

It's a Small World After All: How Technology and Social Media Have Brought Us Together

It is 2:05 p.m. EDT on Saturday, Aug. 13, and I have been up for more than 10 hours already. I'm utterly exhausted, yet having a fantastic day and it's all thanks to technology and our ability to bring the world together and to share and preserve traditions that would otherwise die out. Now, you should know that, in addition to being a great big tech-geek, I also play tenor drum in a bagpipe band. It's an unusual hobby to some extent, one that allows me to travel throughout the U.S. and Canada for shows and contests. It is also a hobby that, until recent years was fairly local in scale.



As recently as 10 years ago, many bands throughout the world competed in their local competitions and sometimes saved and fund-raised for one big trip to a "big games." In the U.S., that meant Alma, Mich., for Midwestern bands, usually, Longs Peak, Colo. or Pleasanton, Calif. for Western bands. And for us east coast bands -- or any of the especially ambitious Midwest and Western bands -- it meant the North American Pipe Band Championships in Maxville, Ontario. And every year, all the little bands around the world would anxiously await the second weekend in August to hear results from that Holy Grail of piping competitions, the World Pipe Band Championships in Glasgow, Scotland. We'd hope to hear results on the day or close thereafter from our friends who were taking a "once in a lifetime" trip to watch the Worlds... or we waited another month or two until results were published in the pipe band magazines and newsletters, and then we'd buy the World Championships cassette and listen in awe to the bands competing there.

Today, however, it is a whole new world, thanks to technology. For one thing, the availability of the Internet has revolutionized teaching in pipe bands. Where before we had to rely on that one guy or gal in a neighboring town for all of our instruction, now we can get video lessons on CD, DVD or live stream from top musicians around the world. The level of musicianship and technique among many regional bands has risen dramatically. Add the instant results available from "big games" via the Internet and the world has gotten a lot smaller, while talent and expectations have gone up. Thus, the former "big games" get put on band calendars, not as goals but as regular, expected events, and the fundraising and saving efforts go towards the Big Prize. Each year, it seems, more regional bands have made Worlds a goal -- not to go and watch, but to qualify and compete!

The e-training and video training, plus the new willingness to travel further and compete bigger have brought the pipe band world closer together than ever before. Social media has allowed friendships to flourish and be maintained despite the barrier of thousands of miles. As a result, the World Pipe Band Championships -- an event held regularly since 1906, less gaps for World Wars I & II -- have grown rapidly in the past couple of decades. The cassette recordings of Worlds gave way to single CDs of the top bands, which gave way to CD box sets of the qualifiers and top bands. And in 2009, the pipe band world got even smaller when the BBC, in collaboration with the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association, began broadcasting the Worlds in a live streaming event as it happens.

Which brings me back to today and my utter exhaustion. The Worlds coverage starts with the very first Grade 1 (top grade) band to play the qualifier, at 9:00 a.m. BST -- or 4:00 a.m. EDT. They covered 13 bands playing the qualifier, announced the 6 bands that made it through, and then covered all 14 bands in the Finals (6 from qualifiers, 8 pre-qualified from other events) as they competed twice -- playing March, Strathspey, Reel sets and Medley sets. It is a grueling day competing there, and almost as grueling sitting at home and watching, considering the time zone differences!

At the same time, it is mind-boggling to realize as I sit in front of my 50" flat panel, listening to the skirl of the pipes and the rhythmic drums, that I am watching this event in a community over 14,000 strong, from over 55 countries -- that's

the number of stream viewers and countries logged in from the very first BBC live stream event, and I'm sure the number has grown considerably as the excitement for the event spread. And, unlike the first two years of the stream-cast, it has been an interactive day, with lively debate, commentary and friendly arguing on Twitter, on Facebook and on the BBC live stream's own chat forum. Comments came in from Canada and Kuala Lumpur, from New Zealand to Nigeria, from Saudi Arabia to Switzerland, and countless places in between. At one point, BBC Commentator Bob Worrall even mentioned receiving a few comments from viewers "on an oil rig platform somewhere in the North Sea." Another arrived in the chat forum from "out on a ship in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico!"

Via the use of technology -- social media, webcasting, video chat, and more -- the world has gotten very small. Thanks to these technologies and the trips we've taken with our band, we count as friends members of the City of Tokyo Pipe Band, the Banda de Gaitas del Batallon de San Patricio (St. Patrick's Battalion Pipe Band) from Mexico City, the Royal Army of Oman Pipe Band, Bagad Cap Caval and several other Bagad pipe bands from France, and many more. And just today, my Twitter coverage of the event brought me new followers from Canada, Wales, New Zealand and Belgium to name a few. So, tired though I may be, I'm also really happy as the day closes in Scotland. I'm happy to be part of this tight-knit community of musicians and cultural preservationists. And I am extraordinarily proud to be an AV professional and tech geek, playing even a small part in the innovation and growth of the technologies that have made this all possible.

This personal celebration of the powers of tech comes on the heels of my recent adventures in bygone days, learning to darn socks and bake and more via the internet. (See my recent blog, <http://www.avdawn.com/2011/08/mid-summer-melange.html>). Just think about how much cultural knowledge, folklore and collective intelligence that would have been lost in previous generations is now preserved online and via technological means. Now, next time someone asks you what you do for a living, don't just answer, "I sell tech," or "I install cable." Instead, put on a big smile and tell them, "Me? I bring the world together and help preserve cultural heritages!"

P.S. -- If anyone is interested, the USA did really well this year! Both LA Scots (CA) and Oran Mor (NY) made it to the Grade 1 finals, finishing 12th and 14th respectively. St. Thomas Alumni (TX) and Stuart Highlanders (MA) finished 4th and 5th respectively in Grade 2. Ulster Scottish (PA) made it to the finals, finishing 10th overall in Grade 3a. And, New York Metro (NY) won Grade 3b, as well as Best Drum Corps in 3b, bringing two trophies home to the USA this year!

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