

MOB Mentality

Ed Cottrell

September 23, 1998

MOB Mentality

One of the largest parts of college life for me is membership in Rice University's Marching Owl Band, better known as the MOB (Identity). As the name indicates, the MOB is not a traditional marching band. We are a scatter band, meaning that we emphasize humorous halftimes instead of precision marching. We are the only college band in the United States to wear fedoras, the only one I have heard of which plays "Louie Louie" more often than our fight song, and one of very few in which playing the cowbell is one of the more essential tasks in a half-time show. (Signs, Symbols, Behaviors, Roles). As unusual as this is, the underlying organization of the MOB is much the same as other bands. At the top of the MOB leadership is our director, Dr. Cesario, followed by a Drum Major and Drum Minor, the section leaders, and approximately twenty other staff members whose responsibilities range from uniform management to prop design and leading rehearsals (Roles). However, the leadership structure is where the resemblance to other band subcultures ends. In fact, within the MOB are several smaller subcultures, which can be broken down by section: the leadership, the woodwinds, the brass, the percussion, and the Show Assistants (I am the MOB Enforcer, or Drum Captain, and a Computer Manager, so I am part of both the leadership and the percussion).

Within each division, individual instruments have developed their own traditions and customs. For example, the trumpets have a long-standing fascination with the Texaco company, while the flutes have a long-standing tradition of screaming upon

hearing the Texaco theme song. The quad players have traditions involving stick-flipping and Tabasco ties, and the tubas typically have large stuffed tongues sticking out of the bells of their instruments (Folkways, Customs, Sanctions). There is also a great deal of bridging between MOB members and other organizations, particularly the college system, Campus Crusade for Christ (a large number of MOBsters are active Christians – Mores), the Student Association, the Rice EMS, and other large groups on campus. Many traditions that started in these smaller sub-networks have gradually become features of the entire MOB culture, particularly those related to outside institutions such as Texaco, Tabasco, and the Blues Brothers (Folkways, Sanctions). For example, the trumpet section's fascination with Texaco and the flutes' abhorrence to Texaco arose out of the fact that large numbers of trumpet players are employed by Texaco after graduation as engineers. The extremely large number of traditions in the MOB occasionally presents confusing situations to new members, particularly in the position of director, which has been occupied by three different individuals in three years. As a result of this, membership in the MOB has varying informal degrees. Anyone can join the MOB in the literal sense by filling out a single form about one page in length, but to become a true "MOBster," fully aware of MOB traditions and norms, is a much more subjective and gradual process. Some members have participated for more than two decades, while most are in their second or third year of playing. A few outstanding members are known as "Black Fedoras," for the different fedoras they are entitled to wear. Thus, MOBsters may be barely familiar with the group or have been members since the days of the Rice Owl Band in the 1970's (Membership, Norms, Roles).

While the MOB contains in itself several subcultures and overlaps with numerous other groups, there is a high degree of unity among MOB members. We are all recognized as a whole through the above behaviors, the constant presence of Fedoras and strange neck-ties in our rooms, and the ability to play “Louie Louie” without any mental activity (Signs). Essentially all MOB members believe that traditional marching in college bands is boring, that something is seriously wrong with any public school whose alma mater is based on “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” and that all issues and events, academic, political, or otherwise, are fair material for MOB abuse, provided that the goal is to make the audience laugh (Beliefs, Values, Mores). Thus, jokes about President Clinton’s scandals, the academic eligibility of a Texas A&M football player, Barney v. Big Bird, or the condition of UT’s athletic department are all considered fair, within certain unspoken – and occasionally misinterpreted - limits on good taste and inoffensiveness (Values, Mores). The MOB’s sense of humor, however, is about as unorthodox as the MOB itself and the university at large. For example, most members of the MOB find amusing (to some degree) the so-called “existential cheer,” which is, “We’re from Rice! Ain’t that nice! Who are you? Do you know?” This bit of academic oddity is far less likely to draw a grin from somebody not affiliated with Rice than from a Rice student (Behaviors, Folkways). Thus, as strange and random as the MOB’s behavior sometimes seems to the opposing team, newspaper columnists, Rice students, and, sometimes, even MOBsters themselves, there is a common understanding in the MOB that it is all in good fun, and that, somehow, someday, somebody in the audience will find it all amusing, if for no other reason than its total absurdity.