

The Real Life of

MIKE KATZ

WHILE not cut from the cloth of the competitive piper, Mike Katz is one of the world's most successful American-born pipers. Born in the Los Angeles region of the San Fernando Valley, he broke his piping teeth in his older brother Steve's high school pipe band – along with a lot of inspiration listening to good old piping records. Soon after, both Mike and his brother joined the Los Angeles Police Pipe Band. Led by John Massie from Bellshill, Scotland, Mike's membership allowed him to benefit from sound teaching and set his piping on a solid course.

In 1987, bucking the centuries-long trend of Scots immigration to the New World, he emigrated to Scotland, settling in Edinburgh. It was a few

years before he connected to pipe bands, his first being The Links of Forth Pipe band (not long after to change both name and sponsor to Scottish Gas). Led by well known Pipe Major Gordon Campbell (ex-Vale of Atholl) the band were full of talent and expert players. Mike found the whole experience hugely impactful to his professional development, learning "through osmosis". He says, "I did not have tuition as such, just constant criticism by my peers."

In 1993, he joined one of Scotland's most popular and respected folk bands, Ceolbeg, setting a path for life as a professional musician. In 1997, he became a member of Battlefield Band, one of the best known folk groups on earth, and since then has never looked back. He's travelled and performed



We caught up with Mike a few days before he was leaving for a music festival in Switzerland with Scottish fiddler John Martin. Time was short so Mike suggested meeting at their final pre-Switzerland "rehearsal" in Sandy Bell's, which is one of the great folk music pubs of Edinburgh. It is known by musicians and lovers of traditional music worldwide and local musicians have been keeping traditional music alive here for over half a century.

Photo: John Slavin@Designfolk Ltd



Battlefield Band at Celtic Connections in 2013

around the world, written and arranged great tunes and sets and been part of countless landmark recording projects.

He has a bias for a lower pitched instrument (he plays in concert B flat) and switches between a set of vintage Peter Henderson drones and an old WW1 vintage set of R G Lawries. Mike's Scottish smallpipes are made by Ian Kinnear. Mike took some time from his day to meet with PT in his adopted Edinburgh hometown and talk about – what else – his real life.

PT: A few of us at PT have a soft spot for square sausage on a roll at two in the morning – or a cheese toastie at any time of day. What's your "poor man's food" weakness?

MK: In short, curries and cheese – separately I might add. And by cheese, I am talking more of the French, European "consumed-with-wine" variety, rather than the rubberised North American form of my youth. I choose these items as I find it difficult to stop eating them no matter how full I am.

As an émigré, perhaps the one "poor man's food" that would be more in keeping with your question would be the "Tommy Burger". Tommy's is a Los Angeles institution whose specialty is a particularly deadly burger with a peculiar form of chili which probably contains chorizo; although nobody really knows.

PT: What makes Scotland great?

MK: Vicious self-deprecation both nationally and individually. Some might argue that it's this that also brings Scotland down; but for me, it is this multi-layered attacking sense of humour which appeals to me. The Irish, too, excel at this.

PT: Guessing that there is something, what do you miss most about the U.S.?

MK: The Pacific Ocean – although this is not exclusive to the Americas – Mexican food and the great American free pour.

PT: Can you tell us the last movie or piece of music that made you tear up?

MK: Great music makes me laugh rather than cry. Saying that, when I occasionally listen to recordings of the late Davy Steele, with whom I played in two bands, [Ceolbeg and Battlefield Band] I am affected in this manner. I'm sure this is personal rather than due to any inherent character in the music itself.

I don't watch enough visual art but last year I went to see *Manchester by the Sea* in the cinema which was fairly heavy duty and an excellent piece of art.

PT: What would you do if you won £20million?

MK: While it would certainly pay off any debts, mortgages and all that, £20million is not the same fanciful figure it once was. Proper Bond Villain types require multiple billions these days. It is, however, enough to fund a surrealist cause which would have to be dealt with seriously. Perhaps a pipe band with super bling gear, rope tension drums, matched chanters – and by this I mean matched not to each other but to the drones – all of which must be pre-1960 or so.

PT: What's the best advice you've ever received?

MK: Always use the zest and not the fruit when perfuming the glass of your gin and tonic, or any other cocktail. Don't overcook fish and let

a dog smell your hand before you pet it.

PT: Have you ever had a paranormal experience, you know, like seen a ghost, connected with someone through a medium or experienced some kind of an inexplicable coincidence?

MK: Mediums are a lot of nonsense. I do believe however that there is a richness of reality extant beyond the mere world of one's senses. We see this with dreaming, altered states thanks to drink or other chemicals, and indeed music which comes to us through at least all of these avenues. I don't know if this constitutes paranormal but to deny the existence and veracity of such mental phenomena seems absurd.

On a more mundane level, items in my mother's house go missing and turn up again randomly and occasionally lights stop working and fix themselves again in similar random fashion. Presumably this is my mother having a laugh. She has been dead for a couple of years but her ashes are still in the house. It's a very nice house.

PT: Can you tell us the last joke or funny anecdote you recall hearing?

MK: Big Michael who drinks in my local pub in Edinburgh is full of Christmas cracker-style jokes. A couple of weeks ago he came out with this: "Did you hear the dog and cat home went out of business? They had to bring in the retrievers".

I think the delivery is perhaps key with these things.

PT: Not bad. Interesting that you remember it.

MK: Thanks.

WHISKY

Sandy Bell's

MERCHANTS





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PT: What's the greatest song ever written? What makes it great?

MK: If I think about songs, it is probably the performance that affects me more than the content – a bit like Big Michael and his wee jokes. The first that comes to mind would be *Burnin' and Lootin'* by The Wailers. The feel of the whole thing is great and perfect with the sentiment: There comes a point at which you can't take any more from the aggressors and the only answer is to meet oppression with violence. That's what I hear anyway.

PT: Do you have a hero?

MK: I believe the definition of hero is a being whose essence is a mixture of the gods and the mortal world of men. I don't really go for the God thing, but surely Pipe Major Angus has to be the closest thing to fitting that bill. Or Johnny Doran.

PT: Can you talk a little about them?

MK: Anyone who has heard Pipe Major Angus MacDonald [1st Battalion, Scots Guards] first hand will know the sound. They say his drones were like a Ferrari when he struck up. My pal and mentor Gordon Campbell told me that he could hear Big Angus at a beating the retreat – an army event akin to a massed bands – striking up from across a parade ground of pipers. Such was the power of his bagpipes. His sound was



Photo: John Stavni@Designfolk Ltd

Battlefield Band at the photo shoot for their *Line Up* album in 2011. From the right: Mike Katz, Alasdair White, Euan Henderson and Sean O'Donnell

fantastic, his playing sublime. If you are too young to have heard Angus in person, there is a recording of him from 1968 that they played on [BBC Radio Scotland's] Pipeline recently. It knocks the spots off anybody playing or competing today. I am sure that if you were to ask any of the top players playing in the last 30 years, they would tell you that the best player of all time would be either Angus or John D Burgess. I only met Angus a couple of times but he was always generous and entertaining as a man, let alone a piper. He also looked great, with real army craic and was a great character who had many great adventures. The bagpipe of today with its synthetic accoutrements is a beast which achieves a very good sound with minimal effort or "lore".

People like Pipe Major Angus were true masters of bagpipes in all of its airts and pairs from the bag, to the hemp, bridles and reeds. This elevated the sound to something higher. A timbre of character that was, and still is in my opinion, superlative. Beyond that, the style of playing and repertoire, as well – as in Angus' case – composition, was inspiring. The only modern pipers who come close to this standard would be his cousins [Angus, Allan and Iain MacDonald]. If you don't know them, perhaps you should take up another instrument.

PT: And Johnny Doran?

MK: Johnny Doran was a legendary uilleann piper. This instrument, like ours, requires extensive maintenance know-how. There is, I

believe, only one available recording of Johnny Doran from about 1950. His style and athleticism is clearly evident there. Flair, panache, adventure.

Traditional music conveys the spirits and thinking of all the people who make up your culture. It is vital to have an understanding of what went before you if you wish to move forward with whatever art with which you are engaged. There is no Irvine Welsh without Burns or Shakespeare, Blake or even Chaucer. No Prince without Hendrix or even Leadbelly.

PT: Well said. Mike, we know this is all good fun, but here's one that maybe is especially so. If you were to host a dinner party and have any six people from any time in history, who would you invite?

MK: David Hume. Probably the most important philosopher of the enlightenment, David Hume's writings on inductive reasoning and

suicide in particular are insightful; and he is a good Edinburgh gadge. He also looks like a boy that knows how to eat: and this is a dinner party. I am tempted to include Plato or Socrates – but I don't speak Greek (laughs).

Jimi Hendrix. This man was truly inventive. A real traditional musician, Hendrix grew up on all of the style of the blues men who came before him and basically invented modern electric guitar playing. By all accounts he was also a very nice fella. There's no point wasting your evening with some genius who is an arse. We all do enough of this in real life

Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Kareem was probably the last big man to play basketball with finesse. He is also well read and eloquent and appears to be pretty funny.

William Blake. Possibly the greatest Englishman of all time. Having written *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, this stands as credentials enough for being good value.

Moira Stewart. Moira Stewart is a newsreader for the BBC. She was, and still is, very bonnie, has a great voice and appears to be pretty good craic.

The Camerons of Maryburgh. Either Donald or Sandy or both: who's gonnae argue with them? This is what pipers should look like. All hair and beards with big, wild bagpipes. Chanters with soles the size of your heid. Imagine the reeds they must have (laughs).

PT: Thinking of the word happy now, what does it mean to you?

MK: Happy is when your pipes are booming, steady and flat – resonating through your whole being – the ocean is warm and it's happy hour.

PT: Sounds like a great T-shirt, Mike. Thanks for taking the time.

MK: Thank you. ●



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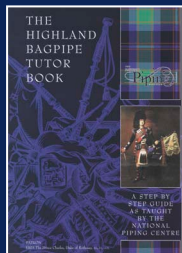


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