

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade How & Why It Began?

On January 20, 1986, the first, oldest, original and largest MLK National Parade, Battle of Bands and Drum Line Extravaganza was held in St. Petersburg, Florida.

A more in-depth review of the *History and Origin Section* of the MLK National Parade and Battle of Bands will reveal that the MLK National Parade was the result of a Vision from God to a Floridian who had just experienced the death of his beloved grandmother on October 31, 1985. Brown's throat muscles would involuntarily constrict and cut off his breathing if he came to close to the Wake or Funeral of his grandmother, Maggie Church. Brown had experienced this same medical phenomena with the lost of his beloved father's mother, his grandmother, Altamease Campbell, in 1972. Not able to cry or grieve, Brown prayed for God to deliver him from his situation. God awakened Brown at 2:30 a.m. a few mornings later and showed him a Vision, in Panoramic View, as if he was in a theater, of HBCU (Historical Black Colleges & Universities) marching bands and floats marching and riding down the streets in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Brown immediately jumped up and began drafting

the format of the King Parade. He became obsessed with the Vision that God gave him of a traditional National Parade with floats and bands in honor of Dr. King. God preoccupied his mind to the extent that it got Brown pass the lost of his second grandmother for the next three months.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade founders are Sevell C. Brown, III and Darryl Lamont Brown, Sr.

Prior to January 20, 1986, the Civil Rights lieutenants of Dr. King and the rest of America only celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. in the form of traditional Civil Right Marches as practiced by Dr. King in the Selma to Montgomery, Birmingham and Washington, D.C. historic marches.

Before 1985, there was no such entity as a “**traditional parade**” in the sense of the “*Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade*” and the “*Rose Bowl Parade*” with floats and marching bands in honor of Dr. King. After 18 years of lobbying Congress, President Ronald Reagan signed the Federal King Holiday Bill on November 3, 1983, making the third Monday of every January, the Federal King Holiday. The first Federal King Holiday would become

effective and celebrated in two years and two months on January 20, 1986.

Ironically, two years after President Reagan signed the King Holiday Bill, in the same month of November, the Brown brothers founded the **MLK National Parade on November 15, 1985.**

Two months away from the first Federal King Holiday, the Browns ignored being told by SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and King Lieutenants that putting on a monumental Dr. King Parade would be **an impossible task to accomplish within two months and they would stick with “memorial marches”**. However, Brown was told he could **go ahead and carry on with his plans for a parade but just don’t ask or expect any financial support from SCLC to do it.** Brown was unmoved by those in Civil Rights and inside SCLC who rejected and refused to support the God Given Vision of the concept of a traditional parade to honor Dr. King.

The founders of the MLK National Parade, rather than participate in the concept of an annual memorial civil rights march, as practiced in Atlanta, to annually memorialize Dr. King, decided to take a separate path from the lieutenants of Dr. King. Sevell Brown had

already participated in these marches as a student at Clark College in the Atlanta University Center in 1970.

Miraculously, against all odds, in less than two months, they successfully introduced the concept of the traditional “Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade, Battle of Bands & Drum Line Extravaganza” to America on January 20, 1986.

For the first time in American History, White marching bands and African American Marching Bands marched together in Salute and Tribute to a great American in the first Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade that was held in St. Petersburg, Florida.

The response to the concept was overwhelming as the police attendance count for the first Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade was 25,000; the 2nd year the police count was 38,000 and 60,000 by the third year. Brown then went before the Pinellas County School Board, lobbied and won a major victory as the Board by 1 vote declared Dr. King’s birthday a School Board Holiday. Some 80,000 attended the parade in this 4th year.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade since

then has averaged 100,000 over the last 20 years with marching bands from some 15 different states from across America.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade and Battle of Bands enjoyed the support of African American Master Band Directors at the University level that served as Advisory Board Members for the event. Dr. Cleophus Johnson, Director of Bands for the esteemed Morris Brown College Marching Wolverines chaired the Advisory Board for Brown.

Director of Bands Ben Butler at Texas Southern, Jimmy Williams and Dr. Johnny Hodge at North Carolina A T&T University, Dr. Dowell Taylor and Paul Adams at Jackson State University, Dr. Charles Smith at the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff, Dr. William P. Foster and Dr. Julian White at Florida A & M University helped in the implementation of the concept of a traditional parade in honor of Dr. King.

BCC now BCU, The Bethune Cookman University Marching Wildcats and its Golden Girls were the first university band to march in the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade in its first year. BCU Director of Bands, Prof. Donovan Wells, carries on the tradition of BCU's participation to this day.

The African American Band Directors of the High Schools of Florida were immensely supportive in establishing the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Parade and Battle of the Bands as this parade features the best high stepping bands from across America. Pop Wilson of Jones High School in Orlando, Florida was the first visiting high school band; Joe Bell, Sr. of Roosevelt Magnet Middle School in West Palm Beach, FL; Shelby Chipman of Miami Central High School; Ollice Davis of Pahokee Middle High School in Belle Glade, FL and; Elmer Davis of Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Brown's vision was designed to expose, teach and instill in generations of young elementary, middle and high school students an appreciation of who Dr. King was and his significance to them. The only way to reach the youth to memorialize King was to provide a way for them to connect to his name and spirit. Brown's premise was "To reach youth, you must reach them where they are, not in the skies where adults wish for them to aspire." In 1985, the youth of America could not be separated from their boom boxes and their music. Brown simply replaced the boom boxes with the African American University bands.

This strategic move by Brown reflects another of the

valuable lessons he learned about the music of the indigenous Black American slave as a student under Dr. Wendell Phillip Whalum in the Afro American Studies program instituted at Morehouse College. **“Music is never music for music sake. It is always reflective of the experience or experiences through which Blacks have gone and are still going through.”** Just as the Negro Spiritual, Blues, Jazz and Gospel music was indicative of this unique application of music to life’s experiences, so it is with the music and Marching Art Form of the (HBCU) Historical Black Colleges and Universities Marching Bands.

Brown’s idea was to utilize the sophisticated orchestrations of marching band music composed by master university band directors and employ the **“Art Form of High Stepping Marching Style”** to cover the entire Federal King Birthday celebration, making this its center and foundation. The intrinsic masterful musical dynamics of master band directors, like Dr. William Foster at FAMU, Dr. Isaac Greggs at Southern University, Dr. Dowell Taylor at Jackson State University, Dr. Graves at Tennessee State University, Prof. Jimmy Williams and Dr. Hodge at North Carolina A & T University, Professor Cleophus Johnson at Morris Brown College and others now replaced the boom boxes and took the minds of children to a higher level.

When university bands took to the streets in the parade and performed at the Tropicana Field Dome Stadium in the battle of bands festival named after Dr. King; every time the Drum Majors of every university and high school band raised their feet and planted them in the streets in their famous, spirited, unique high- stepping performance routines, little children at the Battle of the Bands and at the MLK Parade, began to speak and proudly proclaim, unlike ever before, that they knew who Martin Luther King, Jr. was - “HE’S THE DRUM MAJOR FOR JUSTICE WHO DIED FOR US! HE’S THE **DRUM MAJOR** THAT THE DRUM MAJORS IN UNIVERSITY & HIGH SCHOOL BANDS MARCHED TO HONOR IN THE MLK NATIONAL PARADE.”

Over the years, all visiting bands from some 15 different states in America left St. Petersburg and took the concept of “A traditional MLK Parade Celebration” back to their respective home towns and implemented Sevell Brown’s Vision from God. Thusly, the Annual MLK National Drum Major for Justice Parade, Battle of Bands and Drum Line Extravaganza in St. Petersburg, Florida has been **cloned** and duplicated throughout America as the chosen manner to celebrate Dr. King’s birthday.