

Beer Bands; You Can't Tell the Players Without a Program

You may be aware that one of the beer bands was busted recently (as reported in the Press Citizen 10/2/2015) for performing pieces in public that have been deemed unfit for human consumption.

Well, you can't tell the players (so to speak) without a program so here you go:

UI Alumni Band: A group of former Hawkeye Marching Band (HMB) members formed in 1973 and sponsored by the UI Alumni Association. It plays at Homecoming each year (Friday parade and Saturday game), plus occasional small gigs during the year if enough players can be rounded up. It's good, clean fun.

Alumni beer band: A splinter group of the Alumni Band that has its own director, has one gig per year (downtown after the Homecoming parade) and has no official relationship with the University of Iowa or Alumni Association (to their relief). It's good - albeit somewhat less clean - fun.

Iowa City Beer Band (usually just called the Beer Band): A group primarily made up of current Hawkeye Marching Band members - on their own time - and recent graduates who make the bar circuit on the Friday night before each home football game. They have no official relationship with the Alumni Band or any other University of Iowa entity (again, to their relief). It is currently on hiatus, because this is the group that was busted.

Icbeerband.com: A web site - until it was taken down last week - that was a trove of historic (although alternately funny and raunchy) Alumni beer band lyrics dating back 50 years or more. It seems to be unaffiliated with any of the above entities; it's just performing a public service (really, a lot of people ask). Hopefully it will be back at some point. With a disclaimer.

The Alumni beer band has been using the same songs and lyrics for decades; they are pretty much frozen in time. The lyrics are sometimes lewd and sexist (but not misogynistic), probably due to their creation before the HMB went co-ed in 1972.

The Alumni beer band has been careful to perform the bawdier tunes only in bars and not in public.

After the Alumni beer band got started, it didn't take long for student musicians to heed the siren call of free beer on a Friday night and the Iowa City (student) Beer Band was formed. Depending on the evening, it can have up to 100 members. It began by singing the Alumni beer band song versions, but years ago it began substituting different (even worse) lyrics to the already-earthly tunes that had been vetted over the years. It also incorporated a couple of other inappropriate pieces from other universities' bands that were originally sung only behind closed doors.

It's no accident that the words "common sense" and "free beer" seldom appear in the same sentence. It's a couple of these tunes that got the I.C. Beer Band in trouble two weeks ago when they made the mistake of performing them in public. A recent former I.C. Beer Band director assured me that the word "rape" has never been a lyric in any song, but witnesses last week insist otherwise.

In 2007 I tagged along with the I.C. Beer Band one Friday night just to see what it was like, and at that time they were performing the usual tried-and-true tunes. A problem that still exists today is preventing underage band members from entering bars; they can choose to try to enter and bar owners can choose to try to prevent it. What often happens is the band rapidly marches in on a drum cadence, and anyone holding an instrument is allowed to pass. Once inside, God only knows where the plastic cups of beer are ending up.

In any case, tonight after the Homecoming parade the UI Alumni Band (and Alumni beer band) will be up to their usual antics. Due to the I.C. Beer Band's recent poor decisions, the Alumni beer band will be on its best behavior and not performing the coarse tunes that - frankly - I was uncomfortable singing anyway.

Those will probably start to work their way back in next year. The only one I'll miss performing this year is the "Fireman's Song" which ends with the punch line, "she puts out (fires)." It always gets a laugh, and it amazes me that there are still

people out there who haven't heard it yet. That's an "in-bar" tune only; in 1998 UI officials deemed it "inappropriate" for the HMB to play any longer.

My favorite memory from last year's performance was when we played at the Sports Column, which has large open windows so it was possible to be heard from the street. A woman I estimated to be in her mid-30's was standing on the sidewalk, smiling and singing along on one of our naughtier tunes. Her young son was standing in front of her, her hands clamped tightly over his ears.

I.C. Beer Band members have always been careful to ensure they don't use UI equipment or wear HMB clothing; all they need now is a new set list, and possibly sensitivity training. That seems a little odd because the I.C. Beer Band contains a large number of female members, who you would expect to have a low tolerance for sexism and worse.

Given the UI's current priority of cracking down on sexual misconduct, it is taking the allegations seriously. Meetings about the I.C. Beer Band's recent escapade went high up the UI food chain this week. Nobody was ever fired for over-reacting to reports of misogyny and pro-rape rhetoric, so the danger here is that it will come down with both feet and attempt to ban the group forever. I favor a more tempered response that allows this tradition to continue, yet solve the problem.

Come on downtown tonight, and judge for yourself!

Writers Group member Dave Parsons is a long-time member of the UI Alumni beer band and co-owns a business on the Coralville Strip.