



**G O T H A M B O O K S**  
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014-3657

Dear Editor/Producer:

July 2007

What do Bill Clinton, Lionel Richie, Tommy Lee, Dolly Parton, Lamar Alexander, Trent Reznor, and Jon Bon Jovi all have in common? (Hint: it's not liberal politics or a rebellious streak.)

Believe it or not, they were all in high school marching band.

Bands and former band kids are everywhere—not just in huge annual parades and halftime shows, but kicking off the action in Dave Chapelle's movie *Block Party*, gracing the cover of *Life Magazine*, and marching with Gwen Stefani (also a former band kid) in her video for “Hollaback Girl.” (Not to mention the geeky cliché—*This one time. . . at band camp. . .*)

Whether or not you were ever in band, you may be surprised to know, it's bigger than ever. And for many people, band is an experience that becomes part of who they are and what they value. **AMERICAN BAND: Music, Dreams, and Coming of Age in the Heartland (Gotham Books; August 2, 2007; \$26.00) by Kristen Laine**, an award-winning journalist and a former band kid herself, takes an unprecedented look into the huge phenomenon of American marching band culture.

Laine spent six months in Elkhart, Indiana with Concord High's Marching Minutemen as they prepared to defend their state championship title. With great narrative drive and unforgettable characters, **AMERICAN BAND** not only chronicles the passion and inner workings of the marching band world, but also reveals what life is like in red state America, who the real people are and what they care about.

In an interview, Laine can discuss:

- ◆ Why marching band is almost a religion in the Midwest
- ◆ How participating in band can have positive, lasting effects on youth
- ◆ The role of faith in shaping the lives of current Midwestern teens, and how it relates to music
- ◆ How marching band culture differs today from half a century ago

If you were ever part of marching band, no matter where or when, **AMERICAN BAND** will bring all the memories rushing back. It did for me (I played clarinet in high school), as well as for Gotham publisher, William Shinker (who was a drum major!).

Kristen Laine will be touring the U.S. this August and September. A portion of the proceeds from all her events will be donated to various school music programs across the country. Please contact me for more information or to schedule an interview. For a complete tour schedule, please visit [www.americanband.com](http://www.americanband.com).

All best,

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**Publication Date: August 2, 2007**  
**Price: \$26.00**

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“*American Band* has everything going for it, from tempo to heart to the grand bittersweet finale. What a gift for readers: a pitch-perfect tribute to kids and song and community.”

—Madeline Blais, Pulitzer Prize winner and author of *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle*



# AMERICAN BAND

**Music, Dreams, and Coming of Age in the Heartland**

**by Kristen Laine**

We all recognize the signature uniforms, smart steps, and strong beats. It’s as American as apple pie.

Even if you weren’t in marching band yourself, you’ve likely been energized by their performances in parades, halftime shows, or pep rallies. But what does marching band really represent for millions of Americans? Little has been written about this great American experience—until now.

In **AMERICAN BAND: *Music, Dreams, and Coming of Age in the Heartland*** (Gotham Books; August 2, 2007; \$26.00) author **Kristen Laine** goes behind the scenes of marching band culture in its birthplace, capturing an important snapshot of contemporary life in America’s heartland. In today’s Midwest, band is practically a religion. A marching band performance can feel like a Broadway show on a football field, with fast-changing, curving forms, props and even costume changes. Band directors demand long hours and strong commitments from both students and their parents.

**In AMERICAN BAND, Kristen Laine** tells the exhilarating story of one pivotal season in the life of a defending state champion band, Concord High's Marching Minutemen of Elkhart, Indiana. We meet Max Jones, one of the most talented band directors in the country; the band's drumline captain, who dreams of West Point even as he struggles to be taken seriously as a leader; the Mexican-American clarinet player whose effort to belong in the band is just part of the deeper identity challenges she faces; and the band's top trumpet player, a gifted young man who is held up by his teachers, peers, and church as the embodiment of all that their community values.

In an era when many of us don't know our own neighbors, much less the way people live their lives in towns hundreds of miles away from us, this book opens a door on small-town life in the here and now. **AMERICAN BAND** is an unusually intimate chronicle of life, in all its triumph, disappointment, and drama, in the kind of community in which most of America lives. It is an especially timely portrait, capturing as it does the spirit of the heartland at a time of profound change.

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**AMERICAN BAND:**  
*Music, Dreams, and Coming of Age in the Heartland*  
By Kristen Laine

Gotham Books

August 2, 2007

\$26.00 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-592-40319-6

[www.americanband.com](http://www.americanband.com)

**About the Author**

Thirty years after she marched in an Indiana high school band, **Kristen Laine** returned to the state, moving her family from New Hampshire to Elkhart to immerse herself in the story of the Concord High School Marching Minutemen. She is an award-winning journalist whose commentaries can be heard on Vermont Public Radio. She lives in New Hampshire with the writer Jim Collins and their two children.

Gotham Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA), was launched in 2003 by industry veteran William Shinker. Bestsellers that have helped to establish its solid foundation are *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, *Talk to the Hand*, *Game of Shadows*, *The Official eBay™ Bible*, *The Lucky Shopping Manual*, *Almost French*, *Letters to a Young Brother*, *The Miracle of St. Anthony*, *What Would Jackie Do*, *The Tao of Willie*, *It's Called Work for a Reason*, and *Every Shot Must Have a Purpose*. Penguin Group (USA) Inc. is one of the leading U.S. adult and children's trade book publishers, owning a wide range of imprints and trademarks, including Berkley Books, Dutton, Frederick Warne, G.P. Putnam's Sons, Gotham Books, Grosset & Dunlap, New American Library, Penguin, Penguin Press, Philomel, Riverhead Books, and Viking, among others. Penguin Group is owned by Pearson plc, the international media group.

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## **AMERICAN BAND**

Q&A with author Kristen Laine

### **Q: Why did you decide to write a book about high school marching bands?**

You could say that I wrote a book about marching bands because I was in one. I was a new kid in an Indiana town who found a home in the marching band. Marching band gave me, a bookish, awkward girl, a chance to reinvent herself.

After high school, I didn't think much about marching bands. My family moved away from Indiana. Marching band became another artifact of my Midwestern upbringing, along with a taste for mini-marshmallows and grated carrots in jello. It wasn't until my twenty-fifth high school reunion that I thought seriously about band again.

While reminiscing with high school classmates, all of us discovered how much band had meant to us. Band had been, in varying degrees, a surrogate family. But more than that: we also believed that band had prepared us for life better than anything else we'd done in high school, or even college. Like the others, I believed that I had a stronger work ethic, felt more confident, worked better in groups, and reached higher—because I'd been in band.

That reunion-weekend conversation raised a question for me. Could marching band possibly serve the same purpose for a new generation that it had for mine? Teenagers seemed to live in a faster-paced, more sophisticated and technologically-focused world than the one I had grown up in. I wondered if marching band in the twenty-first century would be an anachronism.

I called my former band director. He told me, “You won't believe how much bigger band is today.”

He was right. If I hadn't seen some of the country's elite marching band programs for myself, I wouldn't have believed the level of intensity, in commitment and in achievement.

### **Q: For people who haven't seen one of these new marching bands, what are they like? What's different from when you were in band?**

These marching bands have grown some distance from their military roots. The straight lines and 90-degree angles of my band days are long gone, as is the high “chicken-scratch” step that I worked so hard to perfect. Band performances today can feel like a Broadway show on a football field, with their fast-changing, curving forms, props and even costume changes. The music is unexpected, too.

Directors frequently select very difficult, sophisticated, and even dissonant music for their shows; it's a way to show judges that their students truly are a concert band on the move.

Another difference is in the length and intensity of the competition. When I was in marching band, we prepared for one month and entered a single competition. The top bands in Indiana, and in other “marching band” communities around the country, have longer competitive seasons than their football teams, and put in many, many more hours of work. The Concord band ended its 14-week season at the RCA Dome, where the Indianapolis Colts play, performing in front of more than 10,000 spectators.

But I think I was most surprised by the level of parental involvement in these bands. At Concord in 2004, nearly three hundred parents worked behind the scenes, some of them putting in extraordinarily long hours, to support their children in this one activity. That’s when I realized that marching band, at least in Indiana, was a much bigger story than I’d expected.

**Q: What does religion have to do with marching band?**

When I began the research for the book, I thought I was looking at a nice little subculture story: kids, music, competition. At first I assumed that I’d find an updated version of my own story, band as surrogate family. I found some of that, to be sure. But as I talked to the kids in the Concord band, I grew to understand that religious faith was the most important thing in many of their lives. And because conservative, evangelical Christianity is the overwhelmingly dominant form of religion in that community, what mattered most to those teenagers was maintaining the correct relationship to God through a personal relationship with Jesus.

Gradually, I learned that some of the students had been practicing their faith “on the field,” if you will—taking what they learned in church and from the bible and applying it to their work in the band. They did this under the radar of their directors, their parents, and their pastors, although they weren’t really trying to hide anything. I’d call what they were doing “Sermon on the Mount” Christianity, or “servant leadership.”

You can’t extrapolate to an entire generation from such a small sample size, but I got the impression that I was watching a new generation of Christians come of age. They are devout, and they take the bible literally in terms of their own faith practice. But they seek a deeper engagement with social issues, with poverty and injustice and inequalities of all kinds, than they had received in their churches, and less empire-building and focus on who’s getting into heaven and who isn’t. Kids staying up late at night wondering about their purpose on earth and how to live. I started the book thinking I’d find a subculture story. Instead, I found myself in the middle of the country’s culture wars.

**Q: So, religion played a much bigger role in the story than you anticipated. What are some of the other issues you explore in the book?**

Immigration and the decline of manufacturing towns are other examples of issues that come up even though one wouldn’t typically associate them with a book about high school students. Having a wider focus allowed me to explore issues of community and generational connection, which I think makes for a deeper story than the hermetic environment that sometimes passes for life in high school.