The Marching Owl Band has been poking fun, creating controversy and making football crowds laugh for 40 years.

By Alyson Ward
It was Labor Day weekend, 2011, and the return of college football. Rice played Texas. Although the Longhorns won the game 34–9, Rice’s band won halftime.

The Marching Owl Band — known as the MOB — often uses its time on the field to comment on current events and, of course, its rivals, such as the University of Texas and especially, Texas A&M. With sharp and timely humor, the MOB’s shows tackled conference realignment and Texas A&M’s move to the Southeastern Conference. “We congratulate the SEC and the Big 12,” the MOB’s announcer said, “as both conferences improve their average IQ.”

The MOBsters formed an SEC on the field, then shifted a bit to make a silent judgment by turning the “S” into a dollar sign: SEC.

It was the sort of war, satirical observation the MOB is known for — and it worked! A few weeks later, the Web site up with chatter about the show. Photos of the formation circulated on Facebook and sports blogs nationwide. In a season of band-wrangling over college sports affiliations and conference realignment, the MOB — a few dozen smart-alecky musicians — had found its niche.

The MOB has become a favorite among visiting crowds, a sort of wry, satirical observation the MOB is known for — something the Aggie crowd liked much better.

The MOB presented a halftime show that lampooned Rice and its traditions, and audiences got smaller and so did the band. Fierec in the late 1970s, the MOB found its way to stay sharp and get people talking. In 2007, the MOB made national news with a show that drew loud complaints and even louder cheers. That year, head football coach Todd Graham had left Rice abruptly after a single season to coach at the University of Tulsa. When Rice had a game against Tulsa, the MOB decided to use halftime to lampoon the Rice community’s disappointment.

The show was complicated and sort of brilliant: It was based on Dante’s “Inferno,” with the band searching for how his flaws might have landed him among the greedy, the false and the traitorous. At last, they found that Graham had landed in a 10th, more horrible circle of hell: Tulsa.

“Tulsa was just a great crowd response,” said director Chuck Thompson. “When he left, there were hard feelings in the whole community, especially the student body, and they were expecting us to take care of the response.”

In the end, Thompson is not sure if the joke was at the band’s benefit. “If I want to sum up what being a MOBster is like,” said Keith Goodnight, “the story I tell is that I once stood at Kyle Field at Texas A&M waving a giant screw at the Aggie band while dressed as a Christmas tree.”

Every MOBster has a story like this, and their stories blend together in a sort of midnight memorized prayer.

Ultimately, said Harrow, the MOB shows Rice is different is a sort of universality. “It’s the Rice culture. Intelligence is not bad — it’s nothing to be ashamed of.” It was hard to sum up — the MOB had run afoul of various academic and other concerns. “Being able to pick up an instrument and put it down easily, and something else, we could cut loose and do things that were fun and creative without worrying — it was a good thing.”

After four decades, it still is.

If you’re interested in the story behind the story, the MOB members are just as interested in sharing the story.

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