

JULIAN LAGE · HARP GUITARS · BEARFOOT · STEVE SPODARYK

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**RICKY SKAGGS · GLEN HANSARD  
TOM ANDERSON · DAVE ALVIN**

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Finding tuning machines for the harp guitar's sub-bass strings is still a real problem. Since there are no off-the-rack solutions, builders have to learn to improvise, as evidenced by the confusing kludge of gears on this one-of-a-kind, Larson-built guitar. The numbers on the buttons suggest that the Larson brothers couldn't figure out how to arrange the sub-bass strings, so they put the tuning machines wherever they would fit and marked them so the player could puzzle out which string he was tuning.

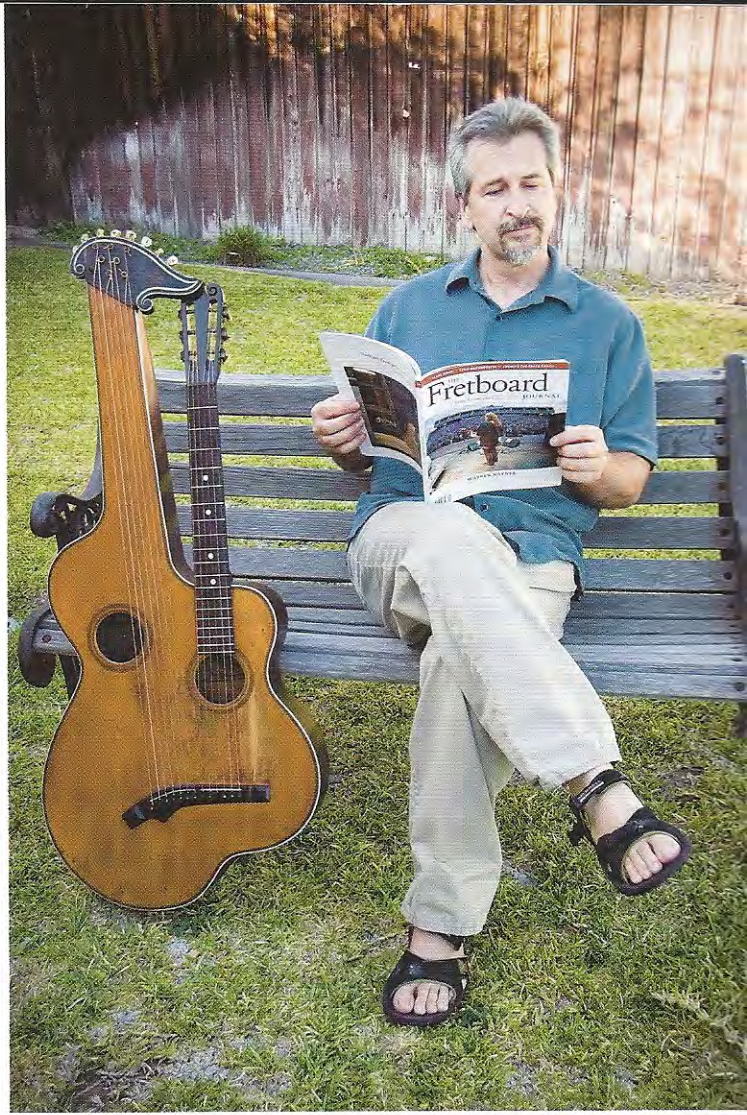
body and a long, pointed version of what we've come to identify as a harp arm. In his 1898 patent, that arm had grown sub-bass strings, and the American harp guitar was born. William Dyer, a Minnesota music publisher and musical-instrument distributor, was quick to see its commercial possibilities, especially if given a more appealing name, so he obtained a license to sell Knutsen's invention and called it the Dyer Symphony Harp Guitar.

In 1901, Dyer had the foresight — or, perhaps, good fortune — to engage the Larson brothers to build his Knutsen-designed harp guitars. Swedish immigrants Carl and August Larson brought to the design an innovative spirit and singular aesthetic vision that looked backward to their European roots and forward to the possibilities of the New World. Intricate purflings and graceful curves merged with angular inlays to produce what many harp guitarists still view as the apex of the

instrument's form. The final ingredients in the archetypal American harp guitar had materialized.

Among vintage-guitar cognoscenti, the Larsons loom large. Outside that inner sanctum, though, they remain unknown, mostly because they never produced instruments under the Larson name; instead, they sold them through distributors who, like Dyer, affixed their own brands.

A few years after Knutsen patented his harp guitar, the Gibson company followed suit with its own patent based on their carved archtop guitars. Gibson's Style R, with six sub-bass strings, and, later, Style U, with 12 sub-bass strings, featured carved tops and backs and a rod running from body to elongated headstock under the sub-bass strings. Though the Gibson harp guitars — especially the earlier incarnations with a scroll-shaped tailpiece — have their advocates, many found them best suited to be, in Darcy Kuronen's words, "a conversation



piece hanging on the walls of numerous guitar shops.”

During the 1920s, the harp guitar caught the fancy of two classes of American musicians: Vaudevillians came to appreciate its novelty value, and guitarists jumping on the mandolin-orchestra bandwagon thought its extended lower register was the perfect prescription for competing with their orchestra mates’ trebly instruments. Still, the harp guitar in the United States was soon to suffer the same fate as its European cousin had a couple of decades earlier. Whereas the classical guitar pushed the European harp guitar from center stage, it was the archtop that grabbed the spotlight in America.

By about 1930, most harp guitars had suffered the same fate as the Martin tossed behind the barn. Those spared an agrarian outcome would languish under beds, in attics and on music-store walls until the 1980s, when a musical visionary resurrected the harp

guitar and stormed across musical boundaries for the remainder of his tragically short life.

## Rebirth

“I WENT TO SEE MICHAEL,” says Muriel Anderson, “because I was intrigued by the harp guitar’s possibilities in my music. I thought that it would be great for playing some Bach — the counterpoint aspects — and would be good for some of the things I was writing, too. When I got to the club, I discovered that everyone else had green-dyed hair and piercings. Well, everyone but one couple sitting at a table, so I sat with them. And that’s how I met Bob and Carol; they had come to see Michael play his Dyer harp guitar, too.”

Bob and Carol Hartman had just embarked on their journey into the world of Carl and August Larson,

**LEFT:** A harp guitar by Settimio Gazzo, an Italian luthier who built his creations in Genoa in the early part of the 20th century. The most famous player of Gazzo’s guitars was Pasquale Taraffo, perhaps the finest harp guitarist who ever lived.

**RIGHT:** Gregg Miner, the “pope” of the harp-guitar community, takes a break from playing one of his many instruments. The instrument next to him is an unusual Larson-built guitar with a Stahl label. This guitar’s “body within a body” design resembles that of a patent that Maurer took out in 1912, but the hollow arm under the sub-bass strings recalls the Dyer Symphony Guitar. The Larson brothers, of course, made guitars for all three companies.

# Spankers and Pluckers

## WHO ACTUALLY PLAYS THESE THINGS?

“**WE ALL DISCOVERED** the harp guitar independently,” says John Doan about the instrument’s contemporary players, and it took those players a while to discover one another. “We were in our own musical universes, unaware of what the others were doing with the instrument.”

Fortunately, those universes eventually intersected at the first Harp Guitar Gathering in 2003. Why would independent actors gravitate to the same arcane instrument? “It really represents the natural evolution of the guitar,” Doan suggests. “As players and composers begin to look for different sounds and textures in their music, they naturally seek to play in lower and higher registers.”

Why, then, in both Europe and the U.S., did it fall out of favor after a relatively short period in the limelight? “That’s a predictable cycle in music,” says Doan. “After something complex, composers, players and listeners yearn for something simpler.” Will contemporary harp-guitar music suffer that same fate? “I suppose that it could, but there is such diversity in modern harp-guitar music that I think it will stand the test of time.”

In case Doan is wrong, and we’re witnessing another musical shooting star, you might want to snap up the offerings from a few of harp guitar’s leading lights. You can do no better than to start with **JOHN DOAN**’s music. He’s a classically trained music professor who played lute and classical guitar, and he paid dues in rock bands before his evolving tastes led him to the harp guitar.

The harp guitar has been Doan’s primary instrument for two decades; his experience and training have given him a unique perspective. “I’m always looking for the narrative to the music,” he says. Start with Doan’s most recent album, *The Lost Music of Fernando Sor*, and work



Muriel Anderson is one of the harp guitar’s major advocates.  
JOHN THOMAS

your way back. For a visual account, check out his informative *In Search of the Harp Guitar* DVD and *Primal Twang: The Legacy of the Guitar*, which also features Doc Watson, Mason Williams, Albert Lee, Dan Crary, Andrew York and others.

Even if you don’t know much about harp-guitar music, **STEPHEN BENNETT** will strike you as an amazingly versatile musician. His harp-guitar compilation weaves its way through gorgeous, slow melodies,

a journey that would yield *The Larsons’ Creations*, the definitive book about the brothers’ instruments. Michael Hedges was expanding the guitar’s vocabulary, and, naturally, he saw the harp guitar as a vehicle for doing just that. “That night,” recalls Bob Hartman, “we were knocked out. We had no idea who Michael really was or what someone could do with a harp guitar. It also turned out that he was a really nice young man.”

Hedges had studied classical guitar at Phillips University and composition at the Peabody Conservatory

before he turned his attention to the steel-string and harp guitar and developed what he variously called “heavy metal,” “acoustic thrash” and “deep tissue gladiator guitar.” His innovative use of two-hand tapping and slap harmonics coupled with his compositional aesthetic inspired a new generation of acoustic guitarists.

And, as Muriel Anderson’s tale illustrates, his resurrection of the long-dormant harp guitar captured the imagination of guitarists yearning for new directions.

Sadly, Michael Hedges died in a car accident, in

funky harp slide and even some work on the eBow (a magnetic device that vibrates the string over which it's held and produces infinite sustain). Like me, try to wait patiently for the upcoming tribute album to his 1909 Dyer harp guitar.

The "pope" can play, too. Regardless of the season, you owe it to yourself to check out **GREGG MINER**'s two-CD masterwork, *A Christmas Collection*, on which he played all of the 100 instruments in his Miner Museum of Vintage, Exotic and Just Plain Unusual Instruments — including about 10 harp guitars. (His collection has since grown.) "It was about 10 years ago," muses Stephen Bennett, "when I was performing in California. As I pulled out my harp guitar, I tossed out my usual bit of humor: 'So, how many harp guitarists are there in the audience tonight?' Two people raised their hands. One was Gregg Miner."

To experience the sensitive side of contemporary harp-guitar playing, give *Harp Guitar Dreams* a whirl. Miner produced the compilation, which also includes contributions from the likes of Muriel Anderson, John Doan, Andy Wahlberg, Andy McKee and Alex de Grassi.

**ANDY WAHLBERG** bills his performances as "music and comedy," though his superb musicianship elevates them way beyond the novelty genre. Somehow, Wahlberg has managed to integrate alternating bass lines, chord melody, improvisation, harmonica playing, scat singing and Mills Brothers-style "mouth trumpet" into his harp-guitar act. ("I just didn't know any better," he explains.) And if he senses that the audience is anything less than absolutely riveted to his performance, he'll start tap dancing while doing all of the above. (You really have to see this to believe it; try YouTube, for now.) His CDs *Collections* and *Memorabilia* will give you a worthy sampling of his talent.

Speaking of YouTube, join the 20 million of your friends who have checked out one of **ANDY MCKEE**'s videos. That's right, 20 million. This sometime harp guitarist is now touring the world, thanks in no small measure to the online repository of pop culture that has enabled his talent to shine on computer monitors around the globe. You can find his harp-guitar playing on "Into the Ocean" and "The Friend I Never Met," from his debut CD, *Art of Motion*, as well as the title track to his second CD, *Gates of Gnomeria*.

The great **MURIEL ANDERSON** has also recorded a CD dedicated to the harp guitar, *Harp Guitar Christmas*. "I try to remember the advice that Stephen Bennett gave me," she says. "Just because you've got those bass strings doesn't mean that you have to play them all the time.' So I try to make sure that I'm using them to serve the music."

**STACY HOBBS** seamlessly weaves the swing and syncopation of ragtime into everything he plays on the harp guitar. "We've all seen the picture of the unknown, black harp guitarist with his suit on and holding a C chord," notes Hobbs. "You know he's ragging!" Hobbs has three CDs featuring the harp guitar: *Awakening of the Spirit*, *Christmas Melodies* and *Beggars' Dance*.

The music of **WILLIAM EATON** seems to have emerged fully formed from the desert terrain that surrounds Phoenix, Arizona — and so do the harp guitars he builds himself. (Eaton serves as director of Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery.) Eaton's website sets the scene: "Combining structure with improvisation, he has written scores for chamber orchestra and Sonoran desert ensembles, ambient landscape music, lyric folk songs, indigenous trance music and soundtrack scores..." A versatile instrument indeed.

1997, at the age of 43, but the harp guitar didn't die with him. One of those to keep the instrument alive was Muriel Anderson, who caught the harp-guitar bug at that Hedges performance. "That night," says Anderson, "Bob asked me to record some of his grandfather's instruments for a companion CD for his book."

Hartman bundled up a gaggle of Larson instruments, including a couple of Dyers, and took them to Anderson, a onetime fingerpicking champion at

Winfield. "He brought the instruments down to me the day before I did the recordings. That's the first time I had played a harp guitar." After that first encounter, Anderson thought she'd work the harp guitar into her music more often, but it would be a decade before she began regularly playing it in her performances. "It brings a lot to my music," she says today, "and I'm still finding ways to use its potential to expand my music."

Perhaps the most influential figure among modern harp guitarists is the accomplished Stephen

Bennett. Like Anderson, Bennett has won a Winfield guitar-playing championship, though Bennett won for flatpicking. (He later placed third in Winfield's fingerpicking championship, making him the rare player to place among the top three in both contests.) "It's funny," remarks Bennett, "because I'm actually a better fingerpicker than flatpicker."

Bennett's introduction to the harp guitar was a bit less accidental than Anderson's. "My first harp guitar was my great-grandfather's," Bennett told me in a recent conversation. In the 1920s, Edgar Pierce, his 1909 Dyer Style 4 and his band, the Hoot Owls, played on radio and in saloons on the West Coast and in the frozen lands of Alaska's Yukon. (The band's vocalist, Mel Blanc, would later go on to fame as the voice of nearly every character in Warner Bros. cartoons. Who wouldn't love hearing Daffy Duck backed by a harp guitar?)

Bennett was born in Oregon in the 1950s, but moved east at a young age, leaving behind his extended family and that harp guitar. "We traveled out to Oregon to see my relatives once in a while, and I remember seeing the Dyer at my uncle's house in 1965. My mother also used to talk about it sometimes, so I knew it existed." Bennett didn't get a chance to play the Dyer until 1988, when he accompanied his mother on a visit to her ailing mother. Bennett's bond with the Dyer was immediate and obvious. "I got it out of my uncle's basement and started fooling around with it. My uncle said, 'It's yours. It belongs with you!'"

The history of that particular instrument and the harp guitar in general pointed Bennett on an uncharted musical path. "As far as I knew," says Bennett, "the harp guitar had no established repertoire. And, for all intents and purposes, my great-grandfather's Dyer was a brand new instrument." For precisely 20 years — from the death of Edgar Pierce in 1968 until Bennett's seemingly preordained reunion with the guitar in 1988 — it had lain in an Oregon basement. "It's amazing," marvels Bennett. "It was perfect then, and still is today. No belying, great neck angle . . ."

As anyone who has ever picked up a harp guitar would understand, the first question Bennett posed to himself was how to tune those sub-bass strings. "I obviously had no point of reference," he says, "so I just tuned them to suit what I wanted to play on the instrument." Today, if you acquire a harp guitar, someone will ask

you if you are going to use "Bennett tuning." Bennett typically tunes his sub-bass strings GABCDG, low to high. Some years later, Bennett would learn of other tuning traditions, but, as he observes, "I'd already figured out what works best for what I want to do."

"It's a bit like having a sustain pedal from a piano combined with a minimalist bass player," he adds. "The additional strings start singing immediately, triggered by the sound of the regular six strings. Then, when the thumb reaches down and grabs the occasional bass note, you really have some extra depth to the sound."

Working with sub-bass strings, however, can be a challenge, Bennett cautions. "Because those strings ring forever, you can't be too busy with them." Like with all harp guitars, Bennett will occasionally retune the sub-basses to conform to the key at hand. "I never retune more than three of them and I never change them by more than half a step. If you are constantly retuning, it will get in the way of playing music."

At times, Bennett has played modern re-creations of the Dyer, but he recently re-embraced his great-grandfather's guitar once he realized it was about to turn 100 years old. "It just seemed like the right thing to do," Bennett says wistfully. The urge to do right by the old Dyer has led Bennett to an intriguing recording project, a collection of period songs from the Dyer's heyday. "I've arranged tunes," he says, "that were composed between 1814 and 1916, with an old-sounding original that I wrote for my aunt thrown in."

As we talk about his Dyer Style 4 and my Dyer Style 7 — less than 200 serial numbers apart — Bennett waxes poignant. "This conversation makes me think about Harp Guitar Gathering Two. Bob Hartman brought some of his grandfather's tools to the Gathering. It was fascinating to hold in my hands the tools that Bob's grandfather used to make my great-grandfather's guitar."

Bennett is held in such regard in the harp-guitar community, and this colloquy shows why. Not only is he a gifted musician, but he also has a deep connection with his instrument that can be heard and felt in what he plays. That there is a harp-guitar community is due to Bennett. (If Miner is the pope of the Harp Guitar Gathering, Bennett is the Creator.) Bennett conceived of the Harp Guitar Gathering back in 2002 as a chance to reach out to his dedicated and sizable following.

friends and fellow harp guitarists Gregg Miner, John Doan and Andy Wahlberg helped make the first one a reality the following year.

“Ah, could this be providence?” you ask. The Larson brothers tweak Knutsen’s design, Dyer puts an example in the hands of Bennett’s great-grandfather, and Bennett uses it to become the pied harper. Plus, it was the very same Dyer Style 4 that started me on my own harp-guitar quest a decade ago.

Strolling through the lobby of the Nashville Sheraton during the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society’s annual gathering, I heard a sound I’d not encountered before. Sitting before a small crowd was a man playing the strangest guitar. I elbowed my way to the front and I sat there for about 40 minutes, until the player let me try the instrument for a few moments. I was enchanted. It was Stephen Bennett and his great-grandfather’s Dyer Style 4.

## No Rules

OVER AT THE MARYLHURST chapel, the future of the harp guitar has just ascended the dais. Mike Doolin, a remarkable luthier and musician, is playing his days-old electric R&B Harp Guitar, accompanied by Tim Bryson on sax. Doolin completed this 13-string wonder just in time for the Gathering, and earlier today, he walked us through its birth (via PowerPoint presentation). Doolin designed and built the body in Gibson ES fashion, constructing his own laminates and even using the glues that Gibson used in its original 1950s creations. He built all but the tuners himself; he machined and anodized the tailpiece and wound the pickups.

Onstage, the duo sounds more like a trio. Doolin comps a bit like Freddie Green, plays bluesy lines a la Kenny Burrell and shows some of Pat Metheny’s chromatic chops (and ES tone) — adding the thump of Stanley Clarke-style electric bass all the while. When I later tell him that the instrument sounds like a P-Bass/ES-175 fusion, he smiles broadly: “Yeah, that’s what I was going for!”

The tuners for those seven sub-bass strings have levers next to them — also Doolin inventions. “Those are sharpening levers,” he explains. “I first made those for Muriel.” It seems Anderson wanted to adjust her sub-



bass tuners on the fly, so Doolin got out the machining equipment and produced these elegant levers that, at the flip of a switch, raise the pitch of a selected string a half tone.

Doolin and a number of other talented luthiers continue to experiment with modern interpretations of the acoustic harp guitar. Are you thinking that a dozen strings are just not enough? Ask your luthier to add a few banks of super-trebles. Fred Carlson might even build you a Sympitar, with strings that run through a chamber in the guitar’s neck and vibrate sympathetically — like those on a sitar.

You see, we’ve come full circle. Because there are no rules, the design of the harp guitar is — and has always been — limited only by the player’s imagination and the builder’s ingenuity. So, go ahead, let your musical muse guide you to as many strings as your digits can handle. But if you grow frustrated with attempting to tame the thing — as it morphs from the instrument of your dreams to the source of your nightmares — please don’t chuck it behind the barn. Pass it along to someone who’s crazier than you are. 🎸

Not all harp guitars were built to be played in the standard manner, as this Michael Dunn creation shows. Inspired by the guitars made by Chris Knutsen in the 1920s, Dunn has placed the sub-bass strings on the treble side, unlike the standard harp-guitar design, which places the sub-bass strings on the bass side. To make things even more confusing, Dunn added some extra treble strings on the bass side.

JOHN THOMAS

# The Power of





# the Symphony

For a devoted community  
of players and builders,  
the harp guitar  
still rings true

BY JOHN THOMAS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIE WARREN



**I'M SITTING ON A STAGE SURROUNDED** by 50 other musicians, and together our guitars sport about 700 strings. We're all roughly in tune (in my case, very roughly) and playing the traditional song "The Water Is Wide" as autumn sun streams through stained glass behind me. The sound is absolutely cacophonous, so I've laid my left ear on the "harp arm" of my Dyer harp guitar in an attempt to play along.

Carl and August Larson, who built my many-stringed hybrid nearly a century ago, knew what they were doing, unfortunately. That harp arm works like a reverberation chamber; every out-of-tune note I play is amplified, mixed with dissonant yet sympathetic tones from the poorly tuned sub-bass harp strings and injected into my ear canal. The result is dizzying, painful and, well, pretty funny.

As I drop all pretense of playing chords or those confounding sub-bass strings and I fumble through the melody, bending each note into approximate tune, I know that at least one other person onstage finds this as amusing as I do. Next to me kneels Stacy Hobbs, one of the handful of seasoned performers scattered among the pretenders. Playing a modern replica of the beast that I'm attempting to tame, Stacy has to hold his considerable guitar chops in check while he looks at me and shakes with laughter.

There is a positive side to the cacophony: None of the other players seem to have noticed my, uh, perfor-

mance. Or maybe, like me and, I suspect, Stacy, they're experiencing singular delight in taking the stage with a group of similarly iconoclastic music lovers. Whatever the reason, and despite my presence, everyone onstage is beaming.

The audience of about 200 in the Marylhurst University chapel in Portland, Oregon, looks on in amazement, astonished not by our artistry, but by our audacity: What are all those folks holding, and have they obtained the proper zoning waivers? Though astounded, the audience embraces our chaotic onstage antics with good humor, catalyzed by our obvious camaraderie — not to mention two hours of enchanting, challenging music. Even my playing cannot spoil this party!

It's Saturday night at the Sixth Annual Harp Guitar Gathering, the brainchild of harp guitarist Stephen Bennett. The event is dedicated to players, builders and admirers of this unique creation, which adds fretless harp strings to a conventional fretted guitar. During the past two days, stunning players have coaxed from these instruments "new musical effects of wonderful beauty," to quote the century-old ad copy for the Dyer Symphony Harp Guitar; luthiers have demonstrated new approaches for producing "the power of the symphony." But, alas, I've also confirmed that, just as I feared, the extra strings do not make playing harp guitar any easier.

Thanks to the charms of my 1917 Style 7 Dyer Symphony Harp Guitar, finding a willing teacher is

All of the musicians at the Sixth Annual Harp Guitar Gathering take the stage to play "The Water Is Wide." Our scribe is seated toward the right wearing a yellow sweater and holding his poorly tuned Dyer Style 7.  
COURTESY OF JOHN THOMAS



easy. I recently acquired the Dyer courtesy of my friend Bob Hartman, an author, guitar collector and a true magician when it comes to locating instruments built by his grandfather and granduncle, Carl and August Larson. Beginning in the late 1880s and working until the early 1940s, the Larson brothers were, as vintage-guitar expert George Gruhn has put it, “the most innovative fretted-instrument designers” of their time.

The Larsons’ Dyer-brand harp guitars represent perhaps the pinnacle of their art, so I need twist no arms to convince world-class players like Andy Wahlberg, Muriel Anderson, Stacy Hobbs and Don Alder to give me a series of impromptu lessons. I simply hand them the guitar and ask, “What does one do with this thing?”

## Range Rovers

**HARP GUITARISTS APPROACH** their instruments with what can only be characterized as religious zeal. Thus, it’s fitting that if you want to learn about the harp guitar, you’ve got to make a pilgrimage to see the “pope.” As fate would have it, he has just taken the dais at the Marylhurst chapel.

The pope is Gregg Miner, a musician and collector at the center of the harp-guitar universe. Harp-guitar enthusiasts awarded him his religious moniker a couple of years ago, and he has since worn it — figuratively and, occasionally, literally — in good fun. Out of respect for

the setting, Gregg has forgone the title (and the head-gear) at this year’s Gathering; still, he takes on a rather devout air as he launches into an update of harp-guitar discoveries of the past year.

There is no one in the world more knowledgeable about harp guitars than Gregg Miner. He has devoted himself to this arcane world since discovering the instrument a couple of decades ago. He’s creator and editor of the comprehensive Harpguitars.net website, as well as curator and caretaker of the Miner Museum of Vintage, Exotic and Just Plain Unusual Musical Instruments. (He played nearly all of them on his 1995 extravaganza, *A Christmas Collection*.)

If you secure a private audience with the pope (or simply visit his Internet hub), you can see just how the instrument has permutated: A traditionally shaped guitar with extra strings from body to headstock morphs into a guitar with two necks, one fretted and one unfretted. From there, the harp guitar grows a hollow arm under the unfretted strings, then grows another, smaller arm. It would lose the second arm and become attached to a conventional harp, then grow several necks. Finally, it melts into a mold for what might pass as an alien weapon.

However, this has not been a chronological progression; each of the above examples can be European or American in origin and may date back a couple of centuries or a couple of months. It’s safe to say that this art form has not evolved in linear fashion. Regardless of



how many strings, necks or bodies an instrument may have, the one defining characteristic of the harp guitar is that it has some combination of fretted strings and at least one unfretted string. Put that unfretted string on the low end of the tonal spectrum and call it a sub-bass string; put it on the high end and call it a super-treble.

With limitless possibilities in terms of body shape, number of strings, number of necks and even number of bodies, it is up to the player to set the parameters. A player may want five, six or 12 sub-bass strings, perhaps an octave or two of super-treble strings, and those strings will be placed in particular positions depending on whether the player intends to use her thumb, her fingers or the palm of her hand.

Players can pluck, snap, slap or tap these extra strings, but the strings will also vibrate sympathetically when the conventional guitar strings are played. Play a slow, gorgeous melody on the fretted neck, and those extra strings will add unimaginable overtones.

Get that thumb working like Larry Graham or Jaco Pastorius and add the funkier of bass lines to your arrangements. Grow those fingernails and generate harp-style accompaniment on the super-trebles. The music played on these things knows no boundaries.

## Early Adopters

WE NOW RECOGNIZE why someone might have wanted to fuse harp and guitar — to increase his instrument's range, by one, two or even three octaves — but who was the first luthier crazy enough to succumb to this temptation? The luthier's name, if not psychiatric status, has been lost to history, though we do know that instruments meeting our definition of a harp guitar began appearing in France and Italy as early as the 16th century. These creations were lute-family derivatives such as the Italian chitarrone and French theorbo, both long-necked bass instruments with additional, unfretted strings running from body to headstock.

The inventions appeared in response to a new musical application: Players needed an extended range to play the basso continuo opera works, such as Caccini's *Le nuove musiche*, that were prevalent in the Baroque period. In some cases, builders were motivated by popular tastes rather than musical substance. In *Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar*, the book that

accompanied the Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibit of the same title, Darcy Kuronen describes a curious 18th century aesthetic in which designers melded classic motifs with objects of the day. In the case of stringed instruments, this meant highly decorated, hyphenated hybrids like the lyre-guitar, harp-lute, harp-lute-guitar and, of course, the harp-guitar.

Most of these instruments were more harp than guitar; they were viewed as novelties by serious musicians and experienced the short lifespan typical of most fads. But the fundamental need persisted for a fretted stringed instrument with an extended lower range, so a few serious creations trickled out over the next couple of centuries.

In France in the 1760s, for example, modern six-string guitars with a theorbo-style headstock materialized (and were named for the French lute-like instrument from which they descended). In Vienna, Europe's harp-guitar epicenter, Johann Stauffer built a number of harp guitars in the early 1800s — while a young Christian Frederick Martin was toiling in his shop. When Stauffer retired from lutherie in 1840, his shop foreman, Johann Schertzer, continued the tradition, and he apparently perfected the design, winning a guitar-building competition with his “10-string guitar” in 1856.

From the 1820s through the 1850s, Rene Lacote would build harp guitars for virtuoso players like Ferdinando Carulli and Napoléon Coste. They and other European virtuosos, such as Johann Kaspar Mertz and Luigi Legnani, used these innovative instruments to produce complex, inventive music.

One virtuoso built his own harp guitars: Italy's Mario Maccaferri, in the 1920s, before his association with Selmer and Django. In 1908, Maccaferri attended Luigi Mozzani's lutherie school in Cento, Italy. Mozzani had built a lyre-like harp guitar that featured a body extension on either side of the fretted neck. Maccaferri's harp guitars, though, bore little resemblance to his master's creations.

Maccaferri's earliest harp guitars look roughly like classical guitars, but have the Maccaferri-style cutaway and three sub-bass strings running from body to headstock. A few years later, Maccaferri would be depicted in a photograph playing what looks like a gut-string (Maccaferri's preference) version of his later Selmer design, only with a harp arm and four sub-bass

**OPPOSITE:** A Mozzani Chitarrarra lyra a due bracci (“double-armed lyre-guitar”). Luigi Mozzani was a luthier, musician and composer who was active in Italy in the first half of the 20th century. He ran a laboratory-school in Cento where he trained musicians and luthiers. His most famous pupil was Mario Maccaferri, who designed the renowned Selmer guitars. The stand upon which the instrument rests allows the musician to play standing up — and it also acts as an extra resonator.



strings. Maccaferri was a formidable guitarist, seen by some critics of the day as Segovia's equal, and recordings, including a few of him playing that nine-string harp guitar, support the claim. Alas, Maccaferri's performance career ended in 1933, when he broke his wrist — notwithstanding a short stint performing as the masked “unknown guitarist,” apparently chagrined by his impaired skills.

Curiously, while Maccaferri's own harp guitars did not emulate his mentor's designs, he treasured Mozzani's creations. In the 1980s, archtop maker extraordinaire John Monteleone befriended Maccaferri and built a dozen guitars with him. I recently asked Monteleone whether Maccaferri played harp guitars in his later years. “Oh, yes,” said Monteleone. “He referred to them as lyra-guitars, as did his mentor, Luigi Mozzani.”

In fact, Maccaferri had five Mozzani harp guitars, which he had purchased from the 1951 liquidation sale of Mozzani's workshop and lutherie school. At the end of their guitar-making sessions, said Monteleone, Maccaferri, then in his 80s, would “drag one of those lyra-guitars out and play for us — myself and his wife, Maria — whilst waiting for the coffee and dessert.” Despite his advanced age and maimed wrist, Maccaferri still played daily and was an excellent player. “He would tune the harp strings to particular notes for various pieces and change them as needed. They were usually a tonic, sub-dominant and dominant tuning, with perhaps a few chromatics as required.”

To experience European harp-guitar music at its zenith, click over to [HarpGuitars.net](http://HarpGuitars.net), where you'll find a video of Pasquale Taraffo recorded at New York's Gallo Theater on December 19, 1928. (It's in the members-only section of the site, but certainly worth the \$10 admission.) Taraffo was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1887 and was quickly recognized as a prodigy. About 1910, he commissioned Settimio Gazzo to build a harp guitar with eight sub-bass strings. After 40 consecutive concerts in Barcelona, Taraffo was dubbed “El Dios de la Guitarra.”

This video is testimony to the accuracy of that title; you're beholding the world's first guitar god. With the Gazzo resting on its integral pedestal, Taraffo blazes

the musician. His left hand frets intricate chord voicings, bass lines and lightning-quick runs; his right hand is just unbelievable, with all five digits equally active.

The video is an artifact of Taraffo's six months in residence in New York City. He would later traverse the country, taking his considerable skills to California. He toured the world throughout his final decade, sometimes aboard transatlantic cruises, before he died on tour in Argentina in 1937.

Taraffo, as it turned out, may have had good reason to tour the Americas. The harp guitar was experiencing a decline in serious European guitar-playing circles. In the mid-1800s, the classical guitar designed by Antonio de Torres began to capture the artistic imagination of continental guitarists. By the 1880s, the harp guitar had largely become a historical artifact.

## New World, Old Idea

ACTUALLY, BY THE TIME Taraffo toured the United States, the harp guitar had come and almost gone. When C. F. Martin immigrated to the United States in 1833, he seemingly left behind Johann Stauffer's love of the harp guitar. Yet, around 1850, someone convinced Martin to build his first instrument with sub-bass strings, and Martin's company would go on to build approximately 10 in the next few decades. About 10 years ago, one lucky soul discovered, on an abandoned farm, one of the few harp guitars constructed by C. F. Martin and Company, perhaps the first harp guitar built in the New World.

A number of luthiers stepped into the void that Martin left when he abandoned the instrument. In 1890, Denver's Arling Shaeffer obtained the first U.S. patent for what looks like a harp guitar, and the following year, Chicago's Hans J. Hansen obtained a patent for an instrument actually designated a “harp-guitar,” but neither of these men produced enough instruments to leave behind any surviving examples, let alone impact the course of harp-guitar design.

A few years later, though, one man would design an instrument that would set off a seismic shift in harp-guitar concert. Chris Knutsen, living in Port Townsend,

**READY TO TACKLE** the many-stringed beast, are you? Unfortunately, you can't drive down to your local GuitarMart and pull a few from the wall; your favorite vintage shop is unlikely to have a Dyer or Knutsen in stock, and your preferred boutique probably won't have a modern harp guitar on hand either. What to do? If you like 'em new and shiny and made to your liking, you have many options.

How about a 39-string acoustic Harp-Sympitar with MIDI capability? **FRED CARLSON** has combined harp guitar with sitar by stringing sympathetically vibrating strings inside the instrument's neck.

**MIKE DOOLIN** will help you get in touch with your inner harp guitarist — especially if it has a split personality. Are you a Ron Carter/Jim Hall type? Try Doolin's archtop Jazz instrument. More like Bootsy Collins/Jimmy Nolen? Go for the R&B model. On the quieter side, try a nylon-string harp requinto (tuned a step and a half higher than a standard guitar) like the one Doolin built for Muriel Anderson. Or take the conservative (for a harp guitarist) path and choose a double-cutaway, steel-string harp guitar with between 12 and 20 strings.

In 1986, **JEFFREY ELLIOTT** built (with the late John Sullivan) John Doan's memorable 20-string instrument. Designed to approximate a piano sans keyboard, all strings sit on the same plane and are evenly spaced. (Elliott calls it the "first modern harp guitar.")

If there's a maker whose visual designs match Carlson's sonic creativity, it's **MICHIHIRO MATSUDA**. His hope is that the "artistic influence" in his creations "will inspire guitarists to even greater creative heights." He may have met that lofty goal with the one harp guitar that he's built to date. Swooping, angular lines combine with rods running under each of the harp strings to accommodate sliding nuts that alter tuning and scale length.

The folks at **MERRILL AND COMPANY** build accurate copies of Stephen Bennett's Dyer Style 4 and call it, appropriately, the Stephen Bennett Signature Harp Guitar. **DUANE NOBLE** will build you an instrument in the classic Dyer mold — or he might fill in those head-stock slots, add a cutaway and swap out those sub-bass



4:1 banjo tuners for some 18:1 guitar tuners, producing a more modern sound, look and feel.

Sometimes, you can get the entire history of the harp guitar, presented with a modern twist, at a single shop.

**STEPHEN SEDGWICK** builds harp guitars in the early European form (without the arm), including a copy of an 1880s Torres 11-string harp guitar. He also builds Dyer/Knutsen-inspired models, including a modern take on the instrument, called the Sedgwick One Arm Harp Guitar.

You've got to admire the courage (and question the sanity) of **KATHY WINGERT**, who built herself a harp guitar for the express purpose of joining the many-stringed horde in the Harp Guitar Gathering's finale. (A couple of other Wingert players joined Wingert and her Wingert onstage.) These days, when Stephen Bennett puts down his great-grandfather's Dyer, he picks up his Wingert.

Luthier Mike Doolin plays one of his own creations at the Harp Guitar Gathering. JOHN THOMAS