

Regina resident's passing leaves behind hidden musical legacy

Don Murdoch passed away at the age of 91 on April 2, leaving behind an eclectic pipe organ that he built and assembled himself.

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Don Murdoch's niece Betty Warke and her son Tyler Dash stand next to his custom built pipe organ. The instrument, which took decades to construct, is built into the walls and floor of the home. Photo by TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Don Murdoch spent 60 years in his white clapboard home before he passed from cancer on April 2, but his legacy lives on through an eclectic, custom-built pipe organ that not only fills the house with music, but literally spills through its nooks and crannies.

The console — the control centre of the organ with the keys — sits in the front corner of the Regina home's living room. But the heart of the organ is the pipes, valves, blower and electronic wires that span two stories — from the basement to main floor — making the machine part of the house itself, a testament to Murdoch's creative genius. He built and added to the instrument for over three decades.

Murdoch's possessions have been emptied from the house as the family prepares it for resale, but the organ will remain, preserving the passion and talents of a man who not only played music, but quite literally lived in it.

"He was just a regular guy, regular Joe, without any type of training and he did something kind of exceptional," said Murdoch's grandnephew Tyler Dash.



Murdoch, pictured here on June 18, 2001, sits in front of his house with a neighbourhood cat.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TYLER DASH. Jpg

Dash's mother, Betty Warke, still remembers when their family first heard about Murdoch's plans to build the instrument. She admits they were skeptical at first.

"I thought, yeah well this is going to be interesting. When he had it finished we went over and he played this pipe organ. Unbelievable. It blew us away. It was literally like a church organ. It was beautiful."

The organ became a beloved family keepsake and Warke has fond memories of hearing him play during family visits.

"We'd request stuff and he would play it. It made Christmas really special," she said.



Allan East, president of the Regina Centre of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, examines the custom made masterpiece from the basement of Murdoch's home. Murdoch had to remove the floor of his home during the building process, to make room for all the pipes.
Photo by TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Murdoch was born to a musical family on Jan. 22, 1930 in Stony Beach, Sask. He took up the piano and the organ at a young age, while his half-brother Edgar played the alto horn. The family were regular churchgoers, but Murdoch never played at a service, preferring to keep his hobbies private. He did, however, carry his love for Christian hymns and baroque composers with him for the rest of his life, and often performed for friends and houseguests.

Murdoch moved to the two-storey house where he would build his organ around 1958, after accepting a job as pressman for the Leader-Post. Warke and Dash estimated the project started in the late 1960s as a result of Murdoch's naturally progressing interests, which included architecture, engineering and woodworking, in addition to organ music. (For security reasons, the family asked that the Leader-Post not disclose the location of the house.)

"The type of literature he had would likely bore the average person to death," Dash said. "It was archaeological, architectural journals. There were engineering magazines and ten different types of encyclopaedias."



The pipes of the organ run through multiple rooms in the house, filling the whole space with music.

Photo by TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Murdoch made history in his house, not only through music, but through social activism too. He was a pioneering figure in Saskatchewan's early LGBTQ+ movement.

Known then as the lesbian-gay (LG) movement, the first meet-up was convened in Murdoch's home on February 13, 1972. They called themselves the Atropos Friendship Society (AFS) and Murdoch served as president of the executive board for three years.

Not long after, their sister group the Odyssey Club was born and Murdoch played a key role in raising awareness, largely through the Leader-Post, where advertisements were placed for social meetings.

In 1977, AFS was renamed the Gay Community of Regina (GCR). It is the oldest continuously running organization of its kind in Canada.

Murdoch never married or had children, but he treated his instruments like immediate family. He owned a few organs at various points in his life, including a Rob-Wave Electric, which had been used to serenade Queen Elizabeth when she visited Moose Jaw as a young girl in 1939. His pipe organ was the only one he built for himself however, and he continued to update it well into the 2000's.

"He was always adding something to it, making it bigger and better," Warke explained.



Don Murdoch, pictured here on June 18, 2001, plays his beloved organ. Murdoch had always been interested in music, woodworking, architecture and engineering and his passions led him to start building the instrument. Jpg

Richard Buck, organ repairman, still remembers the day he helped move the Rob-Wave into Murdoch's basement.

"It was like moving an engine motor... It was heavy and you had to drain the oil out of it," he said.

Murdoch sourced parts for his self-built organ through Buck as well. He helped supply Murdoch with a third keyboard for the organ's console, wire for tuning and metal tongues for the reed pipes.

Buck who continues to operate his Winnipeg-based business Mantle & Buck, became acquainted with Murdoch through an organist at St. Mary's Anglican Church in Regina. He recalled that Murdoch first purchased the body of the organ from Trinity Lutheran Church and that the model, originally from Toronto, dated back to the 1920s. He said the organ had been built for a theatre, adding that it had most likely been used in that industry at some point before finding its forever home.

Buck was one of many people whom Murdoch consulted for parts. He reached out to organists at local churches as well, including St. Paul's Cathedral in Regina and Moose Jaw Zion United Church.



Don Murdoch, former Leader Post pressman, passed away on April 2, leaving behind a custom-made organ built into the walls of his home. The organ took decades for him to build. Photo by TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Warke and Dash cleaned out the house to prepare it for sale earlier in the week, and they scattered Murdoch's ashes across the prairie. They said they'll always remember him as their kind, loving and eccentric uncle whose music will be sorely missed.



Don Murdoch, former Leader Post press man, passed away on April 2, leaving behind a custom-made organ built into the walls of his home. The organ took decades for him to build. Murdoch's niece Betty Warke and her son Tyler Dash stand next to the custom built organ. Photo by TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

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