

Piped-in Laughs

STORY BY
DALE SMITH

PHOTO BY
STEVE MORSE

COLUMBIA'S UNPRETENTIOUS
TOWN PIPER, KEN HINES,
REMINDS US THAT THE
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A
BAGPIPER AND A BAD PIPER IS
ONLY ONE LETTER. HE
CAUTIONS YOUNG PIPERS
"NEVER TO LEAVE YOUR
INSTRUMENT IN THE BACK SEAT
OF A CAR BECAUSE THERE
MIGHT BE A SECOND SET THERE
WHEN YOU GET BACK."

Ken Hines has got a million of 'em:

Q. If you drop a bagpipe and a watermelon off a tall building, which will hit the ground first?

A. Who cares?

Most firefighters would rather run headlong into a burning building than don a kilt and play the bagpipe. And then there's Hines, AB '79, assistant fire chief of the Boone County Fire District and leader of the district's Highland pipe-and-drum corps, which plays regularly throughout Missouri. Thousands have seen him at high-profile gigs including air shows, St. Louis Cardinal baseball games, Gov. Mel Carnahan's memorial service on Francis Quadrangle and Gov. Bob Holden's inauguration. He and his group also march in several parades a year in small Missouri towns. Which reminds him:

Q. Why do bagpipers walk when they play?

A. To get away from the sound.

If it takes a thick skin to fight fires, it takes an elephant hide to pipe in public. Nobody is neutral about bagpipes, says Hines, who has been putting neighborhood dogs in a panic during his practice sessions since he took up the national instrument of Scotland in 1984. Lovers of the instrument might describe its pleasantly plaintive, even wistful renderings of "Auld Lang Syne" and "Amazing Grace." Detractors are just as eloquent about how it can mangle a perfectly good song like "Danny Boy" with its teeth-gnashing whine that's often out of tune to boot. Although Hines looks on the bright side and is clearly proud of his group, and although his corps is a legitimate fire district unit just like the bomb squad and the rescue team, it pays to be an unpretentious piper down at the fire station. Hence his collection of bagpipe jokes comes in handy:

Q. What's the definition of "optimism"?

A. A bagpiper with a beeper.

Hines not only has a beeper for his leadership role at the fire district, he's known around Columbia as the Town Piper, and he has become a one-man clearinghouse who can find the proper piper for weddings, funerals and going-away parties in central and western Missouri. His solo gigs include two or three weddings a year and about two funerals a month. For Hines, the lone piper has a certain drama:

Q. How do you get two bagpipers to play in perfect unison?

A. Shoot one.

Really, folks, the one-piper gigs are a relief because tuning the devil's instrument is so complicated. With all the different pipes, it's almost like tuning four instruments in one.

Q. How can you tell if a bagpipe is out of tune?

A. Someone is blowing into it.

It takes about four breaths for Hines to fill the pipe's Gore-Tex bag, his "third lung." Pipers squeeze the bag, pushing air that vibrates a reed in all three drone pipes — two tenors and a bass — which he calls the backup band. The chanter, where pipers finger their melodies, contains the fourth reed. Players must tune all four pipes when they begin and again after they've warmed up. Hines spends 30 to 50 minutes tuning the whole corps of 15 before performances. Even then the pitch is precarious. Squeeze the bag too hard on this thousand-dollar instrument, and the pitch goes sharp. Too little pressure and the tune sounds flat.

Q. What's the difference between a lawnmower and a bagpipe?

A. You can tune the lawnmower.

Q. How can you tell a bagpiper with perfect pitch?

A. He can throw a set into the middle of a pond and not hit any of the ducks.

Imagine what it must've sounded like during the two world wars, when Scots soldiers went into battle in kilts to the sound of their regimental pipers (who were otherwise unarmed). Small wonder the Germans called them "the ladies from hell."

Q. Why do bagpipers always walk when they play?

A. Moving targets are harder to hit.

Hines says that police and fire departments have long been sponsors of bagpipe corps, a tradition he traces to the 19th century, when many a tough Scottish immigrant worked these jobs at high risk and low pay. Indeed, Hines' great-great-great-grandpappy Campbell may have heard several such rough-and-ready bands when he migrated to the United States in the 19th century.

Although Hines' corps of pipers seems a friendly bunch, still, it's best to let them tell certain jokes on themselves. Take it away, Ken.

Q. What do you call a bagpiper with half a brain?

A. Gifted.

Q. What's the difference between a bagpipe and an onion?

A. No one cries when you chop up a bagpipe. ☼