

# Alex Duthart: Close-up

by Keith Duff and Neil Kirby  
with Sandy and Michael St. James

*Alex Duthart, renowned drum major from the Shotts and Dykehead Pipe Band of Shotts, Scotland, is a leader in the field of pipe band drumming. Since 1953, he has led his drum corp to victory in the World Pipe Band Drumming Championships.*



**MD:** Where are you from originally?

**AD:** Well, I'm from a small village in the county of Lanarkshire. The Lanarkshire area has coal mines and steel works and is in the central belt of Scotland.

**MD:** Do you still live anywhere near the area?

**AD:** Yes, I live about 2 1/2 to 3 miles from where I was born.

**MD:** Your father was the first one to get you interested in drumming. Do you remember how old you were when you first picked up a pair of drumsticks?

**AD:** When I was a kid, I can remember playing with two forks on a tea caddy. I must tell you something about my father. My father was a good drummer. He used to teach James Catherwood who in turn went to Dr. Berger, the leading drummer with the D.L. Pipe Band. He was a real drum enthusiast and studied in Ireland and Switzerland.

It was my father's mother that showed him how to lop a skin. In the old days it was a calfskin and you had to wet the skin and lop it. There must have been drummers in my grandmother's family too. My father came from Northern Ireland so I'm of Irish extraction.

**MD:** Scotland seems to have the grasp for the majority of pipe band drummers. Are there many pipe bands in Northern Ireland?

**AD:** The Pipe Band Association is di-

vided into branches. There is the North-east branch, the West branch, the Glasgow branch and so on. The Northern Ireland branch has more pipe bands in it than Scotland.

**MD:** How about the quality?

**AD:** The quality of piping is slightly below the standard that you find in Scotland. But I wouldn't say that about the drumming.

**MD:** What sort of things were you listening to as you were developing?

**AD:** I was always interested in jazz. I liked the traditional jazz and modern jazz as well. When I talk about modern jazz I mean Joe Morello and so forth. Now we all admired Gene Krupa and his era. It was a rompy, stompy thing, and that's okay, but as it progressed there were an awful lot of good drummers and I always liked good progressive jazz.

**MD:** But Morello is one of your favorites?

**AD:** That's right.

**MD:** He called you the "doctor of bagpipe drumming".

**AD:** Well, I don't know about that. I'm very flattered that Joe Morello said things like that because his opinion has always been valued. One time in Woodside Hall, Billy Stevenson, Bert Barr and I played an interval for Joe during his clinic. Joe stood on stage and he wanted to hear us. I was flabbergasted because Joe Morello was a great figure. For us to be asked to play, amateurs? Nobody would have dared to play but us. We played because we thought we had something to offer in our field which was entirely different.

**MD:** Did you exchange any ideas with Joe?

**AD:** Yes, I'll always remember the following. We played two of our drum solos at his clinic and he stood by the whole time listening. Do you know what he said? He said, "If Buddy Rich had heard these three fellows here today, he would have fallen flat on his face." I said to the other fellows in my corp, "If we never win any competitions, at least one man who knows what he is doing has recognized what we are trying to do."

**MD:** Are you a strong believer that all drummers should be able to read music?

**AD:** I would think the drummer is not complete until he knows something about the value of notes.

**MD:** In other words anything you can

play you should be able to write down?  
**AD:** Did you ever think that is quite a tall order to say, "I am able to write anything that I play." Think about that. That entails an awful lot, doesn't it? You go and pick up those sticks and play anything that comes into your head and write it down.

In most cases guys in symphonies, especially in the London Symphony, just don't want to know our style of drumming.

**MD:** Do you play traps?

**AD:** Yes, and when I play gigs and the other players find out I'm a pipe band drummer, they say, "Oh you don't know anything but ding-ding-a-ding." But I show them that I know more than that.

**MD:** Did you ever have your own band?

**AD:** No, I just played gigs. In those days I'm talking about the old dance halls where you'd play from 7 until 11, playing one number. Nowadays, it's funky, but it's still the same.

**MD:** Do you see any similarities between the syncopation of bagpipe drumming and rock drumming for instance?

**AD:** No, but consider if you've got all these elements, you could certainly have all the elements of a rock drummer too because it's so simplified that if you had this at your finger tips you could make it really interesting. You may do the opposite thing, you may make it too interesting. You could make it too busy, having all this technique. Some of the things I hear rock drummers do are as open and lazy, but it's good.

**MD:** How do you decide if it's too technical or it's not, or if you put too much in?

**AD:** Do you know where you generally find this? You generally find this in a guy who doesn't read a note. He tries to play a thing he doesn't even know. He hasn't got the proper notation for that. He's either got too much or not enough. He doesn't know where to put the notes so that it gives you a relaxed feeling. It's generally guys that don't know a thing about note value that do this stuff. But then you get the natural fellow that can play relaxed and do everything just because he's been used to playing it.

**MD:** It seems to me your drumming shows so much technical ability as far as dexterity and cleanliness and precision especially in the case of the Shotts and Dykehead where you have seven or eight members in the snare drum line. What kind of practice routines do you do personally and does your drum section do? How many hours a day or days a week?

**AD:** Well, this is quite difficult to explain, because I write all the drum parts. And it's solely because we're a competing band that we sit down and try to do things. Now you could sit down probably some night and say I have a drum setting for a march or a strathspey

(dance tune) and work for two or three hours and get nothing. And other times the tunes begin to get embodied in the head. You must know how the tune goes to really have a good setting. Then I fool around with a lot of different basic rudimental patterns.

**MD:** To fit the bagpipe music?

**AD:** That's right. Do you know what it is like? What comes first, the hen or the egg? How can you make up anything if you're not equipped? If I'm not equipped with the sticks, if I'm not able to play, how are you going to be able to fit patterns to the music?

**MD:** How did you become equipped?

**AD:** I don't know. I've subdivided an awful lot of things myself. If you take the old phrase ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six-SEVEN-eight. You see how you can build on it? It's like a tree, and a branch goes out that way. You have another twist of a branch that way, and another twist and another twist, that's how they come.

**MD:** What do you do to build up your hands and your dexterity to be able to play these kind of figures?

**AD:** Probably being able to execute the basic rudiments so that your hands are at will to do what your brain wants. Your brain takes over faster than your hands. Your hands can become free and you can do things.

**MD:** Did you spend many hours developing your rudiments?

**AD:** I never have done it in my life. I've spent quite a few hours working on somethings.

**MD:** You just naturally fell into having clean technique.

**AD:** See a closed drag. I think you call it a ruff, a three stroke roll. You may play a drag open. In Scotland we play it tight and closed. We have developed single tap rolls where we know exactly what we are going to do. I know not to go too fast or too slow because I know the proper notation. That's what it's all about.

**MD:** So you build up your technique based upon what the music requires.

**AD:** That's right.

**MD:** You don't have to sit down and say I'm going to play this rudiment as fast as I can by next week, regardless of the music.

**AD:** I've never done that in my life. I think you can become too methodical. Okay, you say it takes so many taps to play something. Then you say, at the end of the week I'm going to put in twice as many as these taps. Your friend says, "So what?" It doesn't matter how many taps you put in there, after you get to a certain stage it's a mess. There's a point you get to where you have to say to yourself, wait a minute, but how does it sound? With seven or eight fellows playing. You must be able to hear things as well. If you've got a drum that's ringing

or an overtone in a drum you'll never hear half the detail that we play. That's why we play a sharp drum. You have to do it that way.

**MD:** We notice that the pipe band snare drums are very tight.

**AD:** In here, but take it outside and it will sound quite flat. If you were to take your dance drum outside it would sound like a top. That doesn't mean to say that the drum is not good. Your dance drum and your rock drum are good for inside and for the acoustics inside but if you take it outside, what a sound you get.

**MD:** So the pipe drum was primarily designed for use outdoors?

**AD:** Outside. Play it inside here and you get a terrible sound.

**MD:** What started getting the heads as tight as they are now? Do you use a double hoop?

**AD:** Sometimes, when I get down a certain distance and you haven't any money to buy skins you say, "Get it down another turn there!"

**MD:** What kind of wrench do you use to tighten the heads?

**AD:** Well, we have quite a strong key. Premier is strengthening up their keys. The small key is no good for that.

**MD:** There's a question of pounds. 35 pounds on top and 15 on the bottom.

**AD:** I don't know what I put on the top or what I put on the bottom.

**MD:** You go by sound and feel?

**AD:** If the snares are not up then I'll set up the snares and get them right. You see, this is the thing . . . this is what I'm amazed about and it's a great idea. But the American fellow says, "Why are you doing that? Do you know why you are doing that?" And I'll say, "Well I just tighten up to what I feel." And he says, "Well I'll just give this forty pounds of pressure." Well, that's sensible. What you're doing is sensible. We in Scotland have a certain attitude that what you are doing would be too much of a bother for us. I can feel a head, and the tension that's on it and I'll know whether it will break.

It takes about two to three weeks to get the head right. You have to get the snares up really level and you've got to get them up so that you can work it, otherwise you don't get a sharp sound. On the pipe drum, the head should be about level with the hoop on the batterhead.

**MD:** Do you still use the Premier *Royal Scot* drum?

**AD:** Yes.

**MD:** Did you have anything to do with the development of that drum?

**AD:** Well, we needed the top snares so that they were really hard against the skin. You see, the Premier Drum Company makes a very good article, there's no doubt about that. But I don't think that they knew the sound that we wanted.

**MD:** Why has the ten-lug model come out?

**AD:** Because the hoops were warping. You can probably get finer tuning with it. But the main reason for it was to reduce the length of the hoop between the two lugs. In other words, if you reduce that space you're going to get a stronger hoop. As for the tone of the drum, I don't believe that there is much difference between the two.

**MD:** How often do you change the snares on your drums?

**AD:** Not very often. It may be a thing that I overlook but I don't think I've changed the snares on the new drums, and when I say the new drums, they're about 2 1/2 years old.

**MD:** What made you give up playing the chrome drums?

**AD:** I don't see why I should be playing a drum that's about 3 pounds heavier, so I went back to the wooden shell. That's the only reason. I quite liked the sound, it was a softer sound. But a lot of the judges didn't like it.

**MD:** Are there other materials used in drum construction that you like besides wood?

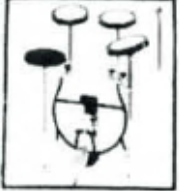
**AD:** I liked the metal shell but there was a tendency for the shell to collapse under

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pressure. In Australia, it gets very hot. Down there they had several metal drums that collapsed.

**MD:** The wooden shell gives and takes.  
**AD:** That's right. Now you take the metal there with the heat; once you get to a certain degree the drum collapses. It's a thin metal which is spun over on the edge and that makes it strong. But it's not as strong as a wooden shell.

**MD:** Have you played the Premier *Resonator* double-shelled drum?

**AD:** I've only tapped it. Kenny Clare's idea. It sounded good.

**MD:** Do you foresee pipebands using double shelled drums in the future?

**AD:** I don't know. I've never tried it so I couldn't have an opinion on it until I try it out.

**MD:** Have you written any books yourself? Are there any Alex Duthart drum manuals?

**AD:** No, but I've started one.

**MD:** Will that be coming in the near future?

**AD:** Dear knows when! I've been asked to get quite a few different movements, and if I don't get it in print then somebody else is going to do it and they're going to reap the rewards. I think I should reap the benefits.

**MD:** Do you teach privately?

**AD:** I haven't got the time. I've got to work during the day and I've got to go two or three nights a week with the band.

**MD:** What do you think has been your biggest influence on bagpipe drumming and the development of it?

**AD:** First and foremost was A. D. Hamilton who is an orchestral drummer, he's about 82 now. He had an influence on me. My father had an influence on me. Then there was Jimmy Catherwood who was under A. D. Hamilton and Patty Donovan the drummer from Dublin. Also the leading drummer of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band, Alec McCormick. Those were the guys that I was under and then I was on my own.

**MD:** Is that when you joined the Shotts?

**AD:** No, I was the leading drummer in the D.L. Pipe Band for 11 years before I went to Shotts.

**MD:** What year did you join the Shotts?

**AD:** 1957. But I won the World Pipe Band Drumming Championship with my drum corps in the D.L. Pipe Band in 1953. We came out dark horses. In 1953 we broke through with the drum corps, and started winning.

**MD:** You've won as the World Champion Drum Corps in every decade since the 1950's, is that correct?

**AD:** Yes.

**MD:** Do you see that happening in the 1980's too?

**AD:** Oh, I don't know. I like to play, and as long as my hands and my mind can

memorize the settings, I'll play. Unless somebody comes up to me and says, "Look here, we've had enough of you." I wouldn't like that to happen. My hands are not capable or my memory is not absorbing and holding things ... do you know how many settings we have to memorize to go out onto that field? There are seven tunes to a selection of music and there are two selections of music to learn. They (the judges) pick out one of these selections just before you go on to play. So that means you have fourteen minutes of memorizing to do. If you don't, you're not up to standard. So it becomes a memory test.

**MD:** Obviously, you are still growing musically. Are there any things you are looking forward to doing in the future as far as development of drumming styles in the pipe band?

**AD:** Well, I would like to progress. I've got quite a few things now which incorporate the Swiss style of drumming. But you've got to be very careful because the sounds that are good to listen to at certain tempos are certainly not the sounds to listen to at other tempos. It's how you can utilize certain phrases and put them into your idiom. It's not always possible to do. It's hard to be original, to try and make things new all the time. It's very hard to do that.

**MD:** Are there any other drummers in Scotland that equal your ability?

**AD:** There are many good instrumentalists in the world. But in this pipe band game you not only have to be a good snare drummer you have to be quite a good composer and arranger as well. There's no book that you can go to and draw scores from. This is what I would like to be able to do. There's no use in having all this material of mine if it's not available for someone to look at. Give me six months off at my job and pay me my wages and I'll get my book out. I've got to work for a living. And when I come home at night, I've got to do two nights with the band. I've got to make up material and you don't do that in ten minutes. So, I'm pretty busy keeping abreast of things. What I was going to do was to compile a book of drumming scores. Now can you imagine, you get this book of mine and the first thing you open to is "Capt. Colin Campbell," a strathspey. Now, what good would it be?

**MD:** Yes, if you weren't aware of the notations and things.

**AD:** You'd say how the hell does this guy play this and how does it work in, man? There's a Book I and Book II, the Scottish Pipe Band Association book, now there's a start. What I've got to do is my method, going from point A to point B or point Z. That's what's got to be done.

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