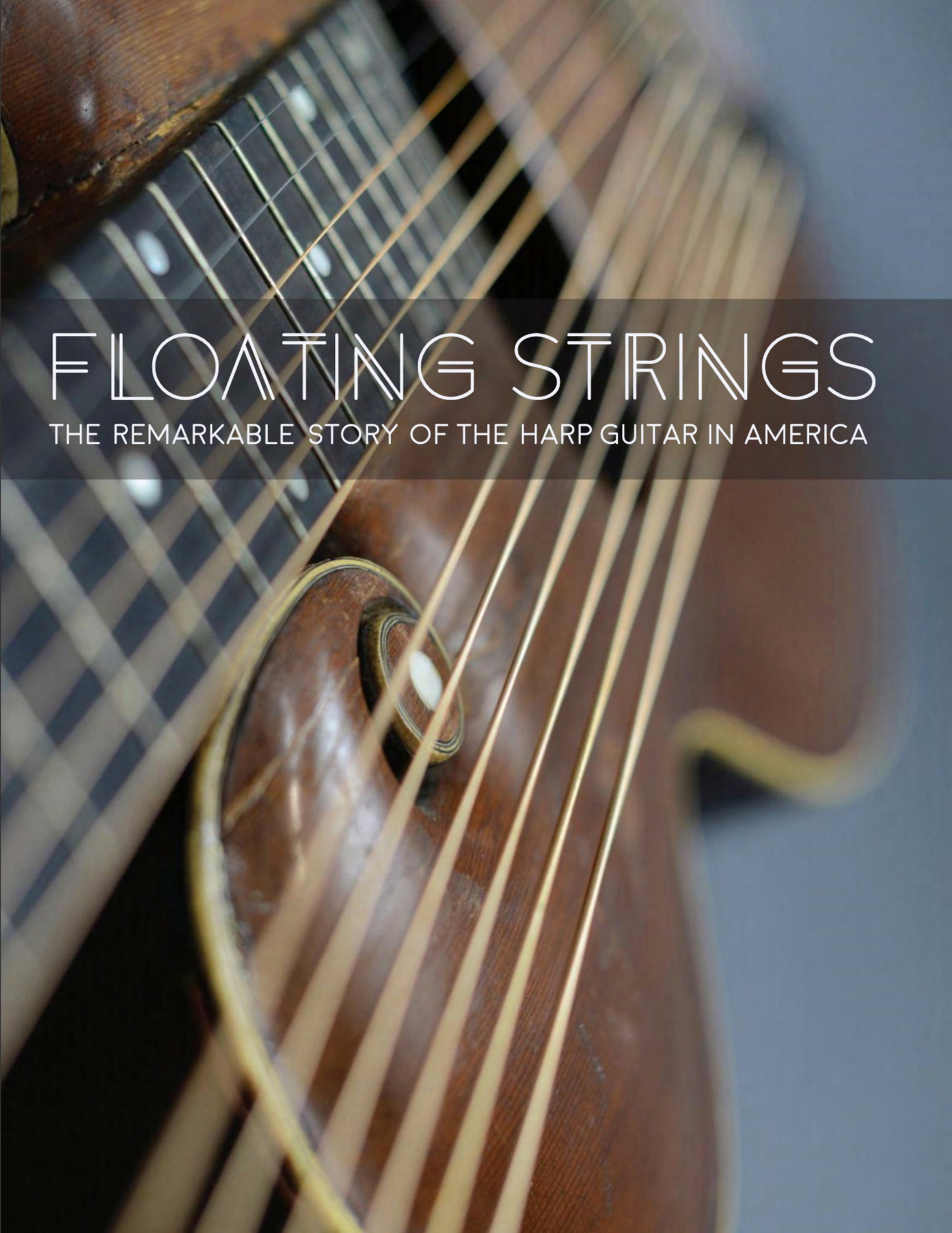


A close-up, artistic photograph of a harp guitar. The image shows the intricate arrangement of strings, some of which are bundled together. The fretboard is visible, showing frets and the wood grain. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the wood and the metallic sheen of the strings. A semi-transparent dark band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title and subtitle in white text.

FLOATING STRINGS

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE HARP GUITAR IN AMERICA

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HARP GUITAR IN AMERICA

OCTOBER 14, 2017 - APRIL 29, 2018

museum
OF MAKING **music**
CARLSBAD, CALIFORNIA



This publication accompanies the exhibition

FLOATING STRINGS

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE
HARP GUITAR IN AMERICA

OCTOBER 14, 2017 - APRIL 29, 2018

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COVER
Style R Harp-Guitar
c. 1903
Orville Gibson
Kalamazoo, Michigan

BACK COVER
"Zither" Harp Guitar
c. 1910–1913
Chris Knutsen
Seattle, Washington

LEFT
12-string Guitar
c. 1840–1870
Otto F. Selling (attributed)
Stockholm, Sweden



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FOREWORD

Throughout history, musicians and instrument makers have turned to technology to find solutions to their musical problems. Three hundred years ago, adding floating strings to a fretted instrument was an appropriate solution for musicians who wanted to increase the bass range of their guitar to achieve their musical goals. Known today as “harp guitars,” these instruments traveled through time, crossed continents and oceans, fell in and out of popularity, and defied standardization. Ironically, in today’s world of advanced technology and countless multi-string guitar options, harp guitars are technically no longer necessary; however, their popularity is on the rise.

All of us at the Museum of Making Music (MoMM) are dedicated to sharing the storied history of music instruments and products—from invention, to creation, to market—as a canvas to enrich people of all ages and backgrounds. Through our exhibitions and educational immersion opportunities, we aim to inform and inspire as we reveal how musical instruments and products color our personal experiences, connect lives, impact popular culture, and yes, change our world.

In this special exhibition, *Floating Strings: The Remarkable Story of the Harp Guitar in America*, we explore what might be, for many, a little-known instrument—the harp guitar.

Curated by scholar and harp guitar expert Gregg Miner, the exhibition and this companion catalogue feature over 40 instruments selected to illuminate the craftsmanship and boundless creativity found in these unique instruments. Arranged in chronological order by era, the narrative explores the intriguing journey of the instrument’s rise and fall, and rise again, throughout 20th and 21st century America. It also encourages deeper thought about the instrument’s roots and well as its future.

So welcome to the world of harp guitars! We hope you enjoy the ride.

**Carolyn Grant, Executive Director
Museum of Making Music**

A division of the NAMM Foundation, the Museum of Making Music opened at NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) headquarters in March, 2000. MoMM is the only museum of the music and sound products industry, and is the only museum worldwide that focuses on the ecosystem of music making from 1900 to present day.



FLOATING STRINGS: THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE HARP GUITAR IN AMERICA

BY GREGG MINER

What is a Harp Guitar?

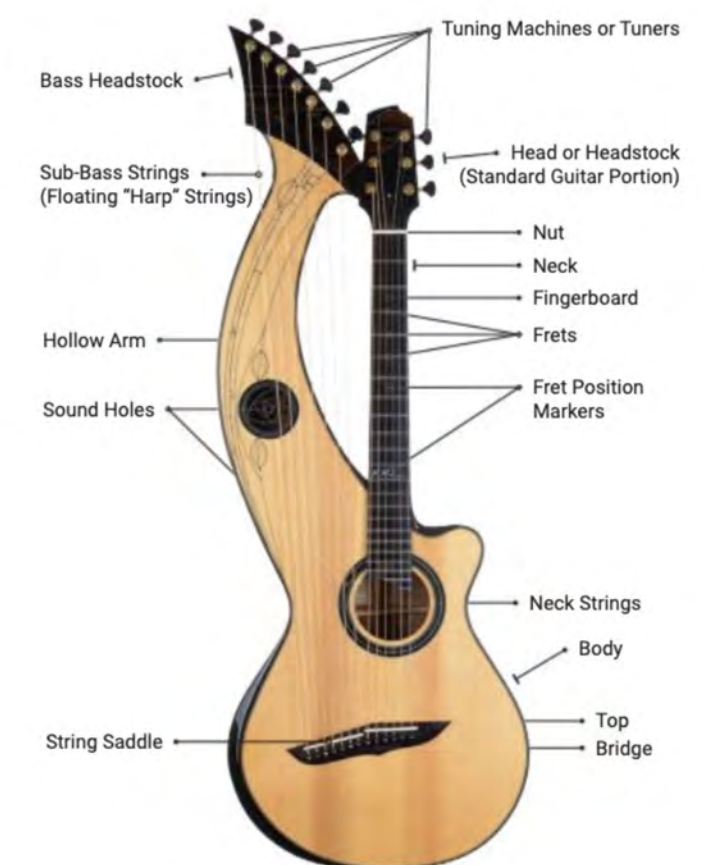
"A guitar, in any of its accepted forms, with any number of additional "floating" unstopped strings that can accommodate individual plucking." GREGG MINER, 2004

Harp guitars come in many shapes, sizes, and forms. They do have, however, a common defining element. In addition to the fretted neck strings, there are additional strings which are not fretted, i.e. floating. These strings can be attached in a variety of ways, and are typically plucked with the thumb or fingers.

The harp guitar wasn't originally referred to as such. Depending on the country, historical period or configuration of instrument, they were called by many different names, and sometimes given no special name at all. They were simply "guitars."

The term "harp guitar" as we understand it today was invented and popularized in the United States. Who gave it this name? The candidates appear in this publication, and with the most successful manufacturers championing the new name, it soon became common vernacular.

With the globalization of our planet through the internet, it was only a matter of time before "harp guitar" became an acceptable alternate term for any guitar with these defined features. And in 2014, "Harp Guitar" was finally given its own full entry in *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (Gregg Miner, author, 2014).



Harp Guitar Forms

A harp guitar can have as few as one floating string or as many as the inventor/designer can fit onto their instrument. While the variations of adding extra strings are boundless, the most common forms are shown here.

THEORBOED

The unlikely term “theorboed” has become both an adjective and a verb, meaning to extend an instrument’s head in any fashion in order to attach additional floating strings. It is derived from *theorbo* (left), a form of lute with floating bass strings that saw huge popularity in the 17th century. This circa 1895 Nunez 11-string guitar from Buenos Aires is a very subtle theorboed form of harp guitar, as the headstock simply expands a bit to accommodate the extra unfretted bass strings.



Theorboed form



DOUBLE NECK

A closer look at the circa 1900 Carlson double neck harp guitar reveals the fact that its twelve sub-bass strings cannot possibly be stopped against the second “neck,” but instead float above it. These open strings provided the late 19th-century American guitarist-turned-harp guitarist with an extra bass note for every chord while adding a full octave to the instrument’s register.



Double Neck form

HOLLOW ARM

The dramatic and instantly recognizable extension of the body on instruments like the early 1900s Dyer forms a hollow “arm” that serves several purposes. It adds resonance and volume with the additional soundboard area and cavity’s air volume, its headstock serves as an ideal anchor for the sub-bass strings, and most obvious, its extraordinary visual factor.

BODY ATTACHMENT

Rarely used for bass strings, body attachments are common for super-trebles and other strumming or effects strings, strung across

the body in any direction. A body attachment usually occurs in combination with another form, so jazz virtuoso Phil deGruy’s 1997 Guitarp is a rare variant.

HARP FRAME ATTACHMENT

In this form, floating strings are attached to an open framework that is either part of or affixed to the guitar’s body and neck. Found in an astounding variety of shapes, styles, and structures, it lends itself to harp-like or sculptural forms, like luthier Fred Carlson’s incredible 2012 creation for musician Jeff Titus.



Dyer hollow arm harp guitar, early 1900s



Phil DeGruy’s Guitarp, 1997, built by Ralph Novak.



Fred Carlson’s harp guitar for Jeff Titus, 2012

European Precursors

The first true harp guitar can be traced back to at least 1659, when Giovanni Battista Granata of Italy wrote a series of pieces for a *chitarra atiorbata*. The manuscript cover included a rudimentary engraving of the presumed instrument, a “theorboed guitar,” with seven floating bass strings below the guitar’s then-standard five neck strings. While unusual for a guitar of this era, floating strings were common, and even essential, on the *theorbo* and other large lutes of the 17th century. Wound string technology was a couple hundred years off, and so increasing a string’s length was the only way to obtain lower pitch. As it was impossible to include these longer bass strings on the fretted neck, a series of additional individually plucked open diatonic bass strings (called diapasons) was the solution.

During the next hundred years, various experimental instruments made brief appearances. There are even surviving plans for theorboed guitars by Antonio Stradivari. The oldest surviving instruments we now classify as harp guitars date to the last quarter of the 1700s and include obscure French theorboed guitars along with other fascinating hybrid instruments, none of which attracted a repertoire, and thus passed into oblivion.



The legitimacy of a guitar with floating bass strings really came into its own from 1810–1860. During the Early Romantic guitar period concentrated in Vienna and other cultural centers, a succession of virtuosos on the recently-standardized six-string guitar created both a repertoire and an audience for the instrument. The best of these players performed on guitars with one to four floating bass strings. Vienna was also the center of excellence for guitar production. Luthier Johann Georg Staufer and his contemporaries produced a variety of improvements on what would eventually be termed “bass guitars,” meaning standard guitars with additional floating bass strings.

At the turn of the last century, a considerable percentage of guitarists throughout Europe and Russia continued to play guitars with floating basses. Meanwhile, in several Italian regions, a virtual explosion of harp guitars in increasingly spectacular forms was instigated by a new wave of guitar virtuosos, whose influence ensured the Italian harp guitar’s popularity well into the mid-1900s.

However, it was the 1880s *Schrammelgitarre* (named for its iconic use in the Schrammel brothers’ groundbreaking Viennese quartet) that begat an entire industry of *kontragitarre* builders. They filled the increasing demand for “contra” or “bass” guitars, instruments that provided transportable chromatic accompaniment for legions of ensembles across the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. There is still an appetite for this beloved Viennese music with its accordions, violins, and zithers. Its tradition—complete with requisite harp guitar—has survived for over 125 years!

A typical pre-1900 Schrammel quartet



Instruments of Note



11-string Guitar 1860

Johann Scherzer, Vienna

Johann Scherzer (1802–1870) was the most important pupil of J.G. Stauffer, and for several decades led the way in providing harp guitars with more and more floating bass strings. This original five-bass specimen displays the iconic Viennese form that morphed from a guitar with two to four extra bass strings, to one with seven to 11 chromatic bass strings. It is somewhat of a transitional anomaly, as the Early Romantic guitar virtuosos never ventured beyond four basses (a Scherzer 10-string won the famed 1856 Makarov Guitar Competition in Brussels), and later ensemble accompaniment players required a minimum of seven chromatic basses.



12-string Guitar c. 1840–1870

Otto F. Selling (attributed), Stockholm, Sweden

This delightful early Swedish harp guitar with its beautiful scroll combining the two necks, bears all the hallmarks of Otto Selling, builder of at least four harp guitars that are known to survive today. Two of them feature a biased scale like this one, where the fretted neck's bass strings are longer than its treble strings—likely for the same reason as today's fan fret guitars: to subtly improve the tone. It is rare to see a harp guitar with frets on the sub-bass neck. These frets were not intended to be fingered, however. They were either for decoration or for affixing a *capotasto*, a clamping device that would raise the pitch of the set of open bass strings for different keys.





14-string Guitar c. 1910–1920

Settimio Gazzo (attributed), Genoa, Italy

This purposely theatrical harp guitar design was the brainchild of Pasquale Taraffo (1887–1937), arguably the greatest harp guitarist to have ever lived. Commissioned by the young virtuoso harp guitarist while in his early twenties, this model has eight chromatic basses (D down to G) and feet built onto the body in order to bolt to a special stand. The stand, which would tilt on a long floor brace, allowed Taraffo to play standing up in the 1,000-seat theaters in which he frequently concertized throughout Italy, Spain, and South America.

Though Gazzo was a relatively crude builder, he was the only luthier Taraffo ever patronized. Taraffo's influence lasted for decades, and dozens of Gazzo harp guitars are now known, though none as elaborate as this one, a duplicate of Taraffo's own.



The great Pasquale Taraffo in 1929

Chitarra Lyra c. 1910–1920s

Luigi Mozzani workshop, Cento, Italy

The spectacular harp guitar designs of Luigi Mozzani (1869–1943) featuring one or two hollow arms encircling the head of the neck, almost beggar the imagination. Even more astounding is the fact that they were copied from instruments designed and built by Friedrich Schenk in Vienna as early as 1839. Mozzani most notably changed the neck to float on six special bolts that could be individually adjusted to fine-tune the neck angle and twist. Though complicated and prone to long-term maintenance issues, it was an extremely clever and effective solution to a potential problem with all guitars. Both he and his famous pupil Mario Maccaferri (1900–1993), included this mechanism on all their harp guitars. The increased surface area of the top, along with the additional air volume throughout the hollow resonating cavities, were meant to improve the tone and volume. This is a questionable claim, though their sound is indeed wonderful. Mozzani deliberately left the soundboards of his guitars bare, as he felt applying finish would dull the sound. Sometime just before or after Mozzani's death, Maccaferri acquired several harp guitars from his mentor's estate, including this one. Dissatisfied with the bass tuners, he plugged the holes and installed new geared tuners on the existing extension, as seen in the photo of Maccaferri with the instrument.



Mozzani in his prime with one of his creations.



Mozzani's prize pupil Mario Maccaferri in the 1950s.

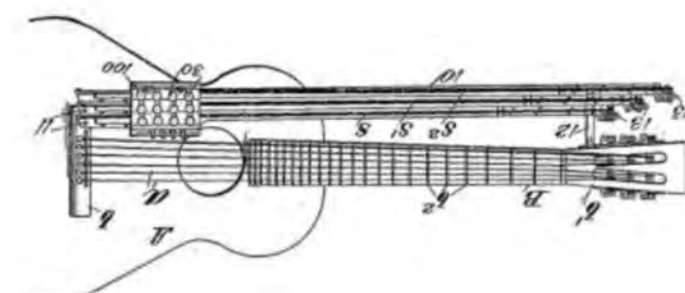


American Inventions 1885–1910

We can assume that during the 1800s, some of the thousands of European harp guitars made their way to America in the hands of immigrants. But no record of such an occurrence—nor public awareness of such—has yet been found. The only documented production of harp guitars in America prior to the 1880s was a curious series of four two-neck or 10-string guitars custom ordered from C.F. Martin in 1859–1860 by a Virginia guitar teacher. Martin's familiarity with Viennese guitars with extra bass strings can be inferred from his apprenticeship there. However, Martin didn't continue with floating string guitars, and harp guitar production lay dormant for at least 25 years.

Then, in the late 1880s, brand new harp guitars abruptly appeared, and a flurry of development began in the Midwest and escalated throughout the 1890s. Clues point to a long-forgotten Kansas City firm, J.W. Jenkins' Sons, having instigated this new American harp guitar gold rush. Meanwhile, in the Pacific Northwest, a curious hollow arm guitar appeared, designed by Norwegian Chris Knutsen. Seemingly as an afterthought, he subsequently added floating bass strings to that arm, and the American hollow arm harp guitar was born.

Beginning in 1890, over two dozen patents for harp guitars or hollow arm instruments would be granted in the United States.



Nicola Turturro's design of a mechanism that could be attached to a standard guitar, transforming it into a fully-adjustable chromatic harp guitar.

America's First Production Harp Guitar

Perhaps it's only fitting that it was smack dab in the middle of America—specifically Kansas City, Missouri—that America's first new harp guitar was likely born. J.W. Jenkins' Sons Music Co. is virtually forgotten today, but after its founding in 1878, quickly grew to become the largest musical instrument firm in the Midwest outside of Chicago, surviving into the 1970s. In addition to the Jenkins firm's prominence back in the day, Kansas City was said to have had "more performers on the banjo, mandolin and guitar than any other city of its population in the country." (*The Cadenza*, May/June, 1895)

It was at Jenkins' Sons music store that a traveling businessman named J. Hopkins Flinn arrived one day in 1885 with a brand new invention that he hoped to demonstrate to the resident guitarists. It was a standard guitar, onto the neck of which Flinn had nailed a piece of wood. This held three violin tuners to which he had strung floating open bass strings tuned to C, D, and G "for good harmony in those keys." The guitarists in attendance—all professionals—had never before seen such a concept and remained unimpressed.

"The first demonstrations were quite amusing, but the extra string attachment did not meet with a very cordial reception," as reported in *The Cadenza*. Subsequently, Flinn furnished Jenkins with a better design with six additional bass strings, and the result was what is believed to be the first harp guitar put into production in the United States, a claim the Jenkins firm would indeed later make.



Hypothetical reconstruction of the Flinn harp guitar.



The Imperial Mandolin, Guitar and Banjo Orchestra from Kansas City, Missouri, pre-1895.

A remarkable pre-1895 photograph (above) of The Imperial Mandolin, Guitar and Banjo Orchestra of Kansas City, Missouri, appeared in *The Cadenza*, the first major periodical devoted to the Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar—or "BMG"—community. All the mandolins, guitars, and harp guitars were "Harwood" brand instruments, identifiable by the white rectangular block at the end of their fretboards. They were probably built in Boston by John C. Haynes & Co. under a five-year contract during that period. The harp guitar on the far left is believed to be the first production Harwood harp guitar, after Flinn's design. Flinn later played a 12-bass harp guitar, quite likely another Harwood like their larger model on the right. No Harwood Flinn-style harp guitars are known to survive, although three different historical photographs displaying them have appeared. It is believed the instrument was quickly abandoned for more logical models with longer bass strings.



A young gentleman in this late 1890s college glee club photo holds a beautiful example of the first Harwood harp guitar.

Instruments of Note

Harwood Harp Guitar c. 1890–1900

J.W. Jenkins' Sons, Kansas City, Missouri

For the first five years of this model's production, it was built in Boston by John C. Haynes & Co. This was an extraordinarily large guitar—of any type—before 1895. Its 18-inch wide soundboard enabled the designers to experiment with twin sound holes. Solid Brazilian rosewood sapwood was selected for the sides and the “HARWOOD” name is engraved in the white block between the last two frets. Though state of the art when built, its 18 friction tuners make an early harp guitar like this extremely difficult to keep in tune.



J. W. Jenkins' Sons Catalog, c. 1895–99, in addition to featuring the first production harp guitars in America, this early catalog also contained the earliest known use of the term “sub-bass strings,” which a Jenkins employee may have introduced. The term denotes that the extra floating strings are below the pitch of the guitar neck's lowest bass note.



Regal Contra Bass Guitar

c. 1898–1901

Wulschner & Son, Indianapolis, Indiana

The curiously short sub-bass strings of the Regal harp guitar long puzzled vintage guitar researchers until the instrument fell into place within the story of Flinn and the Jenkins Company (see page 16). Made by Wulschner & Son in Indianapolis, a city well within the reach of the Harwood's influence, it is nearly identical in concept and design to the first Flinn-style Harwood, though with greatly increased body size, an immediate trend in American harp guitars. Several specimens are known, identical except for level of trim and fret-board inlays. It remains a mystery how the player strung these sub-bass strings and managed to play them properly, as they are exceedingly short, yet tuned to America's six-bass standard FGAB-CD, reaching almost an octave below the lowest string on the neck.



Roy Butin (1877–1943) was one of a small handful of American harp guitarists to record his music through a series of 1908–09 cylinder and 78rpm recordings in which he accompanied the best mandolinists of the day. His style was a simple bass and chords rhythm accentuated by plucking the sub-bass strings on his Regal harp guitar.



Sheet music featuring the Regal Contra Bass harp guitar, 1900.



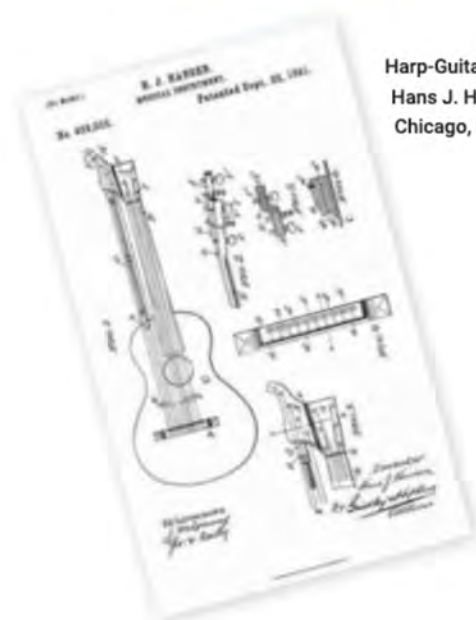
Harp-Guitar c. 1891

Hans J. Hansen, Chicago, Illinois

Nothing is known of Hans Hansen beyond his distinction of having the first patent specifically naming the invention a "harp-guitar." The curious timing and naming of the instrument—along with his Danish lineage—hints that Hansen may have been part of the Jenkins Company's Flinn harp guitar project (see page 16). He describes the

harp attachment as a "means for providing from one to six or more additional strings." It is a beautifully made instrument, with several unique and attractive design elements.

The strings attach to the bridge by looping through from the front and over, rather than through bridge pin holes drilled through the top; this was actually the primary feature of Hansen's patent.



Harp-Guitar patent, 1891
Hans J. Hansen,
Chicago, Illinois

Contra Bass Harp Guitar c. 1900

Joseph Bohmann, Chicago, Illinois

During the 1890s, Joseph Bohmann (1848–1928) of Chicago proclaimed himself year after year "The World's Greatest Musical Instrument Manufacturer." He backed up this claim with awards at seven U.S. and international expositions, and indeed, his \$125,000 reward for a mandolin or guitar better than his own was never claimed. With ten patents in three decades—including one for his infamous internal "tone rods" (omitted in this specimen)—his instruments stood apart from all others. This harp guitar is actually one of his tamer models, though its huge contra bass body—named for its bass resonance, not the extra strings—was certainly attention-getting when introduced in the mid-1890s. The imposing 19 x 24 x 6 inch body features Bohmann's typical heavily-domed back of three-ply wood consisting of maple sandwiched between two thin veneers of Brazilian rosewood, which he formed over large iron molds. Bohmann, who emigrated from central Europe, may have been aware of his homeland's *bassgitarren* with floating strings. If so, he chose to radically depart from that tradition by joining the new American movement of huge, metal-strung harp guitars. The first Bohmann harp guitar appeared in an 1890 newspaper ad, timing that suggest he may have been reacting to the Jenkins-fueled Midwest harp guitar race.

This custom instrument has 10 strings on the neck, which may have stemmed from an 1896 patented guitar invention that doubled the low four strings with an additional octave string, a precursor to the common 12-string guitar of today..



Joseph Bohmann with his children and a standard 18-string contra bass harp guitar, c. 1895





Harp Guitar c. 1890–1895

Dahlman Mfg Co.

Built by Charles Akeson, Minneapolis, Minnesota

No sooner had the harp guitar been “invented” in the Midwest than American guitar players and builders began to tinker with options. One novel variation, patented in 1892 and built from about 1891 to 1895, intended for the player to pluck the four sub-basses with the left hand thumb while fingering the normal first position chords on the neck. The right hand could then simply pluck or strum as any six-string guitarist might. Henry Dahlman’s harp guitars (built and often labeled by Minneapolis neighbor Charles Akeson) featured a delightfully ergonomic design with the floating basses arranged in a tight little semi-circle for convenient plucking access. Though surprisingly easy to play, the model never caught on, though specimens from its short five-year production are not uncommon.



Guitar teacher, composer, and publisher A. A. Holmgren, whose studio was in the same building as Dahlman, heavily promoted this instrument during its short run.

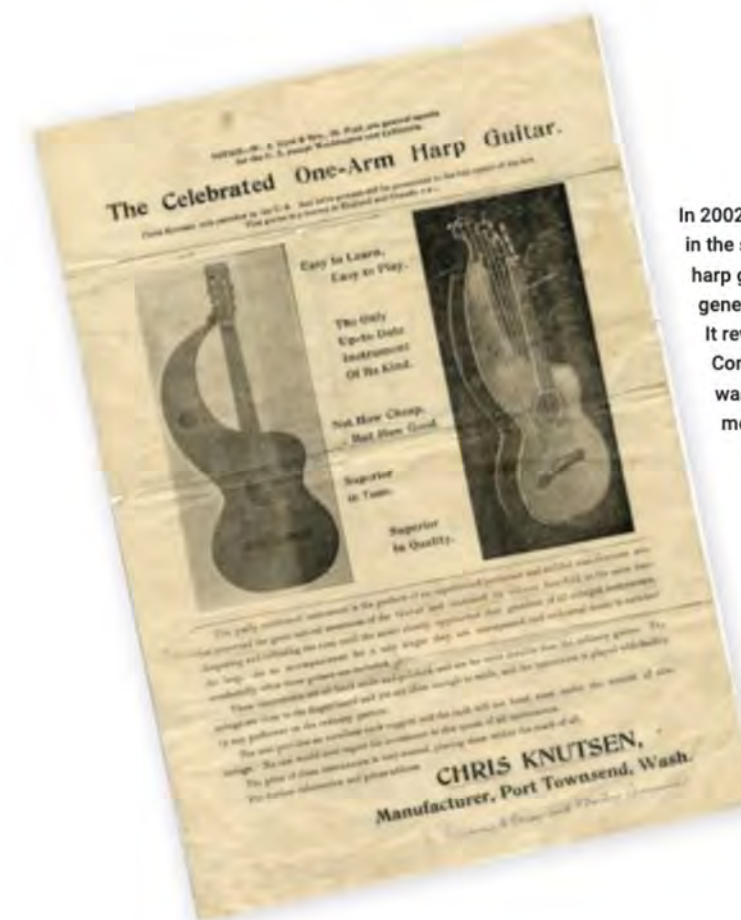


One-Arm Guitar c. 1896–1898

Built by Otto Anderson for Chris Knutsen

Port Townsend, Washington

This unassuming six-string guitar—not a true harp guitar, but named such due to its patented harp frame design—gave rise to virtually all the hollow arm harp guitars popular today. The design patent was granted to Norwegian immigrant Chris Knutsen in the Pacific Northwest in 1896, and would go by many names, including the One-Arm Guitar, Slipper Guitar, Short-Arm Guitar, and One-Arm Harp Guitar. An amateur musician and dubious craftsman, Knutsen had many of his earliest instruments built by fellow Port Townsend resident Otto Anderson, whose finer workmanship and construction elements can be seen here. In 1898, after a year or two of success with these instruments, Knutsen patented a new design, one with a longer arm that also served to anchor two, three or five (and occasionally still zero) sub-bass strings. The American hollow arm harp guitar was born!



In 2002, this large flier was discovered tucked in the strings of an original 1890s Knutsen harp guitar, handed down through generations of Chris Knutsen’s relatives. It revealed that the W. J. Dyer & Bro. Company in Saint Paul, Minnesota was distributing Knutsen’s instruments as early as 1899.





18-string One-Arm Harp Guitar c. 1898 Chris Knutsen, Port Townsend, Washington

Soon after Knutsen was granted his 1898 patent, he abandoned that model in favor of experimenting with a bass headstock shape that would better accommodate his now-preferred five sub-basses, tuned GABCD (low to high). He also began to use louder metal strings. This early specimen includes the first use of the new Symphony harp guitar headstock design, while also introducing a Knutsen novelty that would truly set his instruments apart: seven short treble strings strung on the body opposite the sub-basses. Knutsen himself used them on his personal left-handed harp guitars. How they were tuned and utilized is still unknown, but musician John Doan, owner and initial discoverer of this rare and remarkable harp guitar variant, chose to tune them to the seven-note diatonic scale, a logical decision that would reap unforeseen rewards (see page 44).



Norwegian transplant Chris Knutsen (shown here with his family), reinvented the hollow arm in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1890s. His instruments not only caught the eye, but they opened up a whole new world of stunning tone and volume.

Style R Harp-Guitar c. 1903 Orville Gibson, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Much has been written about the instruments of the Gibson Company, a brand that has remained popular for well over a century of America's musical history. Yet the company's namesake, Orville Gibson, has remained an enigmatic cult figure, with few details known until quite recently. This important instrument, labeled serial #2578 by the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Mfg. Co., is believed to have been built entirely by Orville himself. It was recently discovered during a period of renewed research into his life and work. It is the only fully original harp guitar known having all the features of Orville's 1898 mandolin patent and matching the harp guitars in the original 1903 Gibson catalog—models that the company would soon revise.

This Style R, with six sub-bass strings (tuned FGABCD) and its dramatic silhouette scroll headstock, is the sole surviving example of its kind. As in the patent, the back, sides, and a portion of the neck are carved from one solid pieced-together block of wood, while the entire neck under the fingerboard is hollow to enhance the instrument's "resonant and vibratory qualities." The separate top is thick and flat across the large soundboard surface, with just one small original brace—yet Orville's celebrated hand carving of the graduations near the rim yield an incredible Hi-Fi speaker-like response for all 12 strings.

Though Orville undoubtedly became aware of the Jenkins-instigated harp guitars of the Midwest, it's possible that he too may have invented a harp-guitar wholly on his own. Our clues include the fact that in the 1880s, Orville was both an accomplished guitarist and harpist (an uncommon combination), and was creating elaborate new instruments of "fantastic shapes." One was an unusual harp guitar that stood upright when not in use, possibly the same "guitar of large size and peculiar form...with a double set of strings," mentioned in an 1888 Kalamazoo newspaper clipping. Thus, Orville may have built his first harp guitar about the same time that Jenkins brought out their first production instrument.



Style R in Gibson's first catalog of 1903.





"1901" Harp Guitar c. 1901–1914

C. Bruno & Son, New York, New York

This first harp guitar from the long-established New York company C. Bruno & Son was nothing too spe-cial at this late stage of the harp guitar game—except for its 12 strings on the neck! This was one of the very first American guitars—of any type—with all six strings on the neck doubled in the same configuration as today's popular 12-string guitars (the lowest four courses are strung in octaves with the remainder in unison). Other harp guitar luthiers would also double strings on occasion—notably Chris Knutsen, who would sometimes double just one neck course, or three, or all six. One gets the impression that these early harp guitar builders were anxious to get more tone and volume out of their instruments any way they could, including larger bodies, more strings, and then even doubling strings.



Page from Bruno's 1901 catalog



Harp Guitar c.1912

Wm C. Stahl, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Patented by August Larson

Built by the Larson brothers, Chicago, Illinois

W.C. Stahl of Milwaukee was a prominent music publisher and "maker" of plucked string instruments, and interestingly, one of the witnesses of the Flinn harp guitar in the late 1880s. His eventual instrument line included various Stahl harp guitars built by the Larson brothers, who were also building the popular high-quality harp guitars for W.J. Dyer & Bro. (see page 32). One of Stahl's offerings was a highly unusual model patented by August Larson in 1912. His invention had a second body for the six-string neck inside the larger harp guitar body. It is a fully separate resonating box with its own back and sides, sharing the top and outer wall with the main body. While the resonant top is activated by all strings, each body compartment has its own soundhole and subtle tone particularities for the two banks of strings. Curiously, just three of the several known specimens with the patent's double body shape include the internal body.



X-rays of a similar Larson patent harp guitar.



Heyday in America 1900s–1930s

By 1900, it was clear that American harp guitars were making an impact. Even though highly unusual, players responded to the extra strings, new musical effects available, and their visual impact with often huge, oversized bodies increasingly strung in steel rather than gut. In a world of small, soft-toned six-string parlor guitars, they stood out in almost every way, particularly in the fact that most were *loud*. Thus, players within the growing American banjo, mandolin, and guitar movement (where amateur players gathered in musical social groups) took to them like moths to a flame. A dozen banjos or a handful of mandolins could easily drown out the dainty six-string guitar...but not the harp guitar!

Eventually, nearly every guitar builder or manufacturing company would offer a harp guitar. *The Cadenza* and *The Crescendo* (successive publications of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists, which emerged in 1902) were full of ads and testimonials, and articles frequently made mention of them, with the editor H.F. Odell himself testifying to the superiority of the harp guitar in one lengthy and detailed 1909 article.

While solo use remained rare during this period, they soon became indispensable as accompaniment instruments in groups of every size, from duos to huge mandolin orchestras. Like most American plucked-string instruments, they also served the needs of every musical taste, from serious classical settings to outdoor musical picnics, popular records, and novelty vaudeville acts—the latter being a match made in heaven!



Top: All members of this c. 1910 mandolin orchestra played fretted instruments by the Gibson Company, including four of their huge harp guitars. Above: The Hawaiian music craze exploded in 1915 and Chris Knutsen responded by creating his "New Hawaiian Family" (see page 38). This quintet includes his harp mandolin, convertible upper treble point harp steel guitar, and a Weissenborn-shaped harp steel with sub-basses and super-trebles.

Instruments of Note



Harp Guitar c. 1896–1900

H.A. Weymann & Son, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Weymann company was just one of many early producers of fine American banjos, mandolins, and guitars, and like nearly every manufacturer, soon introduced their own harp guitar models. Little documentation of their instruments exists (and none for harp guitars), so musical instrument collectors and historians post and share information to compare and analyze features to identify and better date instruments. Similarly, tunings were rarely



documented. Presumably the 12 sub-basses on this impressive model descended chromatically from the low E string on the neck—just like the Gibson on the opposite page. There are just three Weymann harp guitars known to survive, and this specimen may be the only harp guitar in the world with both necks fully inlaid with wire and shell.

Style U Harp-Guitar c. 1905

Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Mfg. Co.
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Formed in late 1902, the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Mfg. Company was an immediate success with its offering of Orville Gibson-designed mandolins, guitars, and harp guitars. It soon offered the full range of mandolin sizes (including mandola, mando-cello, and even mando-bass), which rapidly expedited the burgeoning mandolin orchestra craze. The entire country was soon full of hundreds of all-Gibson clubs, under the banner "Everyone a Gibson-ite!"

With the company's aggressive marketing campaign—including an ingenious Teacher-Agent program and monthly pictorial ads in *The Cadenza* and *The Crescendo* magazines—Gibson harp guitars quickly became the most popular and omnipresent harp guitars in America.

This model is the largest harp guitar that the Gibson Co. ever made, with a 21 inch wide body, an extra-long 27 ¼ inch scale length, and 12 sub-basses, descending chromatically to reach an octave below the neck's lowest string. The longer scale was intended to put increased tension on heavily-gauged strings in order to drive the thick carved top, providing incredible projection. One of Orville's two harp guitar designs for the first catalog, this specimen shows the company's changes to Orville's original construction methods (see page 25). Gone is the chunky wooden pan-shaped frame, replaced by a normal carved back and bent sides. The neck is of standard construction, as is its attachment to the body, while the carved soundboard profile is more gradually curved—still providing power, but losing much of Orville's resonant tone. In 1908, this model would undergo an extensive redesign, replaced with a smaller, more modernized Style U. The new model would sell spectacularly well for the next decade.



The Savoy Trio at New York's Genesee Hotel, with a long-scale 12-bass Style U, c. 1904.

Symphony Harp Guitar, Style 8

c. 1910

W.J. Dyer & Bro., St. Paul, Minnesota

Built by the Larson brothers, Chicago, Illinois

W.J. Dyer & Bro. in St. Paul was the largest full-line music store west of Chicago, shipping goods all over the country. They entered the harp guitar market by 1899 with an unusual choice: they marketed the increasingly popular instruments Chris Knutsen was building by hand in Port Townsend, Washington (and subsequently Tacoma). No two of Knutsen's harp guitars were exactly alike, and although spectacular sounding, his workmanship was highly inconsistent—often

within a single instrument. Add to that his suspected inability

to meet demands, and the Dyer Company must have soon realized they needed a better supplier. Licensing Knutsen's patented design, they contracted Carl and August Larson, who had recently opened their own shop in Chicago,

to build them. The choice was kismet. The Larson brothers immediately improved upon Knutsen's Symphony harp guitar and within a couple years had redesigned it, creating the famous "cloud" bass headstock so recognizable today. They would add a sixth bass string to Knutsen's original five, tuned to standard FGABCD, advertised as being retunable to achieve every flat or sharp key. Strung with silk and steel strings, it was the finest sounding flat top guitar—harp guitar or otherwise—available, and holds that reputation even today among vintage instrument connoisseurs. The Larsons were never credited, but Dyer marketed the instrument aggressively in *The Cadenza* and *The Crescendo* periodicals and the instrument became hugely popular, second only to Gibson's harp guitars. Made in five levels of decoration, the Style 8, with its abalone binding and "tree of life" inlay on the fretboard was their finest offering. Today it is the holy grail for harp guitar collectors and players alike.



The Cadenza ad, 1910

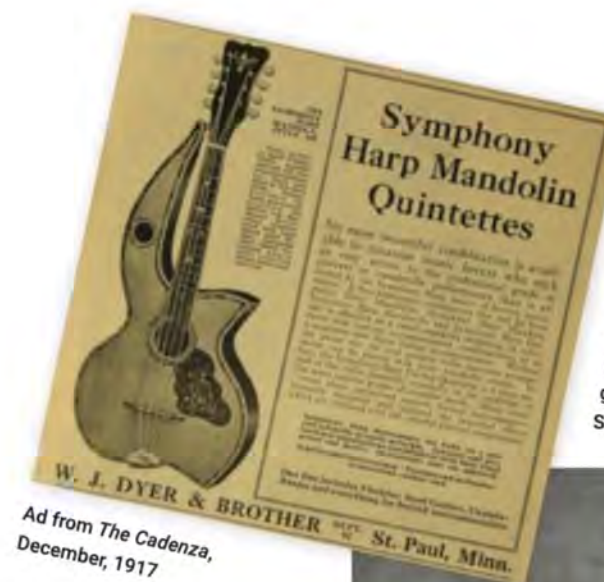
W. J. Dyer & Bro.
Symphony Harp Guitars
catalog, c. 1905

Symphony Harp-Mandolin, Style 35 c. 1916

W.J. Dyer & Bro., St. Paul, Minnesota

Built by the Larson brothers, Chicago, Illinois

From 1895 through the teens, several builders created harp-mandolin designs—so-called because of the similar hollow arm, even though they had no extra strings. The Larsons added theirs to the Dyer line in 1907, tweaking the design three times to result in this form, and offered it in four levels of trim. In 1917, Dyer introduced their harp-mandolas and harp-mandocellos to entice mandolin orchestra players. Though aggressively advertised, extremely few of the larger sized members of Dyer's "Symphony Harp Plectral Choir" were ever built.



Ad from *The Cadenza*,
December, 1917



Below: Before W. J. Dyer & Bro. introduced their "Symphony Harp Plectral" line with the larger mandolin family sizes in 1917, trios of two harp mandolins with harp guitar were popular with Dyer aficionados. These lucky gentlemen both play the top-of-the-line Style 50 with vine inlay on the fretboard.



Short-scale Harp Guitar c. 1907

Chris Knutsen, Seattle, Washington

While the Larson brothers were taking Knutsen's hollow arm design to new heights for W. J. Dyer & Bro., Knutsen himself took the opportunity to take his designs and inventions to new peaks of unbridled imagination. He changed the body shape of his harp guitars to include a dramatic flare on the lower bass bout, and sometimes also on the kitty-corner bout. During this period, he made a large percentage of his harp guitars in smaller size, with a shorter scale length of 19 to 21 inches, in order to cater to smaller statured players, including women who now formed a significant percentage of harp guitar customers.



A Salvation Army musician dwarfs a dainty short-scale Knutsen.



"Zither" Harp Guitar c. 1910–1913

Chris Knutsen, Seattle, Washington

In his 1906–1913 Seattle period, Knutsen brought back his treble harp string feature, still using seven strings, but installing them with a harmonic curve opposite those of his late 1890s examples. As always, no two Knutsen instruments were exactly alike, and many were radical experiments. On this custom creation—perhaps a customer's idea, perhaps Knutsen's—instead of the normal sub-bass strings on the hollow arm, he used that area to fit two additional short string banks in addition to the treble side's seven strings for a total of three chord banks. At least, that's how it was strung up when discovered, the ancient and possibly original strings varying from very thick to very thin, implying tunings of wide chords. Restrung by the owner, it provides three strummed open chords, as on an autoharp or fretless zither, tuned to beautiful, dense arpeggios.



One of Knutsen's loyal customers of his Seattle-era harp guitars with super-trebles was Bert Amend and the members of his band of one-armed musicians.





Sub-Bass Guitar c. 1911–1912

Shutt Mandolin-Guitar Co.

Prototype or employee instrument built by Frank Oppitz, Topeka, Kansas

The story of Albert Shutt reads like the story of David vs. Goliath, with the Topeka music teacher fearlessly trying to compete with the Gibson Company to produce his own similar mandolins and guitars. Evidence points to Shutt being one of the legions of Gibson Teacher-Agents who gave music lessons, led a local mandolin club, and sold his members the increasingly popular Gibson instruments. Apparently believing he could “build a better mousetrap” while turning a bigger profit, he designed and started building his own Gibson-like line of instruments in 1909. Coming out with a full catalog around 1913, he did a bit of advertising and waited for the orders that never came. His ideas and instruments were not without merit, and Shutt would be granted nine patents within 18 years. These and many instrument features illustrate his clearly-intended competition with Gibson’s instruments. Some of his ideas, like F-shaped sound holes and truss rods, pre-dated Gibson’s own.

Shutt’s most amazing instrument was the clever Mando-Bass-Harp-Guitar, which combined the tunings and musical purposes of Gibson’s 10-bass harp guitar and upright mando-bass into one instrument.

This unlabeled harp guitar is of simpler design than the catalog’s Sub-Bass Guitar and was either a prototype, an employee’s instrument, or both. It was acquired from the family of Frank Oppitz, Shutt’s musical duo partner and one of his small stable of workers who built the first instruments in Shutt’s home (later Shutt-labeled instruments were built by the Harmony Company in Chicago). At least one catalog harp-guitar and mando-bass-harp-guitar were made, though none are known to survive.



Left: Shutt's impressive c. 1913 catalog
Right: Albert Shutt with his mando-bass-harp-guitar and a steel guitar-playing female trio on the cover of his sheet music title.

Monster Bass Harp Guitar

c. 1913–17

Lyon & Healy, Chicago, Illinois

From almost the very beginning, American harp guitars were larger than their six-string counterparts, often astoundingly so. But they wouldn’t reach their widest—22 1/4 inches!—until 1913, when Lyon & Healy introduced this model. The harp guitar with six sub-bass strings was actually a custom option and this is the only example known. “Monster Bass” refers not to extra bass strings, but to the tone; the basic model was an exaggerated new six-string guitar meant to provide superior bass response and projection. While playing it, with its immense six-inch deep sound box, you can physically feel the air pumping out of the sound hole along with the deep tones.



New Hawaiian Family c. 1914–1930

Chris Knutsen, Los Angeles, California

America's next musical craze began in earnest in the aftermath of the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) in San Francisco, where a Hawaiian band entertained daily for over nine months. Musicians and public alike could not get enough of the seductive sounds of steel guitars and ukuleles. Chris Knutsen had already entered this world, building his first acoustic steel guitars (named for the steel bar used to slide along and stop the strings) in the Pacific Northwest following the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, where Hawaiian music made a similar, if smaller, sensation. Knutsen is believed to have relocated to Los Angeles, California in 1914, and undoubtedly spent time at the PPIE and in

the Hawaiian Pavilion. He soon created his "New Hawaiian Family," which included harp mandolins, harp ukuleles, and steel guitars of novel shapes and stringing combinations. The hollow arm was unnecessary on the smaller instruments as they typically didn't include floating strings, but it still made for an eye-catching instrument, and was of course promoted as having better tone. Curiously, Knutsen never built a single standard harp guitar after 1914, creating instead a series of convertible "harp steel guitars" that could be played Hawaiian style on the lap or Spanish style. Knutsen would concentrate solely on variations of his Hawaiian instruments for the duration of his life.

Harp Steel Guitar

Knutsen's Hawaiian guitars are the earliest known acoustic steel guitars with the distinctive narrow shouldered shape that Hermann Weissenborn would later make famous. As was typical of him, Knutsen would often add extra strings to his common six-string versions. Two floating bass strings on a simple screwed-on arm was the first step; he would then often add four short treble strings, their tuning and musical objective still a mystery. In 1923, Knutsen himself played a convertible harp steel model on the radio, performing "dreamy music" that elicited requests for encores via telegram from across the country even as he was on the air.



Harp Mandolin

Knutsen's imagination knew no bounds, and it wasn't long before he added sub-bass strings to some of his hollow arm mandolins, creating the only true harp mandolins on the market. Extremely rare and of curious musical potential, copies of this novel instrument are being offered today by Tonedevil and others.

Harp Ukulele

Due to the slender arm design, Knutsen never added floating strings to his harp ukuleles. He continued to advertise a Patent-Applied-For adjustable action feature—the same one used on his convertible harp steel guitars, wherein simple L-brackets attached between the headstock and arm, and on the neck to body joint, allowed one to forcefully push the neck forwards or backwards to set the string height for playing preference.

Harp Taropatch

In 1880s Hawaii, a small Portuguese ukulele-type instrument morphed into a five-string taropatch fiddle, which American builders subsequently turned into a double-strung larger-sized ukulele. Chris Knutsen, bold as always, jumped right in, making harp taropatches in two sizes, both significantly larger than other builders' models.

5-Course Harp Mandola

As mandolas were common in America's mandolin orchestras, it's surprising that Knutsen didn't create more of them. Just two harp mandolas are known, one a standard four-course instrument, and this unique variant with five courses, possibly tuned in a combination of tenor and octave mandolas (in fifths, beginning with a low G an octave below the mandolin).





Harp Guitar c. 1920s

O. Pagani & Bro., New York, New York
Francesco Morabito (attributed)

In the 1900s, there was a large influx of Italian luthiers who set up shop in New York. Many of these individuals eventually built a harp guitar or two. With hints of Italian tradition, these were new Italian-American melting pot designs, often highly creative or decorative, and quite varied in their form and floating bass string configurations.

The labels in this harp guitar and its case are that of a large New York music store, and so as in the case of many of these one-offs, it is difficult to know who may have built it for the Pagani firm. The mirror image headstock design, rope binding, and other elements, are common to several fellow New York Italian harp guitar makers. Todd Cambio, an expert on 1900s Italian-American guitars, believes it to be the work of Francesco Morabito. What this and many other New York instruments mostly tell us is just how much American harp guitar heritage there is yet to discover, research, and celebrate.



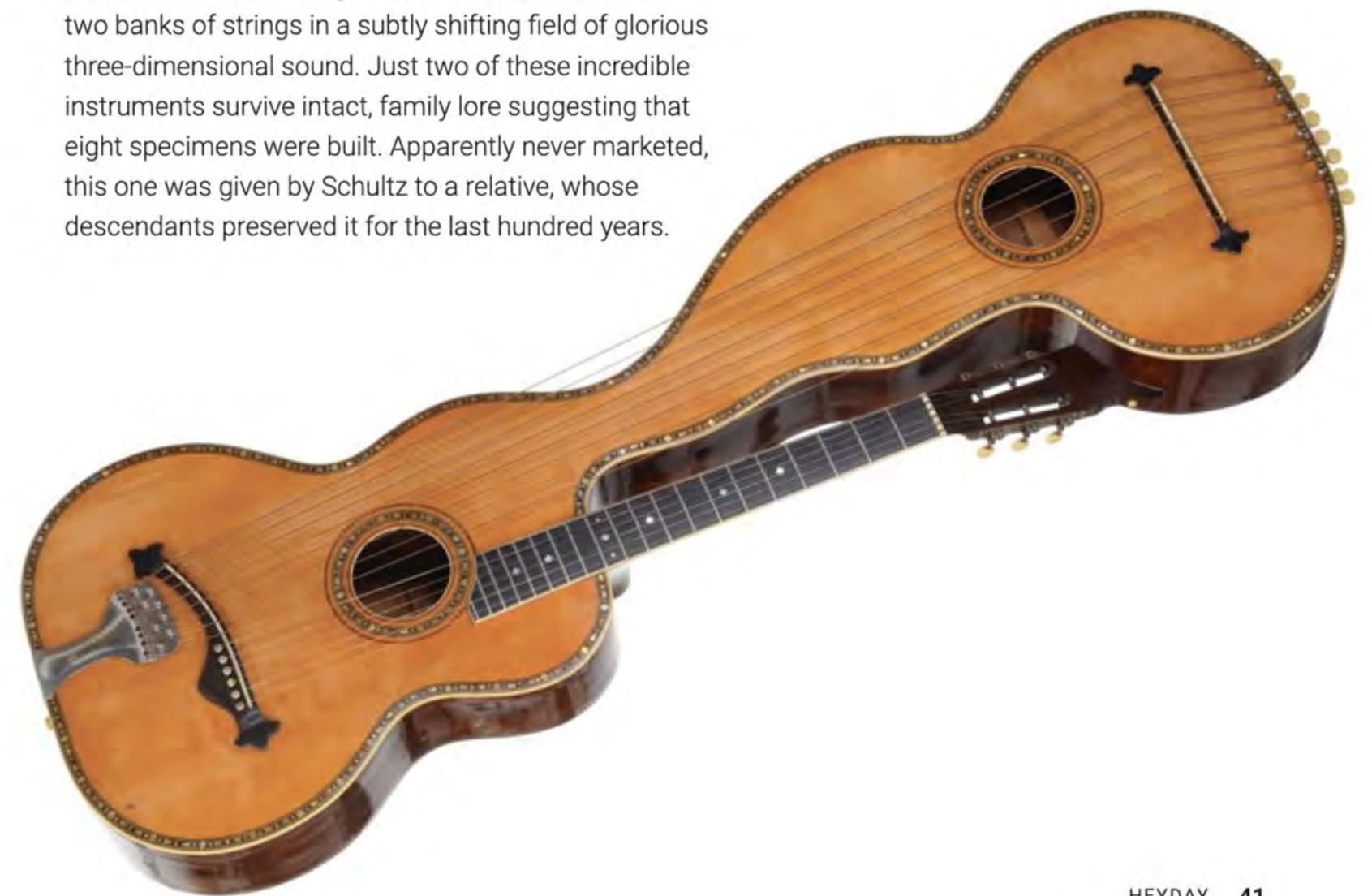
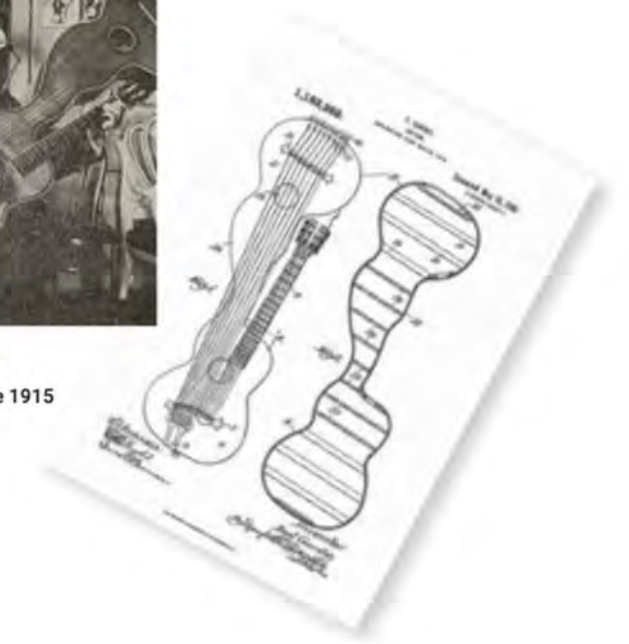
Orchestral Harp Guitar c. 1915

Harmony Co., Chicago, Illinois
Patented by Paul Gardie

This seemingly bizarre harp guitar was intended as a serious instrument. A 1916 design patent for it was granted to Paul Gardie of Chicago, whose achievement was all the more remarkable in that he was blind. William Schultz, founder and president of Chicago's Harmony Company, took it seriously enough to oversee the construction of the instrument for Gardie in Harmony's specialty department. Gardie debuted the instrument at the 1915 convention of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists, where by all accounts he was the hit of the weekend, performing both classical and ragtime. Gardie would pinch-hit for no less than the virtuoso Roy Smeck to debut Harmony's new line of Smeck instruments a dozen years later. Though ungainly in the extreme, no expense was spared by Schultz to create these fantastic sounding harp guitars. A treat for the audience, they are a revelation for the player, whose ears are centered within a personal zone of stereophonic notes emanating from both sound holes, the two banks of strings in a subtly shifting field of glorious three-dimensional sound. Just two of these incredible instruments survive intact, family lore suggesting that eight specimens were built. Apparently never marketed, this one was given by Schultz to a relative, whose descendants preserved it for the last hundred years.



Paul Gardie, from
The Cadenza, June 1915



Decline and Disappearance

By 1920, harp guitars were firmly established in nearly every style of American music. But by 1930, they had effectively vanished. Why did the harp guitar disappear so completely in the U.S. while the banjo, guitar, mandolin, ukulele, and steel guitar survived?

We can trace its quick demise to a number of factors, stemming both from technological advances and changes in taste as America ushered in the Roaring Twenties. Ever trend-conscious, 1900s Americans were fairly quick to embrace each new fad, and the charming mandolin orchestra was becoming antiquated. The Jazz Age arrived soon after the end of WWI, and players were trading in their mandolins for tenor banjos and looking for piano and drum accompaniment rather than the musically unwieldy harp guitar. If a guitar was needed, the new archtop six-string guitar with its punchy sound was the better choice.

Meanwhile, Vaudeville—where harp guitars had flourished—had been dying from the onslaught of first cinema, and then radio, the final nail in the coffin. Still, even in these conditions, the other plucked stringed instruments survived, sometimes by evolving. The Hawaiian music craze continued to escalate from 1915 through 1930, and many players took up the lap steel guitar and ukulele, often backed up by the last holdouts on harp guitar.

A final reason for the downfall was the very nature of American harp guitars and American guitarists. It is worth noting that the U.S. never produced a memorable harp guitar soloist, nor a specific repertoire for the instrument. For better or worse, teachers and method books were virtually nonexistent, as the harp guitar remained almost exclusively an accompaniment instru-

ment. Guitarists figured out on their own how to pluck their sub-bass strings as their interest and skills allowed. Similarly, the harp guitar was never standardized in appearance, number of strings, or tuning. It was embraced because it was something new and unique, and because it served an important musical purpose, namely, it was *loud*.



Popular well past the 1930s, Hawaiian music was one of the last bastions for the American harp guitar.



Distraction number one: It didn't take long for the American public to become obsessed with the first silent moving pictures.

And so the death knell arrived when even louder and more unique instruments were invented. First came the incredible Art Deco-styled National resonator guitars, entirely made of bright, shiny metal. Soon after that, the electric guitar arrived.

For the early American harp guitar, it was Game Over.

Or was it?

National resonator guitar (left), and newly electrified Gibson guitar, (right). Next to these, the once-imposing harp guitars looked like dinosaurs.



Distraction number 2: By 1930, families were glued to the addictive new sensation—radio—and so had little time to sing and play music together.

Rediscovery and Reinvention

America's harp guitars had all but faded into oblivion, but thankfully, the several thousand abandoned instruments were not discarded or destroyed, they were simply tucked away in attics and basements. And so it was only a matter of time before they would emerge to be discovered by a new generation.

This began as early as the folk boom of the 1960s. New music stores sprang up where players discovered all manner of forgotten vintage instruments, including incredible harp guitars. One famous early appearance was in Martin Scorsese's 1978 documentary *The Last Waltz*, with Robbie Robertson playing a huge Gibson (though untraditionally, as he replaced his Gibson sub-basses with higher strings so he could open the song with a "harp" strum!).

Through the 1980s, several virtuoso American fingerstyle guitar players discovered harp guitars, and by pure serendipity all were Dyer harp guitars (and in one instance, a similar Knutsen). Of all the dozens of American brands from the turn of the last century, the Dyer is the one harp guitar that is fully capable of meeting modern playing and tonal requirements. The Larson brothers' instruments (who built Dyers) were at the top of their class and even ahead of their time when built—a perfect realization of the high end steel-string flat top acoustic guitar that is so coveted today.

The most famous Dyer player of the 1980s was the late Michael Hedges, a phenomenon who broke out on the Windham Hill record label and quickly rose to legendary status well before his tragic death in 1997. Though he is known for only a few harp guitar solo pieces, he continues to influence musicians today, with every fan who manages to acquire a harp guitar having to attempt his immortal "Because It's There."

At about the same time that Hedges found his Dyer in a guitar shop, Stephen Bennett, another exceptional guitar player, inherited his great-grandfather's Dyer, immediately putting it to use for his arrangements and compositions in a highly musical and accessible way. No harp guitarist before or since has ever been so prolific, and eventually Bennett would host the first Harp Guitar Gathering® in 2002, which immediately became an annual music festival.

Another fateful discovery in the early 1980s occurred when Oregonian John Doan found a rare Knutsen harp guitar similar in tone and playability to the Dyer, but with an unusual twist—it had an additional seven short strings strung across the body. As Doan was already playing fretless

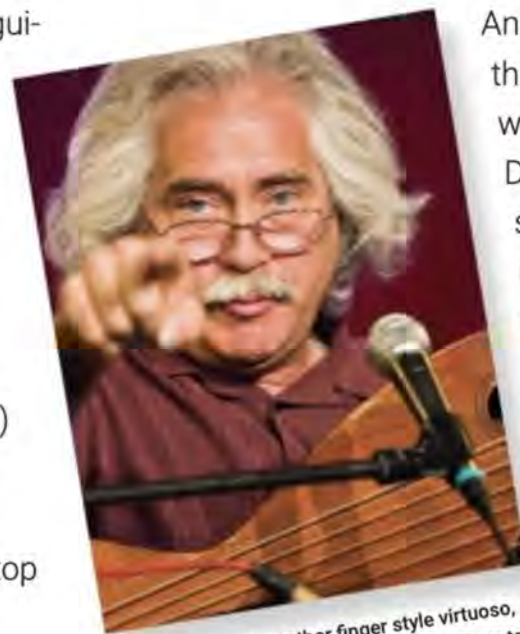
zithers along with a Gibson harp guitar, he quickly realized the potential, and in short order single-handedly devised new techniques to play the Knutsen. It almost certainly would have remained a novelty had he not dedicated himself to creating a modern version of it, tasking enthusiastic luthiers John Sullivan and Jeffrey Elliott to design and build his vision (see page 46). That 1986 prototype is still Doan's main instrument and has today engendered a hugely popular worldwide sub-genre of harp guitars with super-trebles.

Independent of the repurposing of antique harp guitars, there was also the occasional unrelated new invention by various builders and players. In the case of William Eaton and Tim Donahue, both were players with imaginative ideas for new guitar concepts, and both were capable themselves of building their experimental instruments (see pages 47 and 48). Other builders focused on evolving the hollow arm style, while still others branched out in new directions, sometimes with boundless imagination.

Modern harp guitars are made all over the world, and are often expensive and/or highly individualized. Thus there arose a need for a more affordable production model harp guitar. Mickie Zekley's 1995 Lark in the Morning Dyer style instrument was the first attempt at batch building. In 2010, production of good quality Chinese-built Dyer copies got underway by entrepreneur Scott Holloway, a player and passionate fan of the instrument. After less than two hundred instruments were built in China, he teamed up with luthier Jim Worland to move production to California where they trademarked the Dyer brand for a new century.



The late, great Michael Hedges made an immediate impression with his vintage Dyer harp guitar on the cover of *Frets* magazine in 1986.



Stephen Bennett, another finger style virtuoso, immediately put his great-grandfather's Dyer to use upon inheriting it in 1988.



Left to right: John Sullivan, John Doan, and Jeffrey Elliott, with the first Sullivan-Elliott Concert Harp Guitar in 1986.

Instruments of Note



20-string Concert Harp Guitar 2006

John Sullivan, Portland, Oregon

Commissioned by Bob Gore

John Sullivan built a total of five Sullivan-Elliott harp guitars, each with 20 steel and bronze strings. This was his last, commissioned by guitarist Bob Gore, and finished a year before Sullivan's untimely death in 2007. When a former student of John Doan acquired the instrument, he asked Jeffrey Elliott to retrofit the bridge to accommodate nylon sub-basses, a tonal choice favored by Doan.



Harp Guitar 1983

William Eaton, Phoenix, Arizona

William Eaton, while aware of vintage harp guitars and multi-string instruments from the Renaissance era, took his inspiration from the ancient musical bow and lyre, often utilizing the harmonic curve of harps. Since the late 1970s, he has built a unique progression of one-of-a-kind instruments, many of which are novel harp guitar forms. Though his designs have inspired—and occasionally been licensed by—others, his own creations are personal instruments with which he himself performs, most famously with R. Carlos Nakai, the Native American flute player.



William Eaton with a new creation, 2006.





Tim Donahue Signature Harp Guitar 2012

Tim Donahue, Mishima, Shizuoka, Japan

In 1984, Tim Donahue, an electric guitar virtuoso and Berklee graduate, dreamt up a singular electric harp guitar with stringing and tuning more along the lines of Eaton's mid-range harp strings than anything historical. Its six extra floating harp strings are tuned ABC#DEF# (lying in the area of the guitar neck's top B and E strings), and are played by the right hand while the left hand taps the strings on the neck. A common Donahue technique is to alternate notes between the neck and harp strings to create a cascading waterfall musical effect. Though such an instrument might seem too specialized (especially his fretless model), it became popular enough in Donahue's adopted country of Japan that he was able to go into production in 2011. In form and function, this production model is identical to Donahue's original instrument.



Tim Donahue rocks his 1984 electric harp guitar invention in his adopted country of Japan.



Arch Guitar 1993

Gary Southwell, United Kingdom

Commissioned by James Kline

In the early 1990s, James Kline placed an order with luthier Walter Stanul for a new instrument called the Archguitar—a fully fretted hybrid instrument invented in the early 1980s by Boston guitarist Peter Blanchette and built in close collaboration by Stanul. With the wait time far in the future, Kline commissioned U.K. luthier Gary Southwell to build it instead, and they took the opportunity to deviate substantially from the original design, most notably by floating the last three bass strings—thus creating a new harp guitar form. Kline kept the name arch guitar (separating into two words), as the intent was still the same—a modern multi-string guitar variant with a larger compass and more lute-like tone. Kline recorded his first four albums on this instrument before retiring it for a replacement built by Alan Perlman. A year later, Perlman and Kline added a separate super-treble section that strapped on to the other body, creating a single 19-string Arch Harp Guitar—the unique instrument Kline famously plays today.



Classically trained James Kline now performs exclusively on his unique nineteen string arch harp guitar with added super-trebles.





Harp Ukulele 2015

Duane Noble, Richland, Washington

Commissioned by Gregg Miner

By the dawn of the 21st century, many luthiers had tried their hand at building Dyer copies—often at the request of professional players like Stephen Bennett and Muriel Anderson.

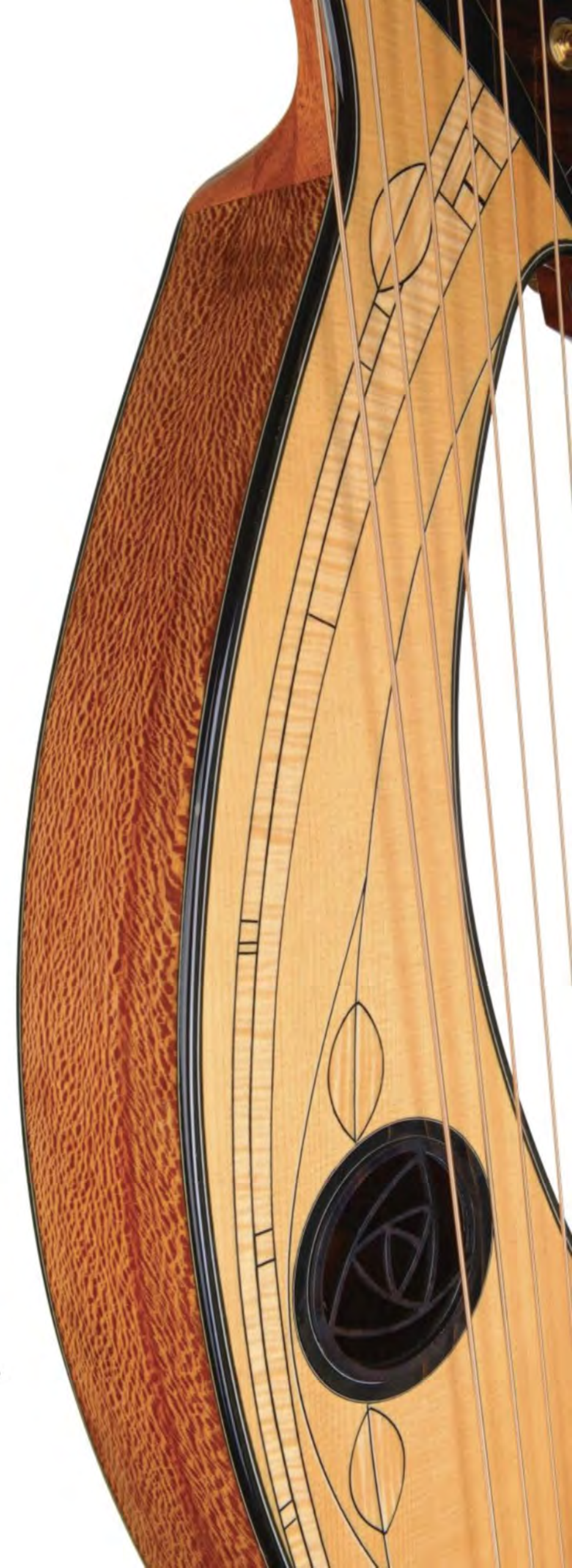
Some luthiers—like Duane Noble—got one under their belt, then immediately redesigned the instrument for more modern tastes. After building two dozen of his popular harp guitars, he started on harp ukuleles. Unlike the historical hollow-arm Knutsen, his has floating bass strings and is almost a perfect miniature of his popular harp guitar, with tone to match. There are already production harp ukes by small companies; they may well become a new trend of their own.



Harp Guitar 2008

Kathy Wingert, Rancho Palos Verdes, California

Kathy Wingert, a highly respected builder of six-string guitars, says she was “dragged kicking and screaming” into the harp guitar world by a persistent client. Like many luthiers since, she skipped the step of copying a Dyer and created her own unique style of hollow arm harp guitars. This instrument, her fourth, is a tonal and visual masterpiece. The heads and arm incorporate her daughter Jimmi’s inlaid designs, inspired by the work of Scottish artist Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh. Since 2007, Wingert has been averaging at least one harp guitar a year.





Harp Guitar 2008

Alan Beardsell, Winnipeg, Manitoba
Commissioned by Esau Simmons

Upon receiving his first request in 2008, Canadian builder Alan Beardsell jumped headlong into harp guitars with his own original hollow arm design. This instrument was the dazzling result, though he first had to build a prototype to work out the complex geometry. The dual sound ports provide a special aural experience for the player without taking anything away from the sound for the audience. They also provide a view into the mysteries of his unique bracing system and carbon fiber tube support structure used in this incredible sounding instrument.



"The Beast" 2010

Alan Carruth, Newport, New Hampshire

It took a slightly mad genius who was both a guitar builder and a harp builder to create what is possibly the first and only harp guitar that is truly a combination of both instruments. And, he built it in less than three months using only \$100 worth of materials and parts—to enter the Musical Instrument Maker's Forum \$100 Challenge. He won. Noting that all historical harp guitars are technically constructed in the form of giant zither-guitars (all strings running parallel to the soundboard), Carruth devised a way for the floating bass strings to be true harp strings, meaning, they had to come off at an angle from—and perpendicular to—the soundboard, as in a harp. While the geometry was a brilliant success, the instrument was judged not to be, as the basses required stringing with a different material in reverse order and the two sound boxes and resultant tones are almost completely separated. It is nevertheless a fascinating and bold experiment that every harp guitarist has begged to try out!





Harp Guitar 2008

Michihiro Matsuda, Oakland, California
Commissioned by Michael John Simmons

Michihiro Matsuda had bold ideas and no shortage of creativity when he built this dream harp guitar on commission for Michael Simmons. In addition to complex internal buttresses and a Nomex-braced top, the sub-bass strings have movable nuts to allow for fully custom bass tunings. This was inspired by the movable bridges on the Japanese *koto*, according to Matsuda. The sound holes were moved far off center to keep the soundboard as strong as possible, and he also added an access panel in the side. The fan frets on this instrument—where the neck's low string is longer than the highest string—has long been a common custom feature on boutique guitars, and increasingly also on harp guitars.



sYer Harp Guitar 2016

Steve Klein, Vineburg, California
In collaboration with
Dyer Harp Guitars, Pasadena, California
Courtesy of Steve Klein

In 1989, Michael Hedges was looking at options for a modern instrument to replace his antique Dyer harp guitar. Collaborating with legendary luthier Steve Klein, they came up with striking designs. Concerned with the many unknowns involved, Klein instead suggested a full blown electric harp guitar, including a Steinberger Trans Trem vibrato system. The result was magic, and the new instrument found success on Michael's tours and 1990 *Taproot* CD, gracing the cover of *Guitar Player* the same year. A chance meeting at NAMM in 2016 with Dyer Harp Guitars' Scott Holloway and Jim Worland inspired Klein to revive the acoustic harp guitar project. He completely redesigned it, incorporating his new headstock design and "bass reflex cabinet technology with a radical interior baffling system." With Worland doing most of the construction and help from Klein's longtime partner Steven Kauffman, the sYer was born. Twenty-seven years later, the modern harp guitar story has come full circle!



Klein's cutting edge electric harp guitar for Michael Hedges immediately made the cover of *Guitar Player* magazine in October, 1990.



Unused 1986 designs by Steve Klein for a proposed acoustic harp guitar for Michael Hedges.

Production Instruments



S-12 Harp Guitar 2013

Tonedevil Guitars, Sandpoint, Idaho
Courtesy of Tonedevil Guitars

Tonedevil Guitars was founded in 2002 by brothers Anthony and David Powell, who took their inspiration from Chris Knutsen's instruments from the early 1900s. Starting their full-time operation in 2010, Tonedevil began production on their new S-12 model and have constructed over 100 instruments to date, including various steel and nylon string models and harp mandolins.

Synergy X7 Artisan Harp Guitar 2017

Emerald Guitars
Lifford, County Donegal, Ireland
Courtesy of Emerald Guitars

In 2013, Alistair Hay, owner of Ireland's Emerald Guitars, created the world's first carbon fiber harp guitar. Other than the frets, strings, bridge, and tuners, the entire instrument is one continuous structure made of carbon fiber weave, yet it produces the sound of a standard acoustic instrument. This is the original model, which has a smaller size and shorter scale than a standard guitar. The size, near indestructibility, and price made it both a perfect travel harp guitar and an affordable option for new harp guitarist hopefuls. In just four short years, the company has sold close to a hundred harp guitars, including their recently introduced and even more popular full size X20 and a harp ukulele. Despite the specialized production techniques of these unique instruments, they are customizable, with players requesting fan frets, additional bass strings, and even super-trebles.



Where Might We Go From Here?

All of these modern instruments include new adaptations, construction techniques, and often dramatic new features—and most are brand new designs. Other examples, such as the singular nature of the instruments of Eaton and Donahue, perfectly demonstrate that the constant reinvention of the harp guitar concept throughout history continues unabated today. The forms, stringing, tunings, and techniques are more varied than ever before. For today's musicians interested in harp guitars, it's true that this non-standardization makes the possibility of wholesale adoption of a single common instrument more difficult. One might look at this as a drawback for those hoping to jump in, but on the other hand, the variety also keeps it endlessly fun and creative.

**And THAT is the real
definition of a harp guitar.**



ABOUT THE GUEST CURATOR

The Museum of Making Music is honored to welcome Gregg Miner as the guest curator for its special exhibition, *Floating Strings: The Remarkable Story of the Harp Guitar in America*.

Miner is a plucked stringed instrument collector, scholar, recording artist, and performer, who is best known for his work with harp guitars. His years of research and extensive knowledge enabled him to define the harp guitar, both as an organological category and an instrument unto itself. His "Harp Guitar" entry is included in *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 2nd edition. He has authored hundreds of articles, has lectured extensively, and has curated his own personal collection of rare and historic instruments that are housed in The Miner Museum of Vintage, Exotic & Just Plain Unusual Musical Instruments in Southern California.

Between 2002 and 2009, Miner created The Knutsen Archives, an online catalog of luthier Chris Knutsen's instruments; Harpguitars.net, the central repository of information on players, builders, instruments, music and history; Harp Guitar Music, a record label and Internet store focused solely on the instrument; and the non-profit Harp Guitar Foundation, which organizes and operates the biannual Harp Guitar Gathering®. In 2007, he served as content expert for

the Museum of Making Music's exhibition, *Harp Guitars: Passion, Imagination, Artistry*. He has studied pedal harp, performed on mandocello and harp guitar with the Los Angeles Mandolin Orchestra, and played lead guitar and vocals for the musical comedy Oldies band, The Pretensions. Miner has also recorded numerous CDs including *A Christmas Collection*, a two-volume set featuring 100 instruments from his private collection, and his most recent release, *Norwegian Wood, New Music for the Antique Instruments of Chris Knutsen*.



LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITON

All of the instruments in this exhibition were loaned to the Museum of Making Music by The Miner Museum of Vintage, Exotic & Just Plain Unusual Musical Instruments, except for the Emerald Synergy X7 Artisan Harp Guitar (page 56) that is owned by the Museum of Making Music, and those noted below:

- John Schneiderman
11-string Guitar (page 12)
- John Riley
One-Arm Guitar (page 23)
- John Doan
18-string One-Arm Harp Guitar (page 24)
- Phil Rowens
Style R Harp-Guitar (page 25)
- Steve Bissell
20-string Concert Harp Guitar (page 46)
- William Eaton
Harp Guitar (page 47)
- Nancy Conescu
Tim Donahue Signature Harp Guitar (page 48)
- Pete Bradshaw
Harp Guitar (page 51)
- Michael Simmons
Harp Guitar (page 54)
- Steve Klein
sYer Harp Guitar (page 55)
- Tonedevil Guitars
S-12 Harp Guitar (page 56, top)

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flawless design aesthetic, skill, and perseverance, this catalogue could not have happened. Lastly, I'd like to thank our volunteers. Through their generosity of time and talent, they will introduce the fascinating world of the harp guitar to our visitors, keeping it alive in the minds of many for years to come.

**Carolyn Grant, Executive Director
Museum of Making Music**

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