’s Symphony
Dorothy Francis, trombone
Maude Blackwood, horn, was a music teacher before joining the WAC.
Joan Lamb, original director
Mary Waterman
Eunice Van Horn
Thelma B Brown
Ruth Lucas
Inez, played the saxophone
Pat Allen
Evelyn Haley, alto horn
Margaret Alice McAlpine
Ernestine L Woods, Second Lt, director

Fluffy the Dog, the band’s original mascot a curly haired toy spitz.

