



Eric McClendon, a junior at JSU, was selected as a member of the 2012 Spirit of Atlanta Drum & Bugle Corps.

# SPIRIT OF ATLANTA

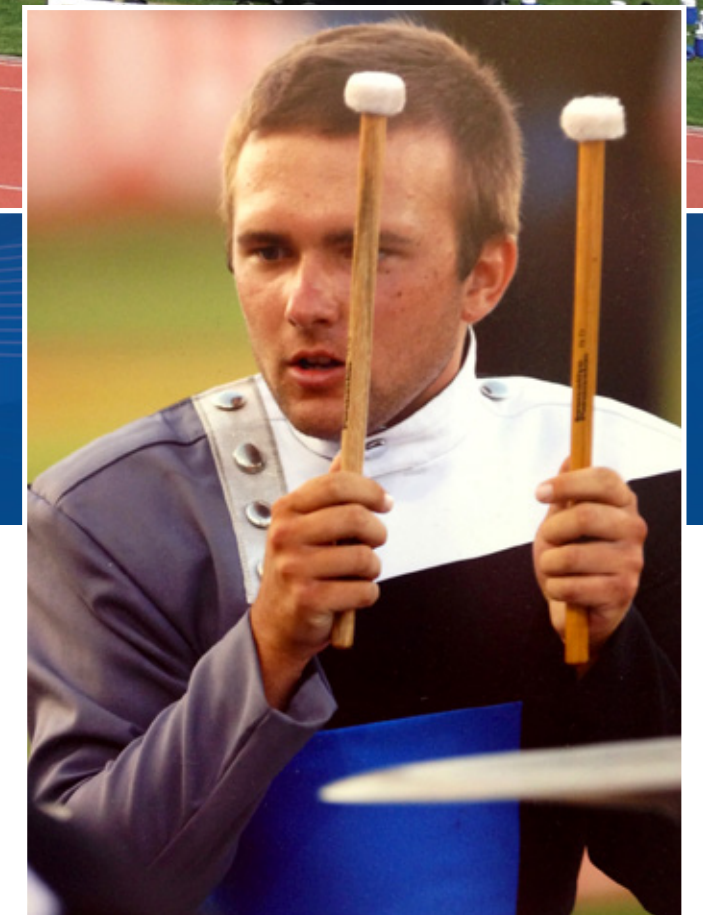
by Diana LaChance

We tend to think of young artists and musicians as dreamers, not ambitious, career-minded achievers. But that's not the case with Eric McClendon, who turned his passion for music into a college scholarship and the opportunity to march with the highly competitive Spirit of Atlanta Drum & Bugle Corps.



Above: Members of SoA come together for an intense day-long practice of their routine before touring this past summer. The team begins practicing as early as January each year.

Right: Eric played the timpani, or kettledrums, with the SoA. His team ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the DCI World Championship Finals this August in Indianapolis.



A junior majoring in art at Jacksonville State University (JSU), Eric began playing the piano when he was in kindergarten, later picking up percussion at Fyffe High School. "Piano and percussion are two very different things, and I just felt inclined to diversify," he says. "I had more of a passion for percussion because I wanted to be able to march in the band." His dedication paid off, and he soon succeeded in marching snare drum for Fyffe.

Percussion also opened his eyes to the world of drum and bugle corps, like the Spirit of Atlanta (SoA), a nonprofit education organization for youth performing arts and member of the Drum Corps International (DCI) that was founded in 1976. "If you're good enough, you can do it in high school," says McClendon, who summoned the courage to audition for SoA in his senior year but ended up not making it.

Nevertheless, the experience only strengthened his resolve, and one year later, failure turned to success when he auditioned for — and won — a music scholarship to JSU. And even though he didn't make the snare drum line for the school's marching band, the Marching Southerners, he says he was able to combine his knowledge of piano with the percussion aspect to play the marimba with the front ensemble.

Two years later, with the skills he gained with the Marching Southerners, McClendon decided to audition again for

the SoA. "Auditioning is stressful, but I felt calmer about it this time since I was growing in my musical capability," he says. "So when I got the opportunity again, I seized it." Not only did he seize it, he succeeded in securing a position playing the timpani for the SoA.

Now the challenge was raising enough money to be able to travel. Every summer, the SoA, which is made up of 150 brass, percussion and color guard members between ages 16 and 21, performs an 11-minute show at more than 30 competitions and exhibitions across the country. The culmination is the coveted Drum Corps International Finals, which was held this past year in Indianapolis. McClendon would have to raise his membership fee of almost \$3,000 by soliciting sponsors.

"It costs a lot of money and it's hard to get that funding," he says. "And I hate to feel like I'm burdening my parents." That said, he knows they are proud of him.

His father, Keith, is a long-time employee of FTC. "He is such a hard worker and is dedicated to being a good father and role model to me and my brother," says McClendon. "I'm grateful to both of my parents and appreciate the fact that they have helped me fulfill my dreams."

Through contributions, McClendon was able to raise the required funds in time to begin practicing. "So much work went into it," he says. "Starting in January and going until the summer, we had weekend camps, then we had 'all-

days' at Riverside Military Academy in Georgia. We moved in and stayed for a couple of weeks to learn the show and to spend every day practicing." After that, it was off to the first competition.

"Each show is actually competition between corps from all across the nation, though not every corps is at every show," explains McClendon. "At any one competition, there are maybe eight to ten world-class corps." Also present are thousands of attendees. "Drum corps season is during the summer so everyone knows bands are touring. It's a pretty big deal."

The hope is that, by the time of the first competition, all their training and practice will be second nature to the members. "The whole point of us beating our bodies down and practicing so much is so when the show comes you don't think about it — you just do it." This summer's show theme was "Sin City," which incorporated popular songs by everyone from Lady Gaga to Frank Sinatra. It proved popular enough for the SoA to make it all the way through to the DCI World Championship finals.

"We placed 11th out of 12 corps," says McClendon, adding that it was an impressive finish given the changes the SoA has gone through over the last few years. "It used to be based at Jacksonville and there were a lot of people around here that had marched, but when they moved to Atlanta, it was like a fresh start," he explains. "But they've been play-

ing really well since they made the move, and the corps is becoming more mature."

Now that the summer of touring has ended and McClendon is back with the Marching Southerners, he's not sure if he'll audition again. "I can only do it until I'm 21, so it's a once-in-a-lifetime type of thing," he says.

No matter what happens, McClendon can still take away some valuable lessons from his experience with SoA. "I not only have a sense of personal fulfillment, but as my career gets more serious, I really hope my years of band help show that I will work hard, which will enable me to get a better job," he says. ■