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FOR BLACK MARCHING BANDS, IT'S ABOUT RHYTHM, PRECISION AND FLARE

By David Gonzalez, December 30, 2015



There is something about the spectacle of a marching band that has entranced Jules Allen. Sure, the sun gleaming off trumpets and the sound of drums echoing in the air are impressive. So, too, is the majestic sight of scores of musicians following a high-stepping, high-hatted drum major. But what gets to Mr. Allen is something deeper: the sights and sounds of victory.

This is not a small consideration for Mr. Allen, 68, whose previous photo projects range from style and metaphor (hats or nudes) to documentary (boxing). What they all have in common is his determination to show African-American life in ways that connect the dots and underscore tradition and history. His coming book from QCC Art Gallery, "Marching Bands," is a culmination of sorts, blending both metaphor and documentary, as well as his interests in style, music and sport.

"I'm trying to describe the culture in photography in a way that disputes a lot of photography about black culture," said Mr. Allen, who teaches at Queensborough Community College in New York. "I'm not one who was beat up by racism or bigotry, but I have issues with a lot of work about black culture done by nonblack photographers. My work in general is to describe African-American culture as a celebration of victory."

The sight of a band in full regalia is an imposing version of that perspective. Yet it was not until Mr. Allen moved from San Francisco to New York City in the late 1970s that he saw his first marching bands up close, at the annual African-American Day Parade in Harlem. He started going each year, working the crowds and the marchers, entranced by what he beheld.

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“Whenever a marching band would come through, it would take me to pieces,” he said. “In particular, Morgan State. They were just something else: the rhythm, the movement, the precision, the timing. What I call now the pulse and beat of what they were doing. It all seemed so particular to an African-American sensibility.”

With help from a grant, he undertook his project, which would eventually broaden to include not just bands from historically black colleges and universities, but also high school bands and community drum and bugle corps. A breakthrough came when Gail Reid, a friend who helped him with research, said she could get him into some of the bands at the big colleges and helped him meet the band director at Morgan State.

Inside the band room, dozens of musicians chatted, until the band director came in and everything came to a halt as the director scanned the room and the band members sat up straight and ready.

“Then this one brother came in late,” Mr. Allen recalled. “The cat was two minutes late. The band director stood at the podium and said: ‘Mr. Jones, you are not in your seat. Turn in your uniform.’ I was like, wow. The guy went to plead his story; all the band members just put their heads down. The director then turned around to somebody and said, ‘Start this off.’ The whole rehearsal just had this discipline.”

That discipline rubbed off on him, too, as he learned how a band moved, how the light hit at what times of day or season. He also got to know the gestures — such as when the cymbal players would bow deeply to one another — that defined this musical universe. And he found ways to show them in a larger picture — such as when a band would be marching through a wooded area, looking like points on a landscape.

“That gesture of human beings, even integrated into a landscape, has a rhythm that is identifiable,” he said. “It all creates a sensibility for me. One thing that has guided me is something Diane Arbus said: The more specific something is, the more general it is. The deeper I can go into the things I am about, the more valuable it will reveal itself to be.”

Yet no matter how deep he got into this project, one revelation eluded him.

“People ask me what I like about the marching band,” Mr. Allen said. “Everything, except the music. My music is Miles, Trane and Beethoven. I didn’t want to hear marching band music. But the visuals and cultural aspects are phenomenal.”