



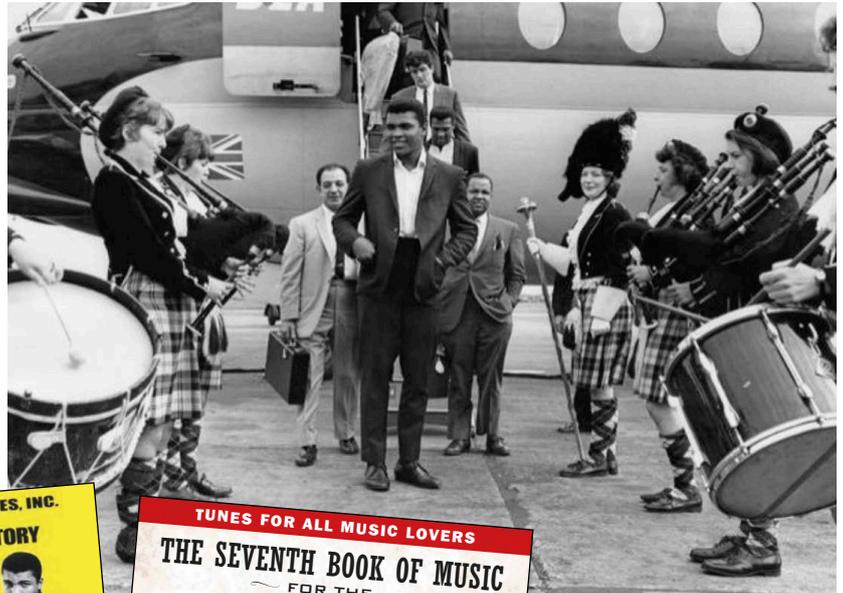
## The Great Highland Bagpipe will take you places

**A** MIDST the magic found around the instrument we know as the Great Highland Bagpipe is an invisible golden ticket to untold amazing experiences. Learn the fundamental ways of the pipes and the world can be your oyster. The extraordinary travels and remarkable people and events that the pipes can conjure are boundless. There's no prerequisite of grand champion status: pipers and pipe bands of every standard routinely encounter greatness – if not unforgettable bagpipe-made moments. From presidents, prime ministers, the Pope and pop stars, pipers the world over can find themselves in the most unlikely of performance situations.

Consider the Coatbridge Ladies Pipe Band. Oh, to be a member in the summer of 1965 (gender and age notwithstanding). On Wednesday, August 18 of that year, Muhammad Ali, the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World, touched down at what was then known as Renfrew Airport. And there, waiting on the tarmac for the arrival of one of the most famous and controversial personalities in the world – were members of the Coatbridge Ladies, tuned and ready for a rousing Scots welcome. As part of a world tour, Ali was scheduled for a Friday night four-round exhibition bout at Paisley Ice Rink. Just think: when the New Year landed it's unlikely members of the Coatbridge band had any idea of the historic brush with greatness they would experience before the year was out.

I'm not a student of boxing. Nor do I have any great knowledge of the history of ladies' pipe bands. I do like old stuff. I like the look, the feel, the aesthetic of interesting vintage things. And so to boxing and this Coatbridge Ladies-Muhammad Ali story.

Last summer I was hard at it pulling together a music book project. A part of the process is landing on a decision of what makes the cover. I liked the idea of a letter block



The Coatbridge Ladies Pipe Band welcome Cassius Clay to Scotland on August 18, 1965



poster. I thought, this stark (and cheap) print style, common, especially, to sporting event posters of the 1940s and 1950s was just the thing. So, thanks to a little research and the artistry of graphic designer, John Slavin, we came to a good first draft. The Liston-Clay [Ali] poster would be a central inspiration. In looking at the design we thought:

“Wouldn't it be great if we could find an old-time kilted boxer for the cover?”

Well, what are the chances? Enter stage right: Muhammad Ali and the Coatbridge Ladies Pipe Band. In looking for our timeworn kilty, not only was the 1965 story uncovered but we stumbled on a great newspaper photo of the man himself – Muhammad Ali – posing in kilt and Balmoral bonnet. It was just too fantastic. After the appropriate photo licensing enquiries were made, an Ali cover draft was ready (pictured). Now here was a book cover that had real punch (ouch).

white people – from outside the piping world. The common first response was a smile (Muhammad Ali in his prime, decked out in tartan). With few exceptions, the follow-up feedback was something like: “Are you \$%#@ crazy?” My late sister, Patty, was especially firm: “No good will come from it.” Most thought I’d be accused of cultural appropriation.

The online Cambridge Dictionary tells us cultural appropriation is the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture. I thought about this – defensively – and thought: “Well, wait, how does any culture evolve or change if we can’t adapt the reflections and highlights of cultures around us? And, anyway, it’s Muhammad Ali, an African-American, in the photo donning a Scottish kilt – and hat.” Continued research found almost countless interpretations of “cultural appropriation”. This truth, alone, sounded blaring alarm bells connected with using the be-kilted Ali image. In a lot of definitions, blogs and essays that I read, one element seemed to always be near the core of the term’s meaning: cultural appropriation is the act of adopting elements of an outside, often minority culture. And so, I capitulated. I wasn’t ready to fall on the sword of an old photo of a kilt-wearing black American icon.

Still, I come back to a theme I know I frequently talk about: Scots pride. It sits on seriously hard bedrock. So much of the world rolls about in what is imagined Scottishness. Tartan and kilts and sporrans and sheep and whisky and – yes – bagpipes. And, aye [appropriated banter alert], so much more. Scots culture is, dare I say, appropriated at every turn.

And how do Scots respond? With open arms and a “See you, Jimmy” hat – surely a tourist tat example of self-deprecation at its best, a Scottish national trait. In my experience, self-deprecation is common to only the most confident. Jimmy hat aside, there’s seldom any real preciousness connected with how Scots see their culture as it’s interpreted by outsiders. The many elements of Scots culture, including that of the Gaels, mostly embrace the vitality that is imbued, maybe even fortified, by having those from away embrace what they interpret as the cultural richness of Scotland.

And so what about the draft Muhammad Ali cover replacement? Well, some irony, it dawns on me now: a cartoon version of a piper found its way: Viz Magazine’s Simon Thorp’s brilliant creation, Finbarr Saunders.

With Finbarr’s right foot forward, fingers – and drone tuning – in all the right places; bunnet, too, and kilt all rightly set, cartoon Finbarr might even stand as a beacon to our Coatbridge ladies of 1965: the Great Highland Bagpipe will take you places: Paisley, Renfrew – who knows – maybe even alongside a legend, like Muhammad Ali. ●



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