

ENTERTAINMENT

The Canberra Times

Frank Jackson 

From the Queen to AC/DC, this bagpiper's blown them all away

Fraser

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...can't help but love playing bagpipes.

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...more than half a century since I first started, and in all that time, I've
...y ever had one real dissenter, a mate who just couldn't handle the
...reaming cats" that as a kid he'd been made to watch - and hear - on the
...ck-and-white telecasts of the Edinburgh Tattoo.



 Andrew "Pipes" Fraser will be donning his kit and playing his pipes as part of the Canberra International Music Festival. Picture by Keegan Carroll

The rest of the time, it's been plain sailing.

In what other endeavour do you get to do dress-ups (and your footy mates
don't mock you), make heaps of noise (without motor cars and police

intervention) and, best of all, get mobbed (because the ladies just love it)?

With a chance to play pipes at this year's Canberra International Music Festival now in sight, my mind was drawn back to some of the grand gigs I've been lucky enough to be a part of over the years, and the odd way I got into piping in the first place.

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Andrew "Pipes" Fraser will be donning his kit and playing his pipes as part of the Canberra International Music Festival. Picture by Keegan Carroll

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I actually don't remember the specific occasion (I was aged somewhere between nine and 11 at the time) but the family legend is that Pipe Major Robbie Ogilvie, who ran the Kingston-Narrabundah RSL Club Pipe Band, came to visit my mother and me one day.

As it filtered down to me, he had three questions for Mum: can I name the band after Jim (my Dad, the long-serving local MP who had died in 1970)? Will you be the patron? And what about the lad - is he going to learn the pipes?


Yes, yes and yes.

As Dr Suess put it in his last book, Oh, The Places You'll Go!

 Andrew Fraser with Skerryvore at Cobargo Folk Festival 2025

The sheer joy of marching through venues like the Sergeant's Mess at Duntroon, the old Canberra Workers Club or the Harmonie German Club on New Year's Eve was only matched by the generosity of the punters in each place. They not only stood on the tables, dancing and cheering, but were exceedingly keen to buy all the pipers a beer, no matter that some of us were still in the tenderest of teenage years.

A switch from Narrabundah High to The Scots College, Sydney, brought a change of piping venues (and, sadly, a slight damping of audience participation), but, still, the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House on speech days and a night-time show at the old Sydney Sports Ground weren't too shabby.

 Andrew Fraser following Pipe Major Steve Ladd and Drum Major Dom Andersen-Strudwick in the 2024 Tattoo telecast. Picture supplied

The best gig of two years at boarding school, though, was playing for the Queen during her 1977 tour. I'd been lobbied at Scots, determined to concentrate on studies, and hadn't disclosed that I was a piper. But when the stark Friday-afternoon dilemma was put before me – military cadets or band? – there was no choice.

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The NSW Government House gig was coming up fast and I had to confess to the School Sergeant-Major that I just hadn't been able to learn all the new band tunes in time.

Nae bover.

So delighted was he to find someone in the place who'd actually played pipes before that he insisted I turn out on parade. I was but one of 100 or so pipers in our massed band, but Serge's reference for me the next year made a point of saying that I had been "selected to play for Her Majesty The Queen".

 Andrew Fraser with his bagpipes behind the Edinburgh Castle drawbridge. Picture supplied

When AC/DC played Canberra in 2001 I was chief of staff at *The Canberra Times* and selfishly assigned myself to cover the gig, which the paper was supporting with radio station 104.7.

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Part of the deal was that I would get to interview, over the phone, Angus Young, along with Marty and Erica, then the biggest stars on the Canberra radio dial. Of course I took my pipes and just about deafened everyone in the small studio with the riff to *It's A Long Way To The Top*.

"How was it?" I asked the guitar wizard. "Perfect", came Angus's reply. So did I have a gig with them on Saturday night? Sadly not. One of J. Farnham's forays into piping had included at one point a version of the AC/DC classic, leading the boys themselves to drop it from their playlist. So, no gig for me, but I'll always have the great man's one-word review of my piping.

Some years further on, my son's mate got himself a spot as a contestant on *The Bachelorette*, and, having Scottish heritage, wanted to go on the show displaying it to best effect. I was consulted. After a second or two explaining clan crests, kilts and plaids, I made the inevitable offer.

Of course, the contestants and producers wanted a piper.

 The 2024 Edinburgh Tattoo massed band formation (Andrew Fraser is at top left of circle of anchor).
Picture supplied

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While there might have been conjecture about whether I cut a dashing (50-something) figure alongside the hunk of a 20-something contestant in the back of the limo, there was no doubt (at least not in my mind) that the bachelorette herself, Ms Sophie Monk, had eyes only on me and my pipes at the outset (at least for a second-and-a-half, anyhow).

Some of the more traditional piping performances are the most powerful.

I have been exceedingly fortunate to be taken in among a group of a dozen or so pipers who get to play *The Flowers of the Forest* during the wreath laying at the daily Last Post Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial. It is invariably moving, with one man's story related each day from those of the more than 100,000 Australians who have lost their lives in war.

And that show that my mate couldn't stand, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, which is even more spectacular when you're a part of it, out on the esplanade of the famous castle.

Our band, the Australian Federal Police Pipes and Drums, has performed at the tattoo five times, with me lucky enough to be among the happy throng on the last two occasions, in 2017, and again last year, that time as Pipe Sergeant.

Think of playing before a crowd the size of what the Brumbies recently had against the Drua.

Pretty cool, huh?

Then imagine doing it 25 times in one month. That is the Tattoo. Tuning up in the long summer evenings in the world's greatest workplace, the Argyle Battery, overlooking the Firth of Forth. And then forming up behind the huge doors, before the cannons fire and ... you're on. Over the drawbridge and on to the world's most famous parade ground. Quite simply, there is nothing like it.

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We open the show playing a traditional set, marching into a formation (in 2024, it was an anchor, honouring the Royal Navy); we come back on mid-way through the show to play for the dancers and then we are a big part of

the finale, which this year featured the hit song *Take My Hand* by Skerryvore, thrice voted Scotland's best live act.

 On stage with Skerryvore on their 2025 Australian tour. Picture supplied

As fate would have it, Skerryvore, an eight-piece folk/rock/pop band, toured Australia this year. An enterprising bandmate reached out: would these absolute pros and thorough-going gents like some locals to join them for a few numbers (as we'd seen them do on videos from Scotland)?

Aye, indeed.

So there we were again, five pipers and a drummer some nights, on other nights just yours truly, joining these great musicians and showmen on stage in Sydney, Wollongong and at the Cobargo Folk Festival. More than one of us seemed on the verge of succumbing to the rock-and-roll lifestyle, but I digress.

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Next on the piping horizon is the Canberra International Music Festival. A few of us locals have been lucky enough to get a go, including me and Burns Club Pipe-Major Sean Hodgman.

I'm to be a small part, lakeside around dawn, playing some traditional numbers in a performance called Five Short Blasts.

It promises to be great fun, unlike any other piping gig I've been a part of.

As the festival site puts it, Five Short Blasts "combines live performance, new composition and simulcast radio in an intimate one-hour experience on electric boats". It's early morning by the waters of Lake Burley Griffin featuring "local water and sound communities, including soloists from the National Carillon, local bagpipers, and ANU's School of Music composition faculty".

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In *Sonneurs*, "a quartet of French pipers will bring vibrant energy to this brutalist yet majestic structure [the column-based installation known as LESS], nestled within the reimagined industrial landscape of Dairy Road ... the program includes a series of carefully curated contemporary works for pipers, culminating in a large-scale participatory work for wind, bagpipes, and brass players, created by renowned composer Otomo Yoshihide."

Pipes feature mightily in this year's festival. Among the headliners are Urban Pipes, "a performance intervention by world-renowned French Piper Erwan Keravec", and 8 Pipes for Philip Glass, "a musical odyssey in which the gloriously saturated sonic texture of eight bagpipes fills the hall, immersing the audience in a world of haunting resonance and complex beauty".

As that old St Kilda supporter on *Countdown* used to say, "Do yourself a favour!"

- The Canberra International Music Festival runs from April 30 to May 4. For more information or tickets go to cimf.org.au.
- Andrew Fraser is a criminal lawyer and former journalist. andrew@frasercl.com.au

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