

# Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: John Savin@designfolk.com

## A jig is a jig

**T**HERE was a time when I thought that one of the hardest things I'd ever done in my life was to play Peter MacLeod's tune *Donald MacLean*, twice through in the jig final at the Northern Meeting.

John Burgess, ever the man, he middle of the bench at the Eden Court theatre (rightly so) and managing his cigarette like a fine theatrical prop: smoke rising, languid swirls clouding the bench in the coolest way; Burgess, wrist at just the right cant and fag angled in just the right way, well, JDB effectively imbued that bench of three with the gravitas I'd imagine was in line with any — Pearly Gates included. And me, sweating and E-striking away.

Thinking back now, I have to laugh. At the very least, smile. The piping world misses JDB and the coterie of many characters of his generation. And by the way, on this particular late Thursday afternoon in early September, I was to play, on the repeat, the third part of the tune, three times. I glanced to the bench, knowing I'd blown it — an amateur thing to do, to give yourself away in a glance — and there was JDB, smiling and shaking his head. I finished my nine unplanned parts — and exited stage right.

Of course, a jig is a jig. A dance tune passed our way courtesy of that seriously musical and enigmatic emerald green place southwest of the Hebrides. Four parts will give you 60 seconds of rhythmic and technical intensity. Highland pipers, by hook or by crook, have managed to squeeze out the fun factor by usually adding a “twice through” in its performance. And Highland dancers shake their fists.

Anyway, my Eden Court thwacking is, of course, far and away not the “hardest thing” I've ever done. I'm happy to say that there is nothing in piping that comes close.

I've lived long enough to have attended more funerals than I'd like (and undertakers aside, who likes funerals?) support acquaintances, friends and family move through tricky health or life challenges — pardon the, admittedly, politically correct vernacular — and, well, just

lived a life, one where bagpipe stuff is never the “most challenging”.

My God, it surely can feel like that, challenging, from time to time — let's keep it real — but, no, a life lived usually tempers all that. Bagpipe stuff, as I'll call it, is just that: stuff — things that happen related to the instrument you happen to play and, sometimes, the band where you choose to make the whole thing happen. All this, I know, is no different from you. We're all the same.

But. But, that often-used word of qualification, one that most always comes before bulls\*\*t — as in, say, “I really enjoy her strathspey playing but only if she'd play in time”. The pipes are taken very seriously and pipers have been known to guide their lives based on the call of the pipes. They have been known to choose careers (teaching is good, summers off and all that)

and partners (people who love, or, at least, tolerate the pipes and the hours of never-ending close quarter practice sessions that goes with them) — all to ensure a “full life” featuring a soundtrack cranked up to 110 decibels.

In my mid-30s, there was a time I thought my life as I knew it was over. My body started behaving in a weird way when I played the pipes. I developed a physical issue that had nothing to do with my hands — my finger technique — and everything to do with the bagpipe itself. When I played the pipes my left arm would tremor, it would involuntarily shake. And the outcome of this? My pipe emitted a strange tremolo sound. Some actually thought it was attractive. “That vibrato thing is really cool, how'd you do that?” Most, like me, thought it not.

So in the middle of my prime medal-chasing years I did every freaking thing I could to fix the problem. Maybe composer Bela Bartok was right when he said, competitions are for horses, not artists.

But I can tell you, I did everything I could to stay in the saddle. I visited doctors, specialists, research clinicians along with attention to diet and exercise — yes, crazy stuff like that: diet and exercise. The problem was a strange one — no one had seen anything quite like it and all, by and large, were stumped.

Almost every piper I know has managed, or manages, personal challenges creating the best music they're able. Issues generally range from the physiological to the psychological. And it seems a truism that if you play the pipes long enough, an unwanted music-making challenge will land in your sporran.

So I fought my shaky arm and my vibra-pipes. The problem didn't manifest itself every single time I played and I managed to get through some performances unscathed. And after about five years it stopped. The arm shook no more. I have my doubts that the problem disappeared as a result of any remedy I attempted.

I do know I came out of my tribulation a changed piper, and I suppose, in turn, a changed person. In trying to overcome “the problem” I found my way to better understand that pipes are pipes. And to be your best is what really matters. To be your best is relative to you. Your best is your best. You'll be happiest when you measure your best on your own terms. A jig is a jig — no matter how many parts you play. ●

