Behind the Bandstand: Jay G. Sims and the Internal Workings of the Sousa Band

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Abstract
From 1919 to 1932 trombonist, Jay G. Sims, served as the personnel manager for the Sousa Band. The Harry Ransom Center at University of Texas at Austin holds Sim's business correspondences which divulge his crucial role in the band's operations, shedding light on his contributions to the band's success as a touring group. Notwithstanding so, there is relatively little information about him in the existing scholarship on John Philip Sousa and the Sousa Band. This paper explores Sims' position as personnel manager for the Sousa Band through an examination of his correspondences. There is particular focus on his day-to-day functions, including his input on hiring decisions and recruitment of members, as well as purchasing of equipment for the band's performances. Furthermore, Sims' correspondence offers a rare, behind-the-scenes glimpse of the Sousa Band, one of the most famous touring musical groups of the early-twentieth century. By using Sims' own documents as a primary source, it is possible through letters and invoices, not only to determine the exact nature of Sims' role within the Sousa Band, but also how his administrative position impacted the band's operations.

Keywords
John Philip Sousa, band, 20th century music, Sousa Band, Jay G. Sims

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From 1919 to 1932, Jay G. Sims, a trombonist, was personnel manager for the Sousa Band. His responsibilities included recruiting players for the band, ensuring that the band’s memberships were set for each of their tours, as well as equipping the members of the band with the necessary instruments and uniforms. Despite the important role he played in the band’s day-to-day workings, there are but few references to him in the existing scholarship on John Philip Sousa and the Sousa Band, perhaps owing to his work largely being behind the scenes. Sims had a key, yet overlooked part in the Sousa Band’s operations, which included dealing with personnel issues during the band’s tours, hiring members, signing contracts, and negotiating with the band’s instrument makers and uniform manufacturers.¹ His documents

¹ The author would like to thank the Office of Undergraduate Research at Lamar University for supplying the grant that funded this research, as well as the Harry Ransom Center for allowing full access to the John Philip Sousa materials. Without both of these entities, this research would not have been possible. The author also extends her thanks to Bryan Proksch, musicologist at Lamar University, for helping oversee this project.
reveal the internal workings of the band, interpersonal relationships among the members, and the tensions between business practice and art as directed by Sousa.

**Sims’s Correspondence within the Band**

Given Sims’s role as personnel manager, much of his correspondence was with current and former members of the Sousa Band. These letters give a glimpse into the daily experiences of the band and personnel issues with which Sims would have dealt. Matters within Sims’ purview included signing contracts with the band’s members, helping make decisions on requests for promotions and raises by current members, and the interpersonal relationships between members while travelling. Taken as a whole, these reveal the extent to which Sims acted as an intermediary between Sousa and his bandmen, and the extent to which his

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1. The sources under primary focus in this paper are archival documents from the John Philip Sousa Collection held by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. This collection contains a large number of Sims’s business papers from his time as the Sousa Band’s personnel manager, including letters between Sims and members of the band, as well as orders for instruments and uniforms. The archive was compiled by Joe E. Ward, a U.T. alumnus whose interest in the Sousa Band stemmed from having seen them live. Ward maintained correspondence with several members of the band, including Sims, for a number of years. It is likely from these people, especially Sims, that Ward acquired the documents which were, in 1971, subsequently placed into the archive. For further information on Sims and the Sousa Band, see Paul E. Bierley, *The Incredible Band of John Philip Sousa* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); John Philip Sousa, *American Phenomenon* (Westerville, Ohio: Integrity Press, 1973).

2. In this context, “Sims’ correspondence” refers to the portion of Sims’ business papers held in the Harry Ransom Center’s John Philip Sousa collection. Also, unless otherwise indicated, the transcriptions of passages from letters appear exactly as in the originals.
authority in financial matters sometimes conflicted with Sousa’s musical interests.

Among the most insightful of Sims’s documents are letters from members of the Sousa Band requesting raises, changes to their contracts, and complaints concerning their fellow bandsmen. In a letter dated March 2, 1931, Earl D. Held, a flautist, wrote to Sousa directly asking to be considered for the first flute chair:

My reason for this letter to you is this. For the last three or four years I have been in your band playing the Eb clarinet stand in the section. I enjoy the work only I am anxious to work my way up. I would like to have a chance at first flute when there is an opportunity. I don’t want to take any one’s job, only I meant that I would like to have a chance when the chair was left vacant or there was an opening[…] I wrote to Mr. Sims soon after I came home from the Southern tour which ended Nov. 1930, and asked him for a chance at the piccolo stand, but I would prefer flute, although the piccolo is a fine stand to play.³

Held did not receive the promotion for which he asked. As of September 1931, he was still second chair of the flute section; no response from Sims or Sousa survives.⁴

Discussions of the players’ salaries appeared in many of Sims’s letters. In one from Sims to Sousa, dated May 10, 1924, he writes:

³ Earl D. Held, letter to John Philip Sousa, March 2, 1931.
Concerning our new band, I wish to report that a number of our men of previous seasons are asking for more money[...] Mr. Carr got $80.00 asks for $90.00. Personally I think he is worth it.

Messrs. Schuler, Kampe, and Frigga are asking for more money. Frigga specifies $70.00. Mr. Danner gets $75.00, asks for more. Maly, second Oboe gets $65.00, asks for $75.00. Mr. Richardson visited me last week in Baltimore, and said he would like to have more than $80.00 for first chair.

Linde, second Bassoon, got $65.00, asks for more.

I am taking no action regarding these men until I have some expression of your attitude towards the increase of our next season salary list...

Mr. Willson says he can come as far as Willow Grove for last season’s salary, $125.00.5

Notably, Sims inserts his own opinions regarding Carr, while deferring on others. At the bottom of this particular letter, which was typed, is a handwritten line: “Preble, 2nd Euphonium, got 60—wants more.”6 Carl Preble had been with the band since 1921, as had Einar Frigga (clarinet) and Anthony Maly; Arthur Danner (trumpet) had been a member slightly longer, since 1919.7 Others mentioned above had considerable seniority: George Kampe (clarinet) had first toured with the band in 1900, John Richardson

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5 Jay G. Sims, letter to John Philip Sousa, May 10, 1924.
6 Ibid.
(tuba) in 1903. This may have played a role in these members asking for raises, with those who had seniority possibly feeling that their tenure warranted higher salaries. Sims’s response as to whether any of the men mentioned received the requested raises is not recorded, however, neither Danner nor Willson returned for the following season, hinting at Sims’s reluctance to comply with their requests. Sousa spoke multiple times about musicians’ salaries, especially about paying musicians based on their ability rather than other factors: “I ransack the earth for the exact musicians that I require. I will pay almost any money to get the right man in the right place, and nationality is of no account.”

This mentality of making business decisions based on merit is confirmed by another comment, regarding his standards for hiring musicians: “Personal predilection and prejudice do not enter into the equation—only merit and adaptability to the individuality of the leader.”

Other matters that naturally fell under Sims’ jurisdiction as personnel manager included the interpersonal relationships between band members, and their effect on the members’ interactions with each other. These relationships had an impact on the overall dynamic of the band. In a letter to Sousa dated September 4, 1926, Arthur Wolf, a horn player, at first attempted to excuse the fact that he had left the band during the 1926 tour by saying that he needed new eyeglasses. He then recounted an

9 Ibid., 205, 245.
incident that is perhaps far more telling: he had been in a fight with Claude Hubley, another horn player. The tension between the two began during the previous tour, when an intoxicated Hubley kicked Wolf’s suitcase under one of the seats in their sleeper car as the train pulled into an unnamed station. Wolf responded by throwing Hubley’s hat to the other side of the car, at which point Hubley threatened to “knock the head off [him].” During the same 1926 tour, Hubley and Wolf were then involved in an argument over the page turns in their music (they played from the same stand), escalating into a fistfight in the band’s locker room. Hubley then filed assault charges against Wolf, who went home after being released from jail, telling Sousa that he would not return if Hubley remained in the band since “any human being who can hold a grudge from one season to the next (for no good reason) to the extent of bodily injury is a lunatic and should be locked up as such.” In the end Wolf was not rehired for the 1927 tour, while Hubley performed with the band again in 1931.

Also among Sims’ documents, there are materials that reveal the less bellicose aspects of daily life in the Sousa band. A story told by Bob Fuller, a tuba player with the Sousa Band from 1928 to 1930, was recorded in a 1951 issue of the Sousa Band Fraternal Society newsletter:

It was on the 1928 tour when we were playing the Chicago Theatre just before Christmas: The Chicago Tribune thought it would make a nice, heart-warming human interest item to have Mr. Sousa togged out as Santa Claus and take a picture of him by the well-known Salvation Army pot while a little girl was dropping a

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13 Bierley, 217, 245.
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coin to keep the pot boiling[…] After all was set and the job was pronounced finished, Mr. Sousa took off across the stage on his way to the stage door. Well, it seems that said Ralph had not done too good a job of fastening the drawstring in the waist of the trousers that held them up, and about half way across the stage the trousers dropped to half-mast, leaving an expanse of Mr. Sousa’s long white underwear in view. He, as was so characteristic of him, wouldn’t lift a hand to pull the pants up, but stopped dead in his tracks, and, taking the ever-present cigar with its paint brush end out of his mouth, he started to holler in his squeaky voice for Ralph. It was something like this… Ralph! Ralph!… For Christ sake Ralph, where are you? My pants are falling down! Ralph! Ralph! For Christ sake come here, my pants are coming off! Ralph!… Ralph![…] We all ducked for the wings where we could burst with laughter, unseen by the honorable Mr. Sousa. Finally, after several minutes of anguished cries to Ralph, that gentleman appeared to lift the trousers and do a better job of fastening the draw string to insure the pants remaining in their proper place[…] The picture appeared in the paper the next day with the aforementioned pants in place and all was well.¹⁴

Ralph Fulghum was Sousa’s valet; he also acted as the “card boy,” passing out encore cards at the band’s concerts during the 1927 and 1928 tours.¹⁵ The Santa Claus incident shows a side of the

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¹⁵ Bierley, 209.
band, and of Sousa, that was rarely seen—a comical moment in contrast to the Sousa band’s ever-professional conduct in public.

**Sims’s Role in Hiring**

Sims received a large amount of correspondence from individuals outside the band, usually in the form of job applications and recommendations. Those who wanted to be in the band often wrote to Sims or Sousa directly (who apparently forwarded the letters on to Sims, judging by their inclusion within a collection of Sims’s business papers). From the introductory nature of the letters, these applications were usually unsolicited. Many of these applications would have been unsuccessful: Sousa himself once said that, “by hundreds, yes, thousands the applicants come. One and all are given a hearing, but few, indeed, are chosen.”\(^\text{16}\) One example is a letter from a certain trombonist, Eldon Schlopkohl, who stated: “Will there be a vacancy in the trombone section of your band within the near future? If so, I desire to apply for the position and submit to you my personal record and qualification.”\(^\text{17}\) Schlopkohl then goes on to give a brief résumé of his education and playing experience, having studied “Public School Music” at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. Additionally, the letter contains information about himself, sparing no details of his height, weight, and even marital status (he was a bachelor). Schlopkohl does not appear in the band’s rosters as having ever been hired.\(^\text{18}\)

In Sims’ correspondences, there were also letters addressed to the band’s management from those recommending other


\(^{17}\) Eldon Schlopkohl, letter to John Philip Sousa, July 21, 1930.

\(^{18}\) Bierley, 197-247.
people for positions within the band. In a letter to Harry Askin, the band’s general manager, William Ritter, of the Ritter Music Company, said that he is, “writing this also in behalf [sic] of a very good musician friend whom is anxious to secure a position with your band,” who was a 35-year-old clarinetist and violinist named Charles Johns.

The process of hiring musicians for each of the band’s tours is a frequent theme in Sims’s letters. Often, members would perform with the band for successive tours; however, with each tour there would also be vacancies that Sims would have to fill. Among Sims’ papers are several letters from musicians who had toured with the band in previous seasons and were asked by Sims to play in subsequent concerts. In a letter dated July 31, 1929, Carl Preble informs Sims that he received “[Sims’] letter forwarded to me today from Kent regarding me playing second euphonium with the band at Winona Lake [Indiana] August 28. I believe that I can arrange the date OK, and would like to play the preceding three days [Sims] mentioned, ie: Atlantic City and Kensington, Pa.”

Another letter, this one from clarinetist Eugene Slick, dated August 11, 1929, is similar in content: “I will join the Band at Atlantic City N.J. Aug. 24\textsuperscript{th}. I am coming prepared to play sax as you requested. I wrote you July 29, saying I would join either at Atlantic City or Winona Lake Ind… In case you want me to join or play other than as above please advise me at once.”

With the hiring of members for each new season also came decisions regarding letting players from previous seasons go, when necessary. In a letter dated April 24, 1928, Robert A. Ross, who had played clarinet with the Sousa Band from 1921 to 1927, writes

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20 Carl Preble, letter to Jay G. Sims, July 31, 1929.
21 Eugene Slick, letter to Jay G. Sims, August 11, 1929.
to Sousa, demanding to know why he was not hired for the 1928 tour:  

Do you know of any reason why I should be dropped from the personnel of your organization this season? Some of our mutual friends in the Conn Co. are wondering why I am not included in the list of members for this season and I can assure you that I am completely at a loss to know how to account for Mr. Sims’ action in the matter. The only information offered to me was when Mr. Sims wrote me that ‘he hated like hell to advise me that I wouldn’t be on the trip this season.’

Sims’s reasons for not rehiring Ross are not recorded, but it is worth noting the way in which he referenced having friends at C. G. Conn, one of the band’s major business partners. This reference to Conn would also have been noted by Sims, who relied heavily on C. G. Conn as the band’s primary instrument supplier.

Perhaps the most interesting exchange between Sims and a band member over a hiring decision was that between Sims, Sousa, and flautist Edward Hall. Hall had played with the band between 1925 and 1928, before abruptly leaving during the 1928 tour. There had evidently been issues with Hall prior to his final tour with the band; in his request to play on the 1928 tour, which was later granted, he wrote: “If I go out with you this season, I promise you there’ll be no festivities in car #3 or any other place. I have a good reputation for looking after my job, and if I was careless two or

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22 Bierley, 234.
23 Robert A. Ross, letter to John Philip Sousa, April 24, 1928.
24 Bierley, 48-49.
25 Ibid., 213.
three times I was only one in a dozen who were always careless. Anyway I’m ‘on the wagon’ and ambitious.”

The exact nature of the “festivities” Hall refers to is not mentioned; however, his usage of the term “on the wagon” in reference to this incident may be an allusion to the involvement of alcohol. Hall later wrote to Sousa in August 1930, and then again in November, asking for a job: “We are in actual want. If you can give me any work I’ll make it my business to be the best flutist [sic] you have.”

After evidently being refused another position with the Sousa Band, Hall angrily wrote to Sousa on June 4, 1931, effectively accusing Sims of poor management: “So far as I am concerned, I would like to come out again too; but if the contractor doesn’t want me, it is just as much loss to the band as it is to me. He will never get as much for the money again.”

Sousa apparently turned over this letter to Sims, who wrote to Hall: “Your latest to Mr. Sousa lies before me dated June 4 – why not give him a rest? Thanks. I am the ‘contractor’ you refer to—I gave you your opportunity and you trampled on it twice.” Sims then signed the letter “Jay G. Sims ‘Contractor.’”

This series of letters shows that although his authority was sometimes questioned, Sims took his role in hiring decisions seriously. Hall wrote a final letter to Sims in response, dated June 20, 1931, which gives more detail into his departure from the band in 1928: “When I said goodbye to Mr. Sousa in his ‘sleeper’ at Lansing (Dec. 7, 1928) he expressed surprise because I was not going to Chicago with you all. That is why I was rather abrupt in my leave taking of you, at the train. I thought he liked me a lot better than you did. Hence the letter, which [illegible] probably

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26 Edward Hall, letter to Jay G. Sims, June 1, 1928.
27 Edward Hall, letter to John Philip Sousa, November 4, 1930.
28 Edward Hall, letter to John Philip Sousa, June 4, 1931.
29 Jay G. Sims, letter to Edward Hall, June 13, 1931. Emphasis in original.
didn’t get (all of). I shall trouble neither of you again.”

Just as in the letter by Robert A. Ross, the above exchange demonstrates the anger that was, predictably, provoked by Sims’s hiring decisions. However, it also demonstrates that important function that Sims served as an intermediary between Sousa and the members of the band, and as the person responsible for the management of the band’s personnel.

**Sims’s Correspondence with Those Outside the Band**

Much of Sims’s correspondence was with people and entities outside the band’s membership. In turn, a bulk of these documents is dedicated to outfitting the band with the equipment that was needed to perform. Three companies in particular account for a large portion of Sims’s correspondence in these matters: C. G. Conn, Browning, King and Co., and the Utica Uniform Company.

The business relationship between C.G. Conn and the Sousa Band was extensive. John Philip Sousa was a sponsor of C. G. Conn, as were a number of the band’s members, and it is the only instrument manufacturer that shows up in Sims’s business correspondence, implying that any new equipment that the band required for use during its tours was likely purchased or rented exclusively from C. G. Conn. All of Sims’s orders for new instruments for the band’s members, as well as his letters related to the receipt of instruments, were made to the C. G. Conn company and its representatives—especially the company’s secretary, J. F. Boyer. Since the relationship between the Sousa Band and C. G. Conn was also one of endorsement, members of

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30 Edward Hall, letter to Jay G. Sims, June 20, 1931.
31 Bierley, 48-49.
the band were expected to provide photographs of themselves and give testimonials for use by C. G. Conn – in the letter from January 9, 1922, Boyer also tells Sims to “try to get photos and testimonials of the other men as soon as you can.” In another letter, dated December 28, 1928, Boyer reminds Sims, “that we want to Connize [sic] that entire organization, if possible, for its next tour.”

Through Sims’ letters, it is also apparent that equipment rentals and purchases often happened in transit. There is an example of this in the January 9, 1922, letter, in which Boyer informs Sims that the “cornet was sent to the Oak Park address by mistake” and that Boyer “had already advised Mr. Brabrook relative to this error.” In fact, the band often had equipment shipped to destinations ahead of them on their tour route so that it would be waiting for them when they arrived in any particular town. This practice of shipping equipment to the band while it was on the road occurred frequently, since it figures in several of the letters that Sims exchanged with C. G. Conn. On occasion, the circumstances of these deliveries were urgent, as is indicated by a letter from Boyer to Sims from July 22, 1922, in which Boyer apologetically explains the company’s failure to ship the band the sousaphone they had requested:

I was very sorry that we were unable to get another Sousaphone on to you. I know that Mr. Sousa is very much put out about it, but it was utterly impossible. The one Bass returned to us as defective, is being overhauled, so we will send that one on as soon as the work is completed on same,

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32 J. F. Boyer, letter to Jay G. Sims, January 9, 1922.
34 J. F. Boyer, letter to Jay G. Sims, January 9, 1922.
and it will reach you at Willow Grove. The big Bass we are building as a duplicate of the old large Sousaphone you sent us for repair, is not quite finished, but will be completed in a couple of days, and as soon as that instrument is ready, it will be forwarded, also. There is no use of sending these Basses into Canada at this time for the bother, duty, etc., would be tremendous. So the only thing to do is to get them to you at Willow Grove.\footnote{J. F. Boyer, letter to Jay G. Sims, July 22, 1922}

As the quotation above shows, shipping items to the band while it was on the move was not always easy, and sometimes resulted in equipment not reaching the band on time due to unforeseeable circumstances.

In addition to C. G. Conn instruments, Sims also wrote to other specific companies regarding the band’s uniforms. There are a number of letters addressed to Sims from the Utica Uniform Company and Browning, King & Co.—the two companies from whom the band acquired their uniforms during the 1920’s. Some of the letters are routine orders for uniform pieces that band members needed replaced. One example is a letter from Browning, King & Co., dated January 22, 1924, in which they are, “pleased to learn that Mr. Snyder is satisfied with this coat,” that they, “expect to have Mr. Son’s coat finished tomorrow Wednesday,” and that they, “received the coat of Gus Helmecke to replace the braid which we shall do and advise you later as to where shipment will be made.”\footnote{Browning, King & Co., letter to Jay G. Sims, January 22, 1924.} As with the band’s instruments, these uniforms sometimes had to be sent to the band while it was travelling: with regards to Mr. Son’s jacket, Browning, King & Co. requested a copy of the band’s tour schedule for February since they were “a
little afraid if we ship Mr. Son’s coat by mail tomorrow it may not reach you in this month.”

Through exchanges with Utica Uniform Company, it seems that Sims was helping to design new uniforms for the band. In a letter dated May 2, 1922, C. A. Evans, a Utica employee, wrote to Sims informing him about various materials and prices for the band’s uniforms:

First of all, we can put the cap in at a price of $4.25 and it will have a full basket frame, amply protected with a good coat of shellac to resist the moisture. It therefore should retain its shape indefinitely.

The question of materials was somewhat difficult but we can furnish you an unfinished worsted same as style 361 for $21.00 for coat and $10.25 for trousers.

Style D 3850 is to show quality only and can be furnished in a jet black at $19.25 for coat and $9.25 for trousers.

From repeated advice however during my investigation I found that an unfinished worsted will not be recommended for garments of this nature for heavy braiding. This was demonstrated

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37 Browning, King & Co., letter to Jay G. Sims, January 22, 1924.; It is worth noting here that the stop before Galveston on this particular tour was in Beaumont, Texas, where the band played the Kyle Theatre. According to a February 9, 2009, article in the Beaumont Enterprise, the current Kyle Building on Orleans Street, built in 1931, is immediately adjacent to where the theatre was located before it was demolished.
by stretching the goods the long way of the sample and then from corner to corner, whereas if you will test the style A doeskin in a similar manner you will see a vast difference in the texture. Both of these materials it is understood would be guaranteed 16 oz. to the yard[…]

On the whole I was not satisfied and therewith sought the manufacturer of the style A doeskin to find out what the experience of this fabric had been. He gives unqualified guarantee as to its color, durability and weight. He states that no complaint has ever been made regarding the goods cracking or breaking and it has been a staple with them for years[…] It has the added virtue that when the nap wears off it shows a very fine twill which is not at all objectionable. He also gave me an added slight discount which will bring the coat to $19.90 and the trousers to $9.65.\footnote{C. A. Evans, letter to Jay G. Sims, May 2, 1922.}

The extensive discussion of materials and prices above makes it clear that the type of cloth from which the uniforms were going to be made, both in terms of durability and cost, was a major concern. It also demonstrates Sims’s position as the decision maker with regard to the design and construction of the band’s uniforms.
Conclusion

Sims’s correspondence gives a glimpse into the internal workings of the Sousa Band and the complexities of running one of the foremost popular music organizations of the early twentieth century. Although Sims is not mentioned at length in the existing scholarship on John Philip Sousa or the Sousa Band, he was crucial to the band’s success as a performing organization. Through his tasks of hiring, signing contracts, deciding salaries, making arrangements for the band’s equipment and uniforms, and recruiting new members, Sims’s role within the Sousa Band was significant and critical to the band’s day-to-day operations.
Bibliography


