



Pipes & Sticks on Route 66

John McDonald

IT sounds like a simple premise for a film — take five stars of the piping and drumming world on a three-week musical journey along the iconic Route 66.

The reality was much more challenging for acclaimed documentary maker John McDonald, the man behind *On The Day: The Story of the Spirit of Scotland Pipe Band*.

In April 2012, he travelled with a stellar line-up of bagpipers and drummers along the historic highway, seeking adventure and performing music in what was dubbed *Pipes & Sticks on Route 66*.

Scottish pipers Willie McCallum, Stuart Liddell and Angus MacColl and drummer Jim Kilpatrick joined forces with American percussionist Mike Cole in Chicago for the journey to Los Angeles.

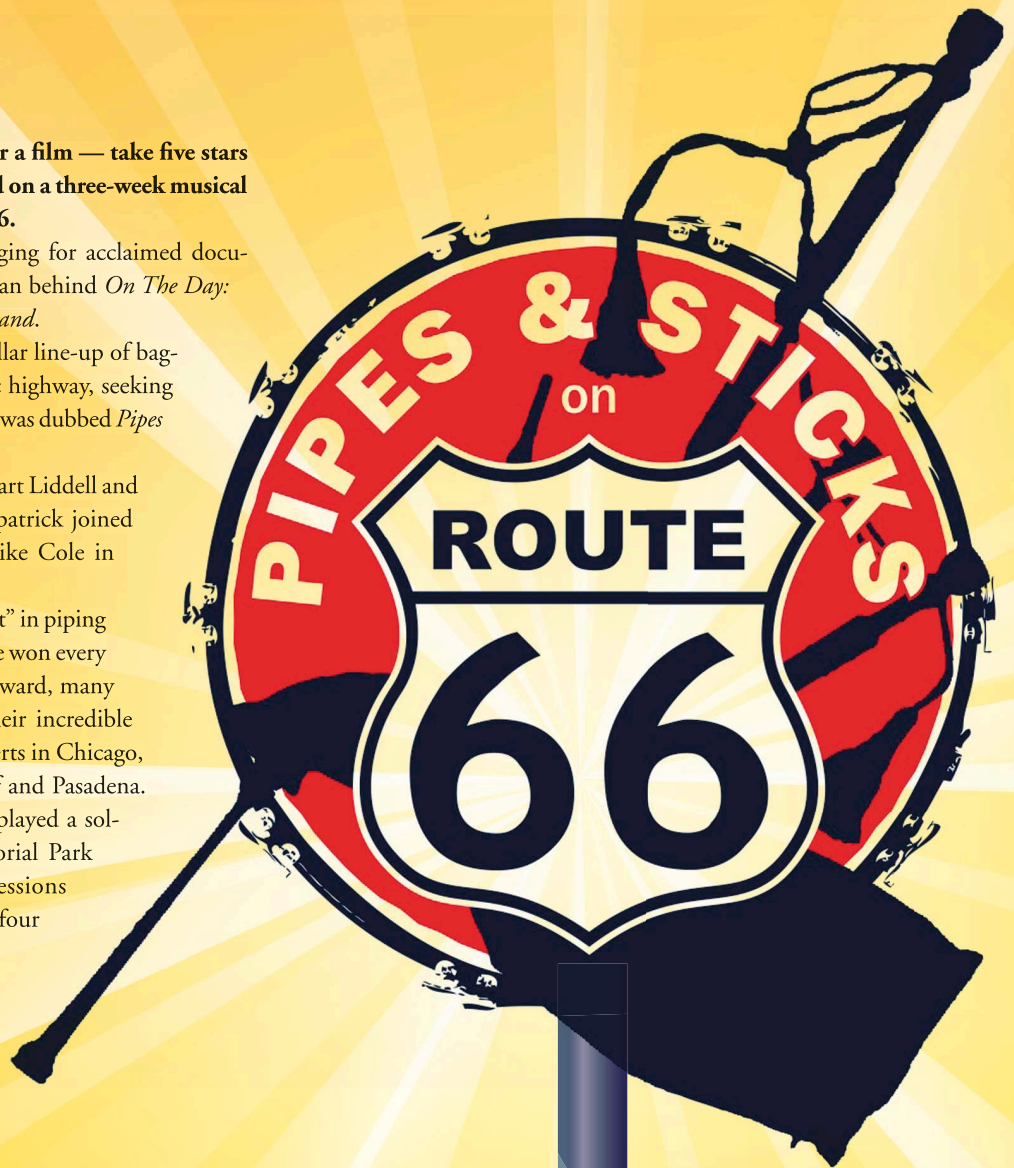
Considered among “the best of the best” in piping and drumming, these five musicians have won every important solo piping and drumming award, many several times over. Well-known for their incredible talent, the players put on amazing concerts in Chicago, Tulsa, Lubbock, Albuquerque, Flagstaff and Pasadena. They also did impromptu pub shows, played a solemn tribute at Oklahoma City Memorial Park and took part in inspirational jam sessions with Native American musicians from four Indian Nations.

From those performances, along with interviews and travelogues featuring the people they met on the way, John is creating a film which he hopes will be screened at key points along Route 66 as well as in Glasgow during the next *Piping Live!*

John explained: “The film follows the band across the country during their 2400-mile, eight-state trip, interweaving their music and their adventures along the way. There was hardly a moment without at least one camera rolling, so the coverage is extensive.

“As the trip progressed, the men began to forget the cameras were there and became very comfortable just being themselves.”

Of course, not everything went to plan, which was both a logistical nightmare and — in terms of adding drama to the proceedings — a blessing for the filmmaker.





John added: "At times, things did not go smoothly. More often than not, the band was running behind schedule. Once, their van was towed away and locked up over the weekend, the crew's trailer blew out a tyre, a hood-mounted camera broke loose and tumbled down the highway, still running, and I required emergency medical care in Arizona.

"These were just a few of the crises to be handled. All of this, of course, makes for great drama and entertainment. There have been many documentaries of bands on tour, but I believe the film that most closely matches the style and tone I want is, ironically, Iron Maiden's *Flight 666* tour documentary."

Before meeting the performers in Chicago, John and his small crew travelled from Los Angeles to the Windy City to scope out locations.

They spent eight days filming background footage — historic sites, landscapes and travelling shots — and planning the filming schedule for the westbound return trip.

John said: "All this footage certainly would make a good travelogue, but *Pipes & Sticks on*

Route 66 will be a character-driven piece as we see how a quintet of egos deal with the pressure of being together 24/7 for three weeks.

"We also conducted interviews with people along the route, folks who are the lifeblood of Route 66 and work hard to keep their mom-and-pop businesses alive. Some have taken over a family business that started three generations ago while others have resurrected long-abandoned motels, shops and gas stations that were deserted for decades. Some are just quirky characters, who sound like the cast from the movie *Cars*.

"Many parts of the original road and its historical bridges no longer exist: they were replaced by interstate highways, but dedicated individuals in each of the eight states have preserved much of the road. Without these people, there would not have been a rebirth of Historical Route 66."

The concerts were covered with six HD cameras and recorded for Dolby 5.1 surround sound. Nearly the entire journey was filmed with two cameras shooting point-of-view per-

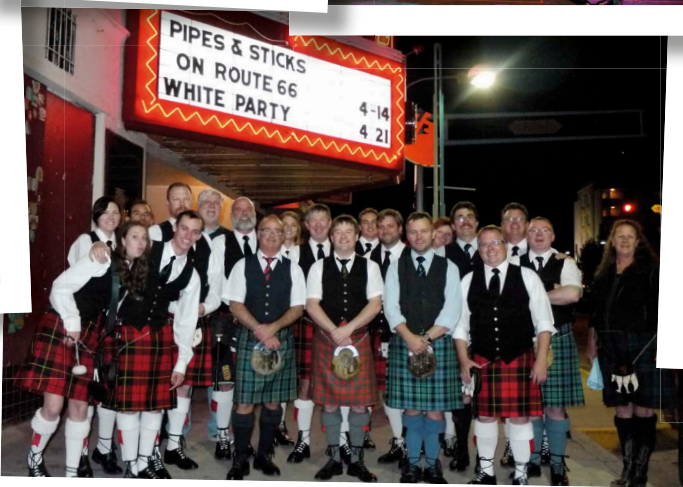
spectives of the road ahead or car-to-car angles leading or following the band van.

There was also a cameraman inside the band van and another in the production vehicle to be sure no opportunities were missed.

Sit-down interviews were done with the individual musicians both in Chicago and Los Angeles, capturing first their expectations at the beginning of the trip and later their reflections on the experience at the end of the trip.

Naturally, music is an integral part of the experience and the film's soundtrack will illustrate the players' musical journey.

John explained: "The music track will be bits and pieces of the six concerts seamlessly interwoven into scenes of the band's travels. One of the band's sets is a medley of traditional American tunes. Other times the music bridges will be Native American pieces we recorded in Oklahoma, New Mexico and Monument Valley. In Oklahoma, the band members were treated to a private soirée by a well-known singing cowboy, and one of his tunes will undoubtedly find a place in the music track.



“The final scene is at sunset on Santa Monica Beach as the band, standing in the water, plays a farewell to America as dolphins, undoubtedly attracted by the sounds of the pipes, swim around them.”

With the success of *On The Day*, John knows there is a market for quality documentaries on piping which tell an extraordinary story. He hopes *Pipes & Sticks* will appeal to the same audience of piping and Celtic culture enthusiasts, with the added bonus of attracting some of the roadies who have travelled and continue to travel Route 66.

“There is a broader audience, too, both in the United States and abroad,” said John. “American audiences will not only enjoy the highlights of the band’s adventures on what has been called the Main Street of America, but, through the eyes of these foreign visitors, also rediscover or maybe even see for the first time a part of their country that has been forgotten by many.

“When the film is completed, it will first take a road tour along Route 66 and screen at historic venues along the way. These venues will

be historical theatres (both movie and vaudeville houses), drive-in movie theatres, hotels, American Legion Halls, schools and museums.

“Ideally, the film will also screen at Glasgow Film Theatre during the *Piping Live!* festival as well as in Oban, home of the Argyllshire Gathering.”

While the project is clearly a labour of love for John, it took private funding from individuals to get it off the ground. With a new four-minute trailer, he has launched another campaign through Kickstarter to raise funds for editing, sound mixing, music clearance, screenings, DVDs and marketing.

After reviewing the project’s business plan and creative treatment, the non-profit International Documentary Association (IDA) has accepted the film into its fiscal sponsorship programme. This is a big win for John, not only because it adds more credibility to the endeavor but also allows tax-deductible donations from US residents under the IDA’s management.

“My previous feature documentary, *On The Day*, was totally funded by contributions

from the piping and Scottish community from around the world. That film screened in 53 theatres across Canada and had national airings on the CBC. It was also presented to PBS stations by American Public Television and has aired in several markets in the US.

“As I did with *On The Day*, I will travel to Scottish festivals and Highland games around the US to screen the trailer and seek funding.

“In 2011, I launched a successful Kickstarter campaign to fund the *On The Day* 3-Disc Collector’s Box Set, so now I’m reaching out again to the same community to make this project a reality.”

Lest anyone thinks John is getting rich off his films, he stressed: “It would be a nice bonus if any money was left over to pay myself — for once. None of my documentary productions have ever raised enough funds or earned enough profit from distribution to compensate me for my many months of work.” Such is the reality of independent filmmaking.

To donate and see the movie trailer, visit PipesAndSticks66.com ●