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Reeds' success is

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TOP bands are playing his reeds, but Andy Ross says he cannot tell you precisely why... because he really doesn't know.

Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band, Simon Fraser University Pipe Band, the 78th Fraser Highlanders Pipe Band, Strathclyde Police Pipe Band, ScottishPower Pipe Band, Boghall and Bathgate Pipe Band, most of the American grade 1 bands... all have opted for the Ross "ridge-cut" style reeds as opposed to the more common "moulded" reeds

"People call it a 'ridged reed,'" he said. "I haven't called it that.

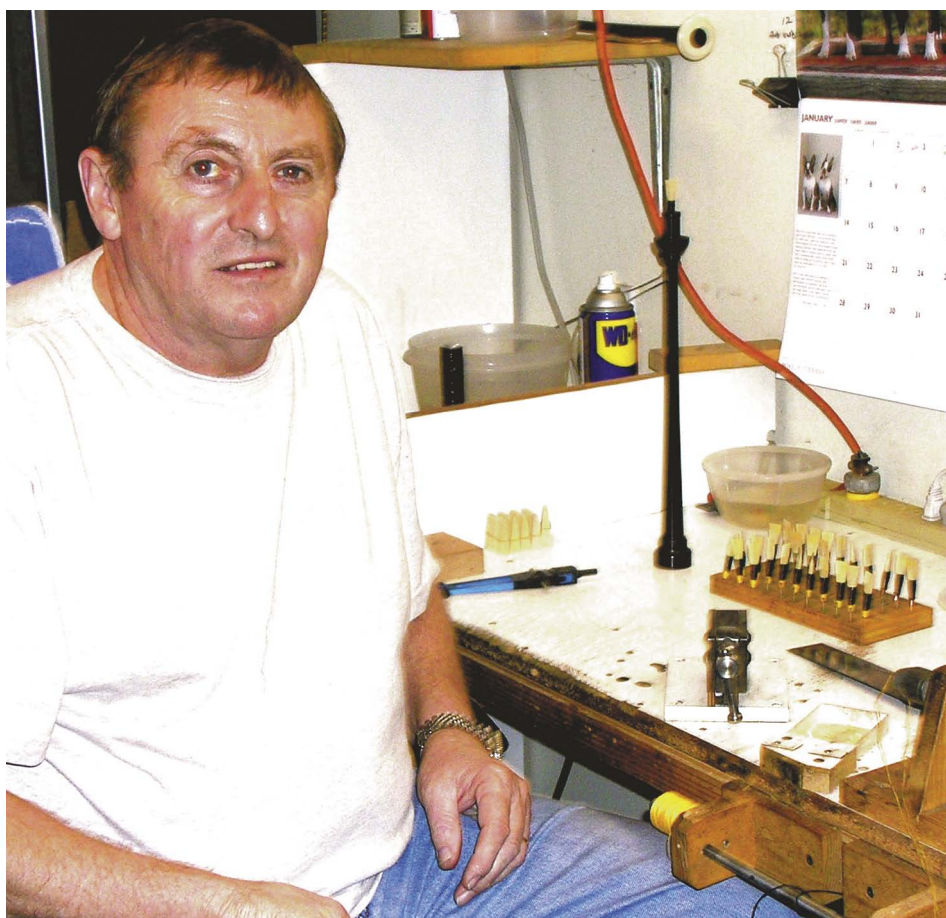
"Where did that design come from? I feel it's a pretty basic design compared with what many of the others in the business are doing — but it works for me.

"I think that originally, the initial reed I was making matched what I was seeing in Scotland at that time, when I was playing with the Dingwall British Legion Pipe Band and so on. My reed's a bit bigger, with a bit more 'meat' to it, but originally it was just a flat piece of cane; it didn't have a curve to it.

"Most reeds now are given a camber before you shape and tie them in. I didn't have that technique; I didn't know the technique. So I made a thinner bladed version of what I'm making now, so it would bend around the staple and produce a reed.

"The edges of the reeds used to all be square but somebody decided to make the rounded-over edges, which people may say is a nicer-looking, tidier reed. I tried doing that with some minimal success and decided I wasn't really getting that much benefit from it for the extra work. And I'm sure that, the way some of the big makers made reeds, they were all tooled to do that, and I didn't tool for it.

"Warnock's were getting away with the way it was, and I always thought in those 'old days' when the Warnock brothers were still doing it, that they produced a fairly vibrant reed... and, if I could equal that, I'd do okay. I think I've



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surpassed it now.

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Reed-making has some clear aspects and requirements, and technical boundaries — "but there is still a lot of art and intuition involved," said Andy Ross, which is why it is difficult to specify exactly what it is that gives his reeds their particular quality. "It's a craft," he said. "You have to use your hands and you have to have a feel for it. And a lot of it's in the finishing; I pare my reeds with a chisel; its dimensions, the thickness of the blade and the staple all matter, of course.

"But two people can work together side by side at the same bench doing the same thing, and what they produce will be different.

"One can be better than the other. There are so many subtle ways in which a reed-maker can be different — the ways they use their tools, the tightness of the binding, how far the staple goes in, where you start the lay of the reed — so there's no single reason why one reed is better than the other. Some people simply can't do it and, though there are degrees between, you'll find other people who have the eye, the feel and the passion for it.

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putting them into your own pipes, then you're on the right road. You can't just leap into mass production; you need the passion and feel for it and a bit of experience. If you're getting into reed-making just to make a bob or two, you're wasting your time."

One of the vagaries of cane chanter reed making, he said, is the cane itself — *Arundo donax*.

"It's very difficult to get consistently good cane and it's a tough problem for reed-makers," he said. "The materials that you're working with are seldom ideal."

Andy Ross prefers Spanish cane. "France and Spain are the best suppliers. There's good cane

coming out of Australia now but I've used it with little success. I don't know why, but the samples I got didn't lend themselves to the reed I make for some reason. I was getting some cane from northern California but it was very inconsistent and pretty hard.

"I did get some from Argentina too once but I wasn't too happy with the colour: it was a very orangey-coloured cane, but I'd be willing to try it again if I could find a source.

"The Spanish cane gives me the reed I want; I've had a lot more success with the Spanish cane than with any other, so I've stuck with it. All the same, I'd say half of it goes in the bin, unfortunately. You have to select the cane, and

it can be frustrating

"Cane draws up mineralisation from the soil as it's growing and that is what accounts for the colouration. You want this nice bright white to yellowish look that tells you it's a good piece of cane. It's a constant pursuit of quality," he said.

"But I'm sure it's the kind of thing where different reed makers have different views.

"If you have something that's working for you, you find it hard to move to a different material. You have to start altering what you do and it can get complicated: I don't like doing that."

The formulation of a perfect synthetic material would change all of that, but Andy Ross isn't holding his breath. Neither are his customers.

"Look at how the big boys have been returning to all the natural materials: sheepskin bags, cane reeds and so on. I don't see being able to get a natural chanter sound with synthetic reed materials, unless some new material comes out of industrial or aerospace research.

"There's nothing there yet, or we'd be seeing it on other woodwind instruments.

"I wouldn't say that it'll never happen, but I wouldn't count on it yet."

ANDY Ross was born and grew up in Inverness, Scotland. He got his first piping tuition with the local Army Cadet Force detachment, where he was taught by an Second World War veteran pipe major, Pipe Major Donald MacDonald.

"He'd taken over the Army Cadet Force pipes and drums in Inverness, and set things up there in the late 1940s and early 1950s," said Andy Ross. "And I went on to play for various bands in the north of Scotland including the Dingwall British Legion which at that time was being pipe majored by Trevor Deere who'd been with the Invergordon Distillery Pipe Band.

"He took the Dingwall band from grade 4 to grade 1 and it all worked out pretty well — and that's where I got most of my more advanced knowledge.

“Then some of us left and started a band in Inverness, the Inverness and District Pipe Band in the late 1970s.” Andy Ross was its founding pipe major.

In 1980, however, his work took him and his family to New Orleans in the United States. “We were sponsored by my employer — I was in construction work,” he said. “And we settled in New Orleans.

“It was a bit of a culture shock.

“I met a lot of people with the Caledonian Society there and hooked up with a small band of four or five pipers that played for our society functions. And the only reason I did it was that my employer was the president of the Caledonian Society. It had to be done. I wasn’t enamoured of the whole set-up but it was my way into the country.

“We had three school-age children, the education system there was not the greatest in the world and that was all quite traumatic. It was a bit of a struggle,” he said.

“Then we came to take up a job offer in California and the sun came out.”

“We’re at Long Beach, 20 minutes away from the centre of Los Angeles on the freeway. We like it here. The city has taken huge strides in cleaning itself up and making itself attractive. Hollywood’s image of LA is pretty sad but you shouldn’t feel sorry for us,” he said.

“I’d got into making a few reeds for myself as a hobby. And I took over a small band in California and made reeds for them but it was all very small scale. I didn’t get into mass production or anything.”

And then came a time when, establishing his own business as a cabinetmaker, Andy Ross pretty much put his pipes away altogether.

“I got my interest back when the Los Angeles Scottish Pipe Band began seriously moving forward in grade 2 and I went with them for a few years.” And he again turned his hand to a bit of reed making.

“During that time I met Steve Megarity. He was a making reeds in Northern Ireland when we visited there with the LA Scots in 1996. We struck up a friendship and developed a mutual interest in doing something together over here if we could get him across on a visa.

“We developed the reed together with quite a bit of success in the late 1990s. I designed all the tools and made the patterns for the tool-maker, and got things up and running,” said Andy Ross. “Steve arrived and we began moving towards where we are now.”



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One attribute of the reed that Andy Ross feels is significant is the staple.

“A lot of reed makers are using a tube and crimping the end of it and, as far as I’m concerned, that’s fine for a practice reed but for a pipe reed I think a folded staple is by far the best. It’s more consistently successful. It starts with flat copper and I have a hand-operated machine that folds the copper over and makes the staple shape. I think it’s an important thing.”

The Megarity-Ross partnership, based in Long Beach, California, was soon highly successful.

“There’s always a bit of luck involved and both of us had come to know Richard Parkes, pipe major of the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band. He was coaching the LA Scots then, coming over a couple of times a year and doing some adjudication as well, and he’d spend as much as a week with us. And we’d go across the Worlds and he’d work with us there too.

“He became interested in trying our reeds. At the same time, Terry Lee also got interested. Neither was happy with the reeds they had at the time. And that worked out very much to our benefit,” said Andy Ross.

“A couple of years later, Steve decided that he wanted to go back to Scotland. He’s an ardent piper and the piping scene here wasn’t suiting him. He wanted to go back and join Boghall and Bathgate.

“So we decided to split the business; he would look after our customers in Britain and Europe and I’d carry on here in Long Beach with the rest of the world.

“That worked for part of a year, then we decided it was best for both of us to go our

own ways. It had been the easiest way to go at the time but it didn’t work out for him, while I got tremendously busy trying to keep up with orders.

“Then, after two years in Scotland, Steve wanted to come back to California, so he’s back here now and I employ him.”

Steve Megarity is now pipe sergeant of the Los Angeles Scottish Pipe Band and instructor for The Misty Isles Pipe Band.

Andy Ross said that, when he and Steve Megarity introduced their reed to the market, people at first seemed uncomfortable with it.

“I found that strange because Warnock’s had been making a reed like that for a long time and ours doesn’t really look all that different; it’s just a bigger version. There’s more ‘meat’ to it, and it’s more vibrant and in most cases, freer to blow. But people looked at it and didn’t know how to work with it as they did with the rounded-over style of reed.

“I overcame that uncertainty in the market by sending every customer a sheet that showed how to work it, how to shave it down, pinch it, snip the top or whatever they might want to do with it, and that helped people become more comfortable with it. And, if people want an easy reed, I’ll give them an easy reed; or I can give people a hard reed. Most people are in the middle somewhere.”

Andy Ross said he hoped his hints sheet has helped people to know what to expect from the reed.

“I try to encourage people not to do certain things: especially not to overdo it, not to overcompensate.

“Scraping or sanding a reed is delicate work,” he said, “and it’s important not to be too heavy handed. I don’t like sanding; it takes too much off and you’ve got no control over the sandpaper,

“With a very sharp knife you can polish the blades, and it eases the reed considerably. Moisture does the same thing: if you moisten wood it will raise the grain and that seems to make the blades of the reed too heavy — and, if you just very gently scrape that raised grain, you find the reed vibrates much much better.

“There are people, though, who seem unable to do certain things, and you can’t handle reeds in a ham-fisted way — you need to be very patient.

“And you have to have some understanding of what the reed’s made of: the cane. That’s possibly the most important thing.” ●