

# Pipes & Sticks on Route 66

**THIS film almost never happened.**

Many pipers and drummers will remember John McDonald from his documentary *On the Day*, which chronicled the formation of the Spirit of Scotland Pipe Band to compete at the 2008 World Pipe Band Championships.

When the director found out cast members Willie McCallum and Angus MacColl would be joining Stuart Liddell, Jim Kilpatrick MBE and Mike Cole on a workshop and concert tour of the iconic US Route 66 in the spring of 2012, he was determined to record the experience.

However, the Kickstarter campaign to get the film off the ground failed, and McDonald was forced to spend much of his own money to allow his film crew to record the epic journey. Finally, after three years of fundraising to get the footage edited and the final product prepared for release, *Pipes & Sticks on Route 66* is ready for the world to see.

The film begins in bass drummer Mike Cole's native Chicago, as the group assemble at the signpost marking the beginning of the historic highway. While there is no explanation as to how the trip came about,

the director solidly establishes the main characters whose journey we will share. Through an extended sequence of the band's first concert we are introduced in turn to the five musicians, featuring some rare and occasionally embarrassing photos from their younger years (e.g. Stuart Liddell in a baby pram).

There is a lot to see along the 2,451 miles of Route 66 from Chicago to Santa Monica, California, and the filmmakers do their best to give the viewer a flavour of as many different settings as possible. At times the checklist of towns along the Main Street of America flies by with the briefest of cursory glances at each, but now and then more time is given to take in key stops along the way.

In a moving passage Angus plays *Amazing Grace* at the memorial to the 168 people murdered in the Oklahoma City bombing 20 years ago. On several occasions the ensemble join in with Native American music groups, and after discovering a Navajo chant and drum beat in strathspey timing, Willie finds one of the most picturesque spots for a piobaireachd imaginable — Monument Valley, Utah.

Every story needs an element of conflict, and just

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when the film is in danger of becoming an everything-is-awesome roadtrip bromance, a crisis presents itself in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the form of a dodgy parking meter, a towed band vehicle and a collection facility that won't open for a couple of days. McDonald does an excellent job of capturing the band's discovery of the conundrum live on camera, and you can feel the musicians' smug satisfaction as they watch the report of their plight on television after Willie phones up the local station with every journalist's favourite sentence: "We've got a news story for you."

More often than running into trouble, the group get to know some of the custodians of Route 66, who have become almost as iconic as the landmarks along the Mother Road itself. They include a man with more than 100 Route 66 tattoos, Dean "Crazy Legs" Walker, and the delightful barber Angel Delgadillo, still offering straight-edge razor shaves and wisecracks aplenty at the age of 85.

While pipers and drummers will lap up the wonderfully entertaining concert performances, many of the film's standout sequences capture much more intimate moments along the way. The best of these is a Stuart/Angus duet in a theatre dressing room in Buddy Holly's hometown of Lubbock, Texas, as the two gently sing the anti-war ballad *The Green Fields of France* by another legendary singer-songwriter, Scotland's Eric Bogle.



While Spirit of Scotland's finish outside the prize list in 2008 denied *On The Day* a proper ending, *Pipes & Sticks on Route 66* climaxes with a wonderful sequence at journey's end on Santa Monica beach. The end credits shot of the five musicians playing with their bare feet in the Pacific Ocean in front of an orange and purple sunset as porpoises bob playfully in the surf is so perfect you can feel the director quietly fist-pumping off-screen.

Indeed, that final image is the perfect metaphor for the film itself, and the journey its director has gone through to bring it to us. It has been a long, hard and expensive three years for McDonald, but the result is a very high quality and hugely enjoyable product that, if it can pass the crunch test of executive approval, would happily find a home on TV screens in Scotland or the USA. Whether you're watching it for the music or to discover more about an American icon, *Pipes & Sticks on Route 66* offers no shortage of kicks. ●