Celebrating 70 years of 'Bear Down, Arizona'

This year, the University of Arizona and its marching band, the Pride of Arizona, celebrate the 70th anniversary of "Bear Down, Arizona," the song that accompanies nearly every Wildcats celebration.

As a fight song, "Bear Down, Arizona" checks a lot of boxes, both musically and lyrically. It's performed at a relatively fast tempo and in a major key, both of which add excitement and lift the listeners' mood. And it features a simple musical structure and equally simple, punchy words that have symbolic meaning.

"I think 'Bear Down, Arizona' is one of the great fight songs. It's uniquely recognizable," says Chad Shoopman, assistant professor of music, director of the Pride of Arizona and an alumnus.

The first-ever public performance of the song took place on Saturday, Sept. 20, 1952, during a noontime "A Day" pep rally in downtown Tucson, just before first-year students headed up "A" Mountain to whitewash the "A." It became an instant tradition – likely by design of the song's composer, longtime University of Arizona band director Jack K. Lee.

In Lee's version of the story, he began writing the song after his interview for the position of band director, as his flight passed over Bear Down Gymnasium on its departure from Tucson International Airport.

He recalled hearing the story of starting quarterback John "Button" Salmon, who was seriously injured in a car accident in 1926. From his deathbed, Salmon is said to have asked coach James Fred "Pop" McKale to take a message to his teammates: "Tell them … tell the team to Bear Down." Those words led the Wildcats to a victory in the next game and became the battle cry for all of the sports teams, the entire student body, and fans across Southern Arizona.

The story goes that Lee wrote the lyrics and arrangement on the back of an air sickness bag.

After Lee accepted the job, it seems he returned to Tucson with a plan to introduce "Bear Down, Arizona" as an alternative or companion to "Fight, Wildcats, Fight" – Arizona's (still) official fight song, composed in 1929 by former band member Douglas Holsclaw, who also began the University's first cheerleading squad in 1923. From his first day on the job on Sept. 1, 1952, Lee began teaching the song to the band and later to the wider student body.

The Sept. 19, 1952, issue of the Arizona Daily Wildcat student newspaper reported that Lee introduced the song to first-year students during an assembly in the Student Union ballroom the night before, singing the lyrics himself. The newspaper printed the now-familiar chorus of "Bear Down, Arizona" on the front page that day.

"I tried to keep the tune as simple as possible with intervals and within easy range like all other collegiate tunes," Lee told Arizona Daily Star columnist Lou Pavlovich in December 1952. "Most everyone says they like the song."

Lee succeeded spectacularly in integrating his new song into the culture of campus, according to the "Grande Dame" of the University of Arizona marching band, former twirling instructor Shirlee Bertolini, recruited by Lee to be the band's first baton twirler.

"The fans, and all the students, picked up the song immediately. They loved it," she said. "He said he'd written a song for the school and he wanted to introduce it to the whole band. And he handed out the sheet music and they started practicing it. He wanted it to be extra special, even though there was already a fight song."

Watch a video detailing the history and legacy of "Bear Down, Arizona" below.
Video by Arlene Islas, University Communications

‘Lost’ lyrics

When people launch into the song at Wildcat sporting events, beginning with “Bear Down, Arizona,” they likely don't realize that they are singing the chorus and not the first verse.

The first verse Lee wrote, but that is never sung, is:

Arizona, bear down!
Let's cheer for Arizona,
Let's raise our voices high!
Let's cheer for Arizona,
That bear down battle cry!
Let's cheer our team to victory!
Let's cheer our team to fame!
Let's cheer for Arizona,
For spirit wins the game!

It's not clear whether Lee ever made a concerted effort to teach this "forgotten" first verse or immediately abandoned it in favor of the simpler, more concise chorus, which took off in popularity. Today, the music for the first verse serves as a sort of fanfare to the sung portion of the song, which the band plays occasionally at the beginning of an athletic event or during an extended break in the action.

"A lot the reason we don't play it is that the song would be twice as long," Shoopman said. "And often when we're playing it, it's after an amazing play, a dunk or touchdown, so we have a limited amount of time. I think the lyrics everyone knows are the chorus. It's more 'What can we get everyone singing right away and get fired up?' It's the most celebratory part of the song."

‘Found’ lyrics

While the first verse seemingly fell out of use almost immediately, new lyrics were unofficially added to “Bear Down, Arizona” following the men's basketball team's first run to the Final Four, in 1987. Reserve guard Harvey Mason produced a rap song, "Wild about the Cats," for a Tucson radio station – with an accompanying music video [2] – that became a hit with local radio and television audiences, and the Pride of Arizona. The band quickly added the rap's refrain to its performance of the fight song.

"There's a lot of nostalgia around it," Shoopman said. "It allows the band a chance to chant and yell after playing and get the crowd fired up on a personal level, by getting the instruments out of their faces."

The new section of the song also spawned one of the University's most popular football halftime traditions: the Tuba Dance, performed by the sousaphone section, in which the musicians line up at midfield to dance with their instruments and lead a chant spelling out of the word "Arizona," after which they set down their oversized horns and spell out "Wildcats" with their bodies as they, and the crowd, rap Mason's lyrics: W-I-L-D CATS / W-I-L-D WILDCATS!

Fight song roots

College fight songs date back more than a century. But the use of music to help establish a group identity and make connections between people goes back much farther.
Professor of communication **Jake Harwood**, who studies the role music plays in bridging boundaries between groups of people, likens the function of fight songs to localized national anthems, conveying a sense of shared values and beliefs among those who sing them.

"Music in general, and fight songs in particular, signal to people inside our group that we belong, and they signal to those outside our group that we are strong, that we are unified," he said. "We've had 70 years of collective practice with 'Bear Down, Arizona' and so even people who are new to the University very quickly become part of that historical tradition."

"You feel like you're connected, not just to the people who are around you, singing it right now, but also to all the people who've sung it in the past," Harwood said.

Since its introduction, "Bear Down, Arizona" has inspired Wildcats and fans to persevere during hard times, to always give their best effort and to support and respect one another. The musical tradition continues to unite Wildcats worldwide.

"What I like about the fight song, and any good fight song, is you're going to have a stadium full of people who may not agree on any one thing, but you play 'Bear Down, Arizona' and we all agree on that in that moment, and that's special, and I think that's the power of a fight song," Shoopman said.

"It wouldn't be a pop hit. It's kind of got cheesy lyrics: 'Hit 'em hard, let 'em know who's who.' It's got that old-school thing. But you'll see people from all walks of life, from all generations, singing it with their heart, with gusto, and in that moment we're all united behind the team, or the University, or the idea that 'This is our community, and we stand for something.'"

The 70th anniversary of "Bear Down, Arizona" coincides with the 120th anniversary of the University of Arizona band program, which was established in 1902. Arizona Athletics and the Pride of Arizona will mark the song's anniversary during this year's Homecoming festivities, happening Oct. 27-29.

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