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AN INTERVIEW  
WITH  
DRUM SERGEANT WILLIE McERLEAN

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Our subject for this edition's interview is Drum-Sergeant, Willie McErlean.

Originally from the Cowcaddens in Glasgow, Willie was a regular solo prize winner throughout the West Coast. His marriage to Therese MacInnes put him into one of the most famous and largest piping families in Canada but more importantly brought him eventually to Vancouver.

Willie was a founding member of Triumph Street and as a matter of fact was the person who coined the band's name.

His unique style was just what was needed for the newly emerging Grade I scene. His career with Triumph Street started as the only side drummer at the band's debut at the Annual Gathering in 1972 and culminated with a World Championship at Nottingham in 1979.

Apart from his playing talents he was also an instructor to the Vancouver Ladies, and the San Francisco Police Pipe Bands.

Enjoying a well-earned retirement from both drumming and his work, Willie is a regular on the judges' panel as well as a great supporter of all our functions throughout the year.

We met the other night in his modest abode (NOT!) where I asked him the following questions;

Why drums?

*I always enjoyed watching three piece orchestras at weddings and other functions. I especially liked the drums and in particular the big bass with the palm tree scene painted on it. You could also hide behind it if a fight broke out.*

Who was your first teacher(s)?

*A man called James Thompson came down to*

*teach the Boys' Brigade. He played with the Shepherd's Band under P/M Archie MacPhedran. Years later I studied under Joe Morello. I always remember he charged \$6.00 per half hour. That was almost 40 years ago.*

What bands did you play with in Scotland?

*Well, I started with the 14th Glasgow Company of the Boys' Brigade then went on to the 5th and 6th H.L.I. Cadet Band. I was also playing with the Allendar Band at the same time. Then I was asked by the P/M of the H.L.I.'s, who was John Weatherstone to play with the big band. I did that for a year or so while I taught and played with the B.B. Band.*

Any of your fellow bandsmen go on to fame and glory?

*Well John Weatherstone of course. The only other guy I remember was Jimmy Watson, our tenor in the B.B. Band. He ended up playing goal for Clyde.*

Did you come directly to Canada from Scotland? I had two sisters who emigrated to America and were living in Portland, Oregon. So that's where I went in 1949.

What bands did you play with?

*I played with the Portland Scottish for one year. We won one contest, when I played lead tip, but the band wasn't ready for someone like me. Then I was drafted and spent a couple of years in the U.S. Army. About fourteen months of that were spent in Germany and six weeks of that were spent with a jazz trio doing U.S.O. gigs.*

After that?

*Jobs were hard to come by at that time so when I was invited to play with the 6th Army Pipe Band I flew down to the Presidio in San Francisco. I stayed in the Army for another four years or so playing with both the pipe band and the brass band. We had some good gigs such as the Tonight Show in New York with Steve Allen and the Colgate Comedy Hour. I joined the City of San Francisco in 1960, playing under Donald*

*Shaw Ramsay, the best P/M I've had the pleasure of knowing. I also joined the Musician's Union that year and played jazz, big bands, the Fairmont Hotel and even strip joints. Then I met my wife Therese; we played for a year or so with Prince Charles before coming to Vancouver in 1970.*

You must have been a joy for the customs people.  
Where do you live? *Canada.*  
Where were you born? *Scotland.*  
Citizenship? *U.S.*

Who are your heroes in the pipe band world?  
*Donald Shaw Ramsay of course. I also respect guys like Jimmy Young who may not have won the "big prizes" but know what it's all about and men like John Wilson and Angus MacLellan who treated us so well on our trips to Scotland. As far as drummers go, Big Alex is there of course as would be Willie Paterson of the Clan Macrae, an outstanding drummer. Alec Healey of the old Renfrew band was another great as was Jim Blackley and George Pryde. A lot of these guys played under the shadow of Big Alex but they were all so different from him as well as each other. That's probably my biggest criticism of drummers today. You can't tell them apart!*

The "Urban Myth" around piping is that Buddy Rich told Johnny Carson on the "Tonight Show" that Alex Duthart was the best drummer in the world. Firstly, is that story true, and who are the top candidates in your opinion?  
*First of all, I know any time Buddy Rich was asked who was the best, he said "I am!". I did hear Jim Kilpatrick pass along the story you mentioned in an interview one time, but I don't know if it's true or not. I do know that Joe Morello called Alex "the doctor of Bagpipe Drumming", and Joe was every bit as good as drummer as Buddy Rich. He also said, after hearing Alex and two of his corps playing at a seminar, that if Buddy Rich had heard their performance he would have fallen flat on his face! My own candidates, apart from the ones mentioned earlier, would be Joe Morello, Louie Bellson, Shelly Mane and Animal from the*

*"Muppets".*

It is often said, by Lead-Tips mind you, that drummers have a more difficult job than Pipe Majors. After all, the tunes are already written (unless you're Robert Mathieson) and there is only so much you can do with them, musically speaking. Do you agree and, if so, how much influence should the Drum Sergeant have in selecting tunes and musical styles?  
*The only difficult job I had was with certain Pipe Majors, especially when it came to tempos. It appears today that there are gentlemen's agreements which of course there has to be. The business of pipe bands has got beyond one man calling all the shots. It has to be a group effort.*

The instruments used in the '50's were a far cry from what we see today....rope-tensioned, skin heads etc. What do you think about today's drum?

*Those old calf-skin heads gave a great tone....if it was dry. At the Cowal Championships in 1951, the Grade 1's played without drum corps because it was too wet! As the subject of tone can take up a whole newsletter I'll just say that I feel very few bands nowadays get a sharp sound off the bottom head. There's very little snare sound off the bottom so the drumming judge may as well stand at the front of the band. The other major differences are the heads themselves, it feels like you're playing on a wooden table, and the weight of the drum....the new Premiers weigh a ton! It's okay for a contest but I sure wouldn't want to play it in the P.N.E. Parade. Meet you in the Waldorf, Hal!*

How about your top three;

A. Tunes

*Donald Cameron, Blair Drummond and The Smith for an M.S.R. I have to mention my favourite hornpipe, Calum McErlean, a tune written by Donald Shaw Ramsay for my son.*

## B. Pipe Bands

*I always liked Victoria, especially in the '70's.*

*Strathclyde Police, the masters of ensemble.*

*I really enjoy what S.F.U.'s doing today.*

## C. Performances

*Triumph Street at Hawick (the World Championships) in 1976, especially for being first on.*

*The same year at Shotts when we got 4th in the European's.*

*Dysart's drum corps in '76.*

Given that the Pipe Section is relatively limited, don't you think the job of ensemble should fall to the drumming judge?

*It's not a bad idea. I've only judged ensemble twice and quite frankly don't feel I know enough about it. I do know that the outcome can be quite different depending on whether the judge is a piper or a drummer. The Ensemble Judges' Union may not be happy with your idea.*

Bass and Tenor usually evoke some controversy. The old Powell River record of the early sixties had a comment on the liner notes to the effect, "in keeping with the trends of today, no tenor and little or no bass is used". That's one extreme.....  
*I really don't think tenors are necessary. Unless you get an ex-side to play snare parts. But if you're a side, why would you play tenor? If we have to have them, I would like to see a return to flourishing. It adds to the spectacle. Jim Stewart, bass drummer from Peel Police had the crowd in his pocket at Santa Rosa this year. As long as it doesn't interfere with the performance, I think it's great. By the way, I think if Geordie Pryde had a better bass for that Powell River record, he would have had more on it.*

Some bands won't compete today unless they have seven or eight sides. Triumph Street's first competition featured just yourself. Any comments on the change of attitudes over the past twenty years?

*I would play with four. As a matter of fact we*

*had four when we won the World's. As far as attitudes go, I think too many people get too caught up in their own importance. I think also that pipers and drummers are looking for instant success.*

Winning the World's had to be one of your biggest thrills. What else ranks up there and what dreams do you still have?

*I told Hal at the time that if I could have changed places with the pipe section I would have. The whole band put a lot of work into that performance, not just the drum corps. Apart from playing outside right for Scotland and scoring the winning goal against England, I would like to find a wee jazz trio and play a few gigs around town. In the regrets department, I wish I had played in the World Solo Championships, just to say I had done it.*

Our current scoring system for bands has drumming at 25% of the total mark. There are many who think it should be 50%. Do you feel this is fair and do you have any other comments on our system?

*Yes, I think 50% is fair if you consider that the musical score for the drumming has to be composed. Having said that however, I'm still a firm believer that the drumming is there to enhance the piping. I would also like to see a blank sheet to be left for the judge to fill in. Forget all these categories and boxes to tick and check. In solo events, if time permitted, I think the judge should address the audience at the end of the class and give his assessment of each competitor. And while I'm on a roll, I think we have to re-think the circle formation for outdoor band contests.*

Despite the fact you only play one note, or at least that's how the joke goes, it appears to me that drummers in general have more musical ability, both theory and expression than pipers. In these days when execution and sound seem to take preference, does it really matter?

*Yes, expression is still what it's all about. Drummers should be able to hum all the tunes and know all the tunes by name. When I'm judging I*

*don't let the piper tell me the names of the tunes.*

You've never really been noted as a prolific teacher in this area. How obliged should top players be to pass along their talents? *I don't think they should be. We've all been through the problems with teaching, rotten kids, rotten parents, etc. I'll talk to people at contests, send tapes, show a competitor whom I was judging a movement etc. but I just don't want to conduct lessons anymore. Besides, I think musicians, and drummers in particular, should listen and learn from everyone and not be tied down to one style or system.*

I understand Reid Maxwell is going to move to Vancouver as has Johnny Fisher. Apart from making the treasurers of S.F.U. and the City of Victoria happy, do you see long-term benefits for the pipe band community in B.C.?

*I think it's great. It'll be a shot in the arm for pipe bands in the area. The future is with the young people and if they can study with guys of this calibre we should be in good shape.*

This is a bit of an in joke, but how do you spell rubbish?

*I was judging in San Diego a number of years ago and there was one band who were so bad.....Anyway, I wrote "Rubish" on their sheet. After the contest, the chief steward approached me and said something must be wrong, you can't put that on a score sheet. I looked at it and said, "yes, you're right, there's two B's in Rubbish!". Needless to say I wasn't invited back.*

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THE PUZZLE

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Due to the overwhelming response from our last puzzle page (actually that should read in spite of the underwhelming response) we have tried again to tease your brain.

Step 1 involves unscrambling the letters on the left and filling in the blanks on the right.

Step 2 involves taking the letters with the \* under them and using these to complete the phrase below.

Step 3 involves sending the Editor your guess by December 1/93.

Step 4 involves the Editor awarding a Celtic music or Pipe Band CD to the first correctly drawn entry.

GLDUOIBN                    - - \* \* - - - - -

RSNAPOR                    - \* \* - - - \* -

MRDEUMR                   - \* - - - \* -

HRMHTY                    - \* \* \* - -

UNCTO                      - \* - - - \* -

RWSET                      - - - \* -

If you want to do well in the marching & department competition.

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Special thanks to my wife Robyn for her puzzling creative talents.

**- LOST ! -**

**The Young Owner of a  
Black Uniform Jacket  
from  
the Sons of Scotland  
Delta Highland Games**

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**Contact White Spot Pipe Band;  
Katrina Watts, 929-3328**