

JIM MCGILLIVRAY

(1955 -)



Taken on the day pipetunes.ca was launched in 2007.

I was born in the city of Kitchener, Ontario to parents of Scottish descent. Neither of my parents was a musician, but my father loved the pipes and we sometimes went to the Highland games, so on a whim at age 11, I decided to learn the pipes.

I began with a legion piper named John McIntyre, a Glasgow man, and started to play with the Branch 50 Kitchener Legion Pipe Band in 1967 under Pipe Major Colin Miller, another Glaswegian. Colin was great with the kids and we were a successful Grade 3 band, winning Ontario Champion Supreme honours two years in a row.

However, my commitment to solo piping came after I met Ed Neigh in 1970. I joined Ed's Guelph Pipe Band and he began to teach me. My formative years as a piper were heavily influenced by Ed, and it is to him that I owe whatever early piping success I had and in many ways the direction my life has taken. He was a tremendous mentor and guide to me for many years.



My first pipe band, Branch 50, Kitchener Legion, around 1968. I'm in the front row, right behind the bass drum.

During the 1970s I also went to summer schools with John MacFadyen of Glasgow. John was one of the leading Scottish players during the late 1950s and 1960s. Five years of two-week sessions with John were a major influence in a different sort of way. Ed taught largely by analysis; John taught by force of will.

I enjoyed some gratifying successes quite young on the professional solo scene in Ontario during the 1970s, earning prizes as the top amateur piper at the North American Championships at Maxville, Ontario in 1972. I also won two North American Pipe Band Championships with the Guelph Pipe Band, the final one in 1981, the year I was Pipe Major. I played in the Guelph band from 1970 until 1981, mostly under Ed Neigh, then I felt I needed to commit more time to my solo career.

It was in that year – 1981 – that I began serious competitive forays to Scotland. During this time I was getting help with piobaireachd from Andrew Wright, mostly by tape. I would visit Captain John MacLellan in Edinburgh once in a while during those trips to play some tunes for him. The combination of Andrew's sense of phrasing and Capt. John's constant admonitions that the music must have

some 'go' seemed to be just what I needed at the time. I would also drop in on Bill Livingstone periodically during the winter to run tunes past him, and his common sense and musicality always hit one or two nails on the head. I was quite driven during these years, as any successfully competitor is. I liked the positive reinforcement of winning prizes, I liked the people I was involved with, and I loved the sound of the instrument.

I was fortunate enough to win more prizes than I'd ever hoped to win during an intense seven-year period in the late 1980s: the Gold Medal at Inverness in 1985, the Clasp at Inverness in 1986, which many consider an unofficial World Championship, the Gold Medal at Oban in 1991, the March/Strathspey and Reel at the Glenfiddich Championship in 1986, and the Strathspey & Reel at Oban in the same year. It seemed like a pretty good run in a fairly short period of time, and while the trips were fun they were a drain in many respects. So I stopped, just like that.



Oban, 1991: this was one of my proudest moments. Having won the Gold Medal the day before, I march as Pipe Major of the traditional pipers' march to the games park. To my left are Colin MacLellan, Duncan MacGillivray, Colin Drummond and Mike Cusack. Out of sight directly behind me are Michael Grey and Bruce Gandy, and I'll never forget how my friends gathered round me for that parade.

Those Scottish solo pilgrimages had lasted 10 years. I retired from competing in 1991 at the age of 36 for the simple reason that during all the years I did it I never enjoyed it. In fact, I never realized how much I disliked it until I quit. The pressure I put on myself to play well was enormous and the cost and sacrifices of the Scotland trips in finances and time were difficult to sustain. I envy my colleagues who enjoy competing so much that they have pursued it well into their 50s and 60s, but I was not one of them. Yet I almost certainly owe my playing standard, the depth of my

repertoire, and much of my mental toughness to those years of competition. And of course, my natural competitive nature remains.

In 1988 I had a hankering to try out a pipe band again, so I joined the 78th Fraser Highlanders in Toronto and spent five great years with them. My friends were there – Bill Livingstone, Michael Grey, Bruce Gandy, Andrew Berthoff, and later Michael MacDonald and Rob Crabtree – and we were all very creative and very silly, and we laughed until our cheeks hurt. But we were serious about piping, and it was during those years that I wrote my best tunes, some of which have become quite popular on the world stage. I left that band in 1993.

I get my band fix now out of the [St. Andrew's College](#) Pipes & Drums at the independent boys' school I joined as a full-time piping teacher in 1998. I teach credit piping courses and run the band as part of the school's Cadet Corps. We've made and brought in some wonderful young players and for me it's been a tremendous education in teaching and running a band of young men. We are neither a competition band nor a 'street' band, but we perform high-profile engagements on a regular basis and produce some pretty grand music in concert situations.



Performing at the St. Andrew's College 100th Anniversary Gala in 1999.

In 1998, I produced [Rhythmic Fingerwork](#), a piping method and exercise book, and to my surprise it became a hit, selling 20,000 up to 2016. A few years later my friend Rob Crabtree and I produced two instructional DVDs, [Pipes Ready!](#) and [Pipes Up!](#) on maintenance and tuning, respectively. They too have proven popular. During the last 35 years I've spent much time travelling to judge, giving workshops and clinics, teaching at summer schools and giving recitals.

My piping took an interesting turn around the year 2000 when I learned how to use a bellows and started to take Scottish Smallpipes, Border Pipes and Northumbrian Smallpipes quite seriously. I'm particularly taken with the latter instrument. It has one of the most beautiful sounds in all music, and a very cheerful repertoire all its own – with no gracenotes! While I would not feel comfortable playing this instrument in public, some of my most enjoyable times are spent alone playing through the traditional Northumbrian smallpipe repertoire with my 16-key Colin Ross chanter and Richard Evans drones.



Playing Border Pipes with Hamish Moore at the 2002 Pipers' Gathering in North Hero, Vermont.

Around that time I also began selling miscellaneous piping supplies and that has now turned into a thriving and vibrant small business called [McGillivray Piping Inc.](#) I focus not on CDs, kilts or balls of hemp, but on top-line bagpipes — particularly valuable vintage bagpipes — chanters and reeds, and on providing people with superior instruments set up to play superbly according to their level of experience. That's what I like doing in my business and that's what I do best.

The 2008 piping season saw one of the most fun, intense and interesting piping projects I was ever involved with when the concept came about to form the *Spirit of Scotland Pipe Band*. The idea was simple: get 35-40 leading solo and band players currently unaffiliated with bands to commit to playing at the World Pipe Band Championship. Have them learn the music during the winter, then meet the week before the event for intense practice and see what happened. It had never been done before, and it was an incredible experience, all documented in the feature film *On the Day: the Story of the Spirit of Scotland Pipe Band*. There were 10 Gold

Medallists in the band, and while we never expected to win, we played two superb performances, achieved our goal of qualifying for the final round, had a blast, and were part of a great piping film. I'll never forget that week and my fellow bandsmen who were involved



The remarkable front rank of the Sprit of Scotland Pipe Band, 2008, from left to right: P/M Roddy MacLeod, Niall Stewart, Angus MacColl, Colin MacLellan, Iain Speirs, Alasdair Gillies, Jim McGillivray, Willie McCallum.

My current labour of love is of course pipetunes.ca, which I consider my most exciting project. This is a website where pipers can download individual pieces of sheet music, mostly public domain. I record sound files for each tune. At the time of this writing there are more than 1,600 tunes and recordings on the site, and lots more will come!

I still see my own playing as the most important part of my piping career. I play as much as I can, maintain my personal musicianship at a high level and refuse to play for an audience without being at my best. I live in Aurora, Ontario and have two children, Anne Catherine and Neil James, both much smarter than their father but, alas, neither one of them pipers.