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WINTER STORM

An early 19th century pioneers' wagon train supply and outfitting centre at the start of the Santa Fe, California and Oregon Trails leading overland to the 'West', Kansas City, Missouri, had graduated by the 1930s into a hard-partying fiefdom of organised crime.

The last half-century or so, however, has witnessed quite a turnaround in a cleaned-up, go-ahead Kansas City, with the opening of an international airport and of the world's only matched set of football and baseball stadiums. It is now said to have more fountains than any city except Rome, and more boulevards than any city except Paris.

Kansas City has become a significant arts and cultural centre and continues to head determinedly in that direction: a 316,000-square-foot, \$326 million performing arts centre, the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, designed by one of the world's leading architects, Moshe Safdie, is scheduled to open in the downtown heart of Kansas City in December 2009. It will host performances by the Kansas City Symphony, the Kansas City Ballet, the Lyric Opera and other performing arts organisations.

There is also the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, the American Jazz Museum, a steamboat museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, renowned for its Egyptian and Asian collections... and, right next door to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, is the main venue of an annual piping and drumming workshop, competitions and concert that has become a significant attraction on North America's piping calendar.

Winter Storm is an intensive few days to which some of the world's top pipers and drummers are recruited as workshop leaders, adjudicators and performers. It has been a remarkable success in an area that doesn't necessarily have the North American piping roots such as Vancouver or Ontario.

The 2008 *Winter Storm* takes place 11-13 January. Full details and online registration are available at: www.winterstorm.net.

"There really weren't a lot of piping or drumming workshops happening in the Midwest prior to our workshops," said Cliff Davis, a co-founder, board member and secretary of the Midwest Highland Arts Fund that launched and organises the event. "We decided to hold a workshop and it was more successful in terms of attendance than we'd expected. We broke even our first year, which surprised us, and we've just grown from there.

"We haven't seen a great influx of new learners locally, though; it's attracting a North America-wide interest, and we've had people come from Europe and South Africa for it — there's really nothing quite like this anywhere else. Last year we had 40 American states and four Canadian provinces represented, and people from Europe... *Winter Storm* draws people from all over.

STUART LIDDELL and John Fisher in the spotlight at the 2007 Winter Storm Concert in Kansas City's Community Christian Church — a highlight of the annual piping and drumming school.



we're in Kansas City

"In January 2007, we had 375 students register for the workshops, we had 155 solo competition entrants, and we expect those numbers too in 2008. And we have nearly 1,000 for the concerts. The concerts have been sold out every year for the past four years."

THE Midwest Highland Arts Fund grew out of the Kansas City Caledonian Pipe Band. "Bands go through ups and downs and that band reached a point where it needed to fold," said Cliff Davis. "There was a treasury there and a decision was made to form a new entity to take those funds and use them in an educational way for piping and drumming."

"Jeff Kruske, Mark Stanfield, Henry Spangler, myself and Matt Kline were the original board members. We'd all played with that band at one time or another. As *Winter Storm* has expanded, we have enlarged the MHAF board: over the past couple of years we've brought Frank Holladay, Mike Schenk, and Beth Wilson onto our board.

"All of our board members are pipers or drummers or have been deeply involved in the art, and that's really important to us: that everyone on the board understands the crux of what it's all about. And that's part of our success too — we understand what pipers and drummers want."

The Midwest Highland Arts Fund incorporated in 2001, and held its first workshops in January, 2002.

"We began with six instructors our first year," said Cliff Davis. "We've tried to keep the teacher-student ratios manageable by adding instructors. So we had 20 instructors this year and we're adding to that a little bit for this coming *Winter Storm* to keep up with the demand. We want to provide a high quality educational experience and, to do that, you have to add more staff.

"At some point, we'll probably end up having to cap the numbers of students we

take; at some point you have to decide when big enough is big enough, but I think we're a couple of years away from that still."

Last year's piping instructors included Canadians Jack Lee and John Cairns, Mike Cusack and Alasdair Gillies from the United States and, from Scotland, Stuart Liddell, Willie McCallum, Angus MacColl, Fred Morrison and Andrew Wright.

Drummers were Craig "Hoss" Colquhoun, Scott Currie, Tyler Fry, Duncan Gibson, Jim Kilpatrick, Norman "Haggis" MacLeod, J. Reid Maxwell, Eric Ward and Barry Wilson.

"The thing that's really helped us grow has been that we've always focused on the education aspect of the weekend," said Cliff Davis, "and we include tickets to the concert as part of the registration for the workshops and think of it as a part of the education experience as well.

"We bring in the best people we can find to help us teach and, as a result of the workshops being so successful, we were encouraged by many of our instructors to host competitions as well.

"Our plan was to do that maybe 10 years out but we started in our second year with our silver medal piobaireachd competition and added after that gold medal and amateur snare drumming, gold medal and amateur tenor drumming, gold medal piobaireachd and gold medal light music piping, and most recently, the gold medal bass drumming competition which actually was a big smash.

"You never know with a bass drumming competition but we attracted extremely good players to that contest and it was a lot of fun."

The *Winter Storm* concerts feature guest teachers playing solo or, more usually, in some head-turning small ensembles. The music is reliably amazing; this year's concertgoers heard Willie McCallum playing with J. Reid Maxwell, Haggis MacLeod and Duncan

WILLIE McCALLUM Leads a piping class at the 2007 Winter Storm piping and drumming school.



Gibson; John Cairns accompanied by Jim Kilpatrick; Stuart Liddell with John Fisher, Tyler Fry and Duncan Gibson; prize winners Glenn and Blair Brown teamed with Neil Bruce and Michael Cole; Angus MacColl playing with Eric Ward and Craig Colquhoun; Alasdair Gillies with John Fisher and Craig Colquhoun... matchings of virtuosity and musicality rarely heard anywhere else.

It all makes for an unusually rich and concentrated experience.

"We have two hotels, side by side, the Marriott and the Holiday Inn," said Cliff Davis. "The Marriott is the primary host hotel. We take all of the meeting space at the Marriott and the Holliday Inn to hold our competitions, provide warm-up rooms and the rest of it and take over both hotels for that purpose. Then, after Friday's competitions, all those rooms become classrooms and we have classes in both venues.

"It took us a while to convince the hotels about the scale of what we were up to and how it would all work. Now, we have a superb relationship with them and it's been a good deal."

The concerts are held at the nearby Community Christian Church, a block away from the hotels. It was designed by the world-famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright as a "church of the future", dedicated in 1942 and since refurbished. The acoustics are excellent and the space is attractive.

"It's a smaller venue but we like it that way; we want to keep it intimate and prefer to have sell-out concerts to having a big hall where we lose the intimacy."

As well as pipers, drummers and learners, Winter Storm is attracting families and bands.

"We have a lot of repeat students, people who come back year after year," said Cliff Davis. "But bands are coming in and sending their key players and sometimes whole bands.

"When that happens and family members come, it really helps your numbers and it's become quite a great weekend, just as an event, because of the social aspect as well as the educational aspect and the concerts

"The important thing to attract families is to make sure that there's more to do than the workshops. We're located in the heart of Kansas City, two blocks away from world-class pubs, restaurants, shopping, museums, galleries and all sorts of things to do. There's an art museum a half a block from the workshops and another one, with a huge collection, five minutes away. So families can come and, if they want to spend time doing other things, there's plenty on offer.

"And we offer instruction for raw beginners so, if an eight year-old child wants to come with a parent, we've got someone to teach him or her or how to hold a chanter."



CLIFF DAVIS (right), with Premier Percussion's Sven Parris, presents the 2007 Davis Drums Gold Medal to winner Mike Cole at the 2007 Winter Storm.



A STUDENT snare drummer is happy to get some one-on-one advice from John Fisher at the 2007 Winter Storm.

IN his own case, Cliff Davis took some time to find his way into piping and drumming.

"When I was 12, I wanted to play the trumpet and my dad said, 'well, how about the drum; I have a drum I played for six months as a kid and it's in my mother's attic?'"

"I said, 'sure', and played percussion all through high school and college, and in a blues band on a drum kit, and then as a hobby as an adult.

"I was in my mid-30s when I heard a small pipe band in Topeka, Kansas.

"I'd never heard a pipe band before and I loved it. They invited me to come to a practice and after about five minutes I was saying, 'I want in on this'.

"It was the most exciting drumming I'd ever heard and that's how I got involved in a pipe band — in the mid-1980s."

He is now the secretary of the Midwest Highland Arts Fund, a director and organiser. "My primary responsibilities have been in organising the drumming competitions, the drumming workshops, working with our instructors and judges to develop curriculum as well as the context of the competitions so that it's world class and a great experience," he said. "And I'm the primary point of contact for advertisers, sponsors, and I helped develop that side of our fund and we have superb support.

"I've always been in sales and marketing.

"I owned a wireless telephone store for 12 years. But last October I sold it and to follow my passion and opened a business called Davis Drums, so now I'm selling pipe band drums,

heads, slings and carriers and kit for bands all over the place and writing scores and providing instruction — and it's a lot of fun."

So Cliff Davis has also been intimately involved with marketing and promoting *Winter Storm*.

"If you're selling a commodity or product that has no service or consultative component to it on the internet, something like light bulbs, it's strictly a matter of price. But, with what we have at Winter Storm, price is the secondary issue. We have a reasonable fee for the workshop because we want it to be accessible and affordable. And the more unique your product is, the more successful the internet can be for you.

"One of the key marketing successes of *Winter Storm* has been to take advantage of the internet. Without the internet, and that economical way to communicate, I don't think we'd exist.

"To get the word out about this type of event by direct mail would be very difficult; you couldn't afford to do it. The internet makes it very inexpensive to let people know about the event, and you can change things on the website in a timely way so people are up to date, and that's how we did it.

"We developed a superb e-mail list that delivers our newsletter. We have about 5,000 people we send newsletter information to and that's been really a big help to us — it's what has helped to put us on the map."

The other high priority in ensuring *Winter Storm's* success, said Cliff Davis, has been to ensure the organisation is thoroughly seen to.

"People want to come to an event where, when they walk in the door, they're greeted, they get their registration packet, everything's organised, there are no questions, they have a map of the venue, they know where they're supposed to go, and what time everything is — and their tickets for the concert.

"Problems may crop up but, if you're well organised and really think things through, those things can be kept to a minimum. And people come back; they like a well-organised event.

"We have a lot of confidence in what we're doing," he said, "and we receive a lot of great support from some fabulous sponsors and that continues to grow — there are some patrons of the arts in Kansas who support us, and we have a lot of people who believe in this event.

"The instructors who come in, they talk about the event and the word-of-mouth support from that group of people has been a key thing for us too.

"So, as long as we continue to be organised and provide world class instruction and run the competitions in a world class manner, and put on a great concert, as long as we're firing on all these cylinders, people will keep coming back and continue to enjoy the weekend." ●