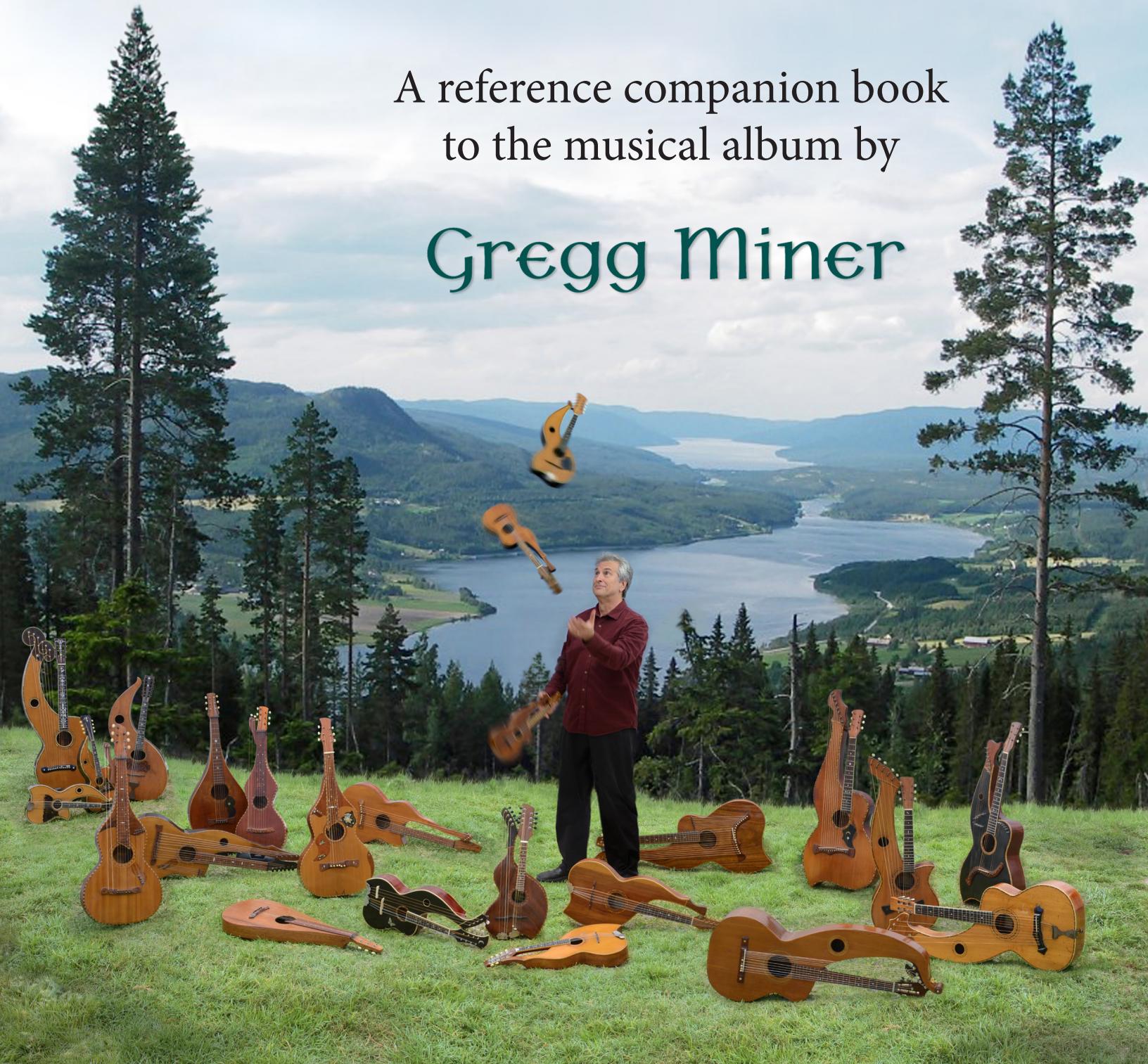


Norwegian Wood

The Incredible Imagination and Instruments
of Chris Knutsen

A reference companion book
to the musical album by
Gregg Miner



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Preface by musician and author Gregg Miner

I've had a nearly 40-year love affair now with the instruments built by that indefatigable creative savant, transplanted Norwegian Chris Knutsen. I first saw one hanging on the wall at Santa Monica's McCabe's Guitar Shop after moving to Los Angeles in 1979. In 1988 I found my first one at Gene's Guitars in Palo Alto. It was the Knutsen Symphony specimen shown on page 21 and cost me the then-staggering sum of \$1200. (I was recently offered 20 times that for it. I passed.) I didn't know it at the time, but the metal tailpiece was a later add-on – an unoriginal feature that had possibly saved the instrument from a premature implosion. I didn't dare remove it! The only work I had done on it was a re-fret by fellow Knutsen fan Rick Turner, when he happened to be back in the repair shop at Fred Walecki's Westwood Music. Man, *those* were the days! It is now almost 120 years after Knutsen built this instrument, and several players have pronounced it the most incredible-sounding harp guitar on the planet. *That* is just one reason why some of us love Knutsens. While some are "basket cases," there is often major mojo to be found in these mysterious instruments.

I continued to seek out both instruments and information on Knutsen, of which there were only vague snippets. Soon, through mutual friend Kerry Char (who restored many of the instruments seen and heard here) I hooked up with Dan Most of Tacoma, Washington. Dan was even more obsessed with Knutsen's creations than I was and was also smack in the middle of Knutsen country. By 1995 when I came out with my *A Christmas Collection* CD featuring my then-six incredible Knutsens, Dan had amassed *thirty*. Studying these, along with additional Knutsen and Weissenborn steel guitars owned by his friend Tom Noe, the two produced the ground-breaking book *Chris Knutsen: From Harp Guitars to the New Hawaiian Family* in 1999. No sooner had the book been printed than we discovered Knutsen's distant relative Jean Cammon Findlay – or more accurately, she discovered us. A passionate genealogist, she has toiled for years to help us with our research and put all the family history together. With her help, I created the online Knutsen Archives, which debuted with rare family photos and information, along with 100 instrument entries.

Two decades later, my own humble Knutsen instrument family has grown from 6 to 20, while the Archives' count has grown to well over 400 instruments. It has proven to be one of the most continually fascinating, rewarding and *never-ending* hobbies one could imagine. Here's a taste!



Introduction to the Music by Frank Doucette

All artists strive to find their own original voice, that intangible that allows full expression in a way instantly identifiable and unlike any other. Gregg Miner could easily consider himself notable for his choice, and unusual combinations, of instruments. This, however, is no mere showman. A quick listen to his music reveals a mature and deeply expressive composer in whom, as older pieces here demonstrate, an original muse has been at work from a young age. In a body of work spanning 40 years, an exceptional gift for melody is evident even when employing unusual harmonies or abstract forms.

With various harp guitar compilations and Gregg's 2009 release *Good Dogs, Bad Dogs, Best Friends* behind us, I found myself craving more from this person fast becoming one of my favorite tunesmiths. The idea for this project had been percolating in his mind for some time and, all these years later, I am most pleased to see it become reality. I have listened to these pieces over and over again as this CD came together and, still, I love every one. On many days, I continue to wake happily humming a current favorite. These tunes tell stories you will want to hear again and again.

Ostensibly, this is a concept album celebrating the creative efforts of Chris Knutsen. I find it more a portrait of the artist displaying (or juggling) these instruments, and his most personal project to date. Whether fresh interpretations of music that set the path in formative years or original works, these tracks all embody the artist's innermost self. From the nostalgia of pieces such as "Midwest Memories" to the yearning of "What the Soul Wants," with profound expressions of friendship, happiness, whimsy, and more in between, this is uniquely and beautifully my friend Gregg Miner. Enjoy! – FD

The Album Concept



I inadvertently started this “concept album” way back in 2003 when I was stringing up the just-restored “zither harp guitar” and wanted to arrange and record something for it. This was a fascinating early 1900s musical instrument variant by the ever-inventive Chris Knutsen, and the modern tune “Little Martha” was the result; I was pleased enough to burn a few “singles” for my family and friends. That Knutsen was perhaps my tenth, but hardly the last, as they seem to find their way to me. And of course, each one is unique, often dramatically so, as Knutsen’s creativity knew no bounds.

(Left) With the zither harp guitar at the 3rd Harp Guitar Gathering® in 2005

The following year I happened to use my Knutsen Symphony harp guitar – this is a *pre-1900* instrument, mind you – for two professional recordings submitted for *Beyond Six Strings*, a groundbreaking project that led to the formation of my Harp Guitar Music label and web business.

By this time, I was imagining doing a version of my *A Christmas Collection* CD project, but with Knutsen instruments – including several models and examples owned by friends of mine. To that end, in 2005 I borrowed Flip Breskin’s unique “wrap-around” hollow arm guitar built by Otto Anderson (builder of 200 of Knutsen’s earlier instruments) – both to document for the Knutsen Archives and to record a couple things with it. I ended up not pursuing any other loans, as I managed to fill in nearly all the gaps in my collection over the years. I continued to experiment with this growing family of Knutsen instruments in the occasional performance or recording, while also playing and recording on Dyer and Merrill harp guitars, which have a direct relationship to Knutsen’s, explained later.



After a time, I found myself with a growing number of unreleased recordings using these instruments, along with a plethora of other ideas – and so began the arduous task to complete the project. I found that Knutsen’s instruments were the perfect choice, as he made not just harp guitars, but steel (Hawaiian) guitars, mandolins and ukuleles. Not only do no two look or sound quite alike, they are often configured very differently. A given instrument might have additional open bass strings or open higher strings (melodic or chordal): one or the other, both, or neither. Their string counts often vary as well, along with the size and scale of Knutsen’s endless inventions. They might be strung with steel strings, nylon strings or other materials, which you’ll hear typically in solo outings, along with the occasional duo, trio or quartet. Finally, I added my Larson brothers-built Dyer instruments and a couple new Merrill harp guitars (highest quality Dyer copies) due to their direct evolutionary link to Knutsen and their incredible sound.

Notes on the Music

Personally, I've never really considered myself a "composer," but that hasn't stopped me from coming up with all sorts of tunes, motifs, soundscapes and what-have-you. All of which are nothing more than a very personal, private relationship between my muse and me. But occasionally (so Frank tells me), others find them entertaining, so you can thank him for making me stick at this rather exhausting musical project.

Even more surprising is that I pulled several of these tunes (*seven of them!*) out of my deep past – my 20-to-24-year old "creative period." Curiously, the majority of the covers I arbitrarily chose are *also* things from my youth.

Then there's a gap of a full two decades (my *A Christmas Collection* will explain the '90s...) and we next jump to 2004, when I wrote my first original piece in ages on my return from the second Harp Guitar Gathering® (Track 10).

Several subsequent new pieces appeared on the Harp Guitar Music compilations and my 2009 *Good Dogs, Bad Dogs, Best Friends* CD.

And now this project contains another six more recent pieces.

Old or new, originals or covers, all have been reworked to fit the various instruments herein. I hope you enjoy both the instruments and the music – thanks for reading and listening!



The Tunes

1. *Midwest Memories* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP)

Dyer harp guitar & Knutsen convertible harp steel guitar

This tune was the very last one I was working on in Illinois in late 1978 before moving to Los Angeles in early 1979. It was always a duet, originally on 6-string and 12-string guitar (I toyed with a bottleneck on the 12-string). I never did locate my old work-in-progress recording of this tune; unbelievably, I remembered virtually every note nearly forty years later. As the original 6-string was tuned to open G with a low C in the bass, it naturally leant itself to harp guitar, though the strumming and muting became a challenge! Still lousy at bottleneck guitar forty years later, I chose a harp steel to play lap style slide, while getting an additional set of subs in the bargain. This one never had a title – until now; it serves as the wrap up to my treasured Illinois days of acoustic music experimentation and so many other memorable experiences.



2. *Little Martha* (D. Allman; BMG Bumble obo Happily Married Music) Knutsen “zither” harp guitar



After Kerry Char restored this one-of-a-kind Knutsen, I had to figure out how to string and tune it; the normal, long sub-bass bank is split in half to make two shorter string banks, giving 3 treble banks with a total of 7 strings each. As it had been found with old strings of very thick to thin on each bank, and since there were three sections, I immediately imagined the purpose as having a I, IV and V chord. As my gauges and options were coming together (two were 6/9 chords, the V chord was a Dom7sus), I was brainstorming for a simple 3-chord instrumental to try (*Louie, Louie* was out). Suddenly I remembered this tune that I used to play ages ago from The Allman Brothers' *Eat a Peach* LP (which I still have)!

3. *Mood for a Day* (Steve Howe; Warner-Tamerlane Pub Corp.) Knutsen nylon-strung harp guitar

You can probably tell that I come from more of a folk/pop background than a classical one. Case in point: when thinking about a tune for this nylon-strung Knutsen, this “pseudo-classical/flamenco” Steve Howe solo from the Yes *Fragile* album came to mind. I had played the popular piece for my last year high school talent show, but probably never since – but it was like riding a bike (it seems I still have “muscle memory” from decades ago even if I have none from last month...). As the transcription and then recording evolved, the embellishments grew and grew – added subs, more harmonies and flights of fancy – while preserving the simple essence of the original I think. Note that there is *no* reverb added to this track; it was recorded completely dry in my padded booth – that is all the Knutsen’s own sympathetic resonance (natural overtones emanating from every string in “sympathy.” Thus, if I stopped *any* of the eleven strings with my palm/hand, it was like I had literally unplugged a reverb unit. So, it was either mute constantly (and ruin a great effect) or counterintuitively train myself to avoid *all* damping, which I finally did.



4. *Sea of Life* (Traditional Chinese) Knutsen 20-course harp guitar & teardrop steel guitar

In 2003, my wife Jaci and I found ourselves in Edinburgh, Scotland during their August music festival with its incredible stream of constant live music both indoors and out. As we ascended a hill one afternoon I could hear the “Theme from Titanic” played by some strange, beautiful instrument. Cresting the rise, we were treated to a virtuoso player of a Chinese erhu (a two-string bowed instrument). The tune was a bit cliché (and the cheesy synthesizer “orchestra” played by his partner didn’t help any), but then they launched into a folk tune that had me bawling within a minute. I bought their CD, happy to discover that the tune – this one – was on it. I can’t do the expressive and plaintive erhu justice but tried to channel some of the exotic color and nuances I remembered onto the steel guitar. The particular harp guitar used for accompaniment, with its three top neck strings doubled and its seven super-trebles tuned to the pentatonic melody (the entire song fits on these seven notes), turned out to be ideal for the introduction and accompaniment to this simple but inspiring piece.



5. *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant* (Maurice Ravel) Knutsen harp mandolin with sub-basses



Translation: “Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty,” from Ravel’s *Mother Goose Suite*, which along with Debussy’s *Children’s Corner Suite* has always been one of my absolute favorites. This is played exactly as written in A minor, the harp mandolin having a much larger range than a standard mandolin. I play it solo fingerstyle, like a miniature harp guitar

6. *Ode to a Heloderm* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen short-scale harp guitar

The particular heloderm in this case being my pet gila monster, Cliff. Though that sentence reads back as bizarrely to me today as it does you, it’s quite simple really, and not as aberrant as I know you’re thinking! I was a serious herpetoculturist (reptile keeper) back in the ‘70s, the aforementioned *heloderma suspectum* being just one of my many charges. No, none were actually “pets” and none had “names,” other than a couple that my comedian friend Rick insisted on christening based on their perceived personalities. As it turns out, gila monsters (and their beaded lizard cousins) are ridiculously docile animals – my little ditty is an homage to their goofy, benign personalities, with that underlying hint of danger (they *are* venomous, after all!).



7. *Humming Song* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen 20-course harp guitar & harp mandolin

Another tune from my Bloomington, Illinois period, circa 1977, originally on a six-string guitar in standard tuning, flatpicked. At that time, when I couldn’t find anything from my little burgeoning collection of random instruments suitable for the separate melody on the verse, I recorded it with my then-girlfriend and I simply *humming* it, ergo the title (that had remained the *only* version until today). Even with all the instruments I have now, I *still* didn’t have something appropriate! A mandolin drew the short straw, but then came up with its own additional appropriate bits.



8. *Perplexual Movement No. 1* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen harp ukulele & harp steel guitar

This and the following “Perplexual Movement No. 2” are examples of “abstract music” – i.e: they are not “about” anything, but little experimental “studies.” They made me think of *perpetual movement* – simple repeating motifs with endings that presumably go on forever. Being a bit weirder than, say, Poulenc’s “Mouvements Perpetuels,” I combined that with “perplexing” to create a more applicable term. Each started out with an unfinished idea on a single instrument. In this case it was something I came up with ages ago on my Dobro in this close tuning. The three sections I remembered virtually verbatim and transferred to this Knutsen 12-course harp steel, then came up with the “clockwork uke” idea. The unique configuration of Knutsen’s seemingly limiting harp steel enables the illusion of multiple instruments with its Hawaiian-style neck, two sub-bass strings and a mere four chimey super-trebles, for this experiment strung in Nylgut to counterpoint the harp uke.



9. *Sad Pig Dance* (Dave Evans; Shining Shadows Music) Knutsen jumbo 8-sub-bass harp guitar

When I learned that my absolute hero, ‘70s guitarist Dave Evans, would be coming from Brussels to attend the 5th Harp Guitar Gathering® in 2007, I realized that I *had* to work out one of his tunes on harp guitar to surprise and honor him. Back in the mid-70s I had learned and played incessantly nearly all the 6-string acoustic guitar tunes on his classic Kicking Mule *Sad Pig Dance* LP, and now, over forty years later, the title track was still under my fingers. I fiddled with a few things and added subs by stretching the 1-5-1-5 Travis-picking accompaniment into an insanely wide variation across the two string banks. That became even more difficult when I further tweaked the tune for the latest Knutsen I acquired – this giant-bodied (but standard-scale) monster with a Knutsen-record *eight* subs. Given the extra bass strings, I had no choice but to add a bit more chromaticism – something I knew Dave would approve of!



10. *The Friends I Finally Met* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen harp mandolin with sub-basses

This tune appeared on the *Further Beyond Six Strings* compilation with an additional fretless bass part performed by Michael Manring. Here’s the original fingerstyle solo as originally recorded, and intended, for this current CD project. I wrote it after the second Harp Guitar Gathering® as part parody, part loving tribute to all my tapping, rapping and slapping harp guitarist idols. Idols who have all since become friends. I’d like to dedicate this to the memory of the late Tom Shinness, my biggest inspiration that fateful 2004 weekend.



11. *The Magic Pony* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen Symphony harp guitar

I’ve always considered this my first decent original tune, written on my old Martin 6-string in 1975 at age 20. As I often did at the time, I arranged and recorded a personal demo (and later, better studio version) for “random ensemble” – including the Martin, electric guitar, lute, harp, toy piano, banjo and flute (session player). The trick with this new solo harp guitar version was capturing as much of that ensemble color as I could, rather than simply going back to the basic guitar part. About its creation: The A section (verse) always sounded somewhat “clip-clop” horsey, as you hear it now; the unusual B waltz section sprung from frustration of not knowing what would come next...and then finally just letting whatever happened happen. I immediately understood that it was now indeed about a pony, but as imagined by a child riding a carousel horse...which can of course detach itself to lead them both into fantasy...



12. *Women of Ireland* (Sean O'Riada; Mechanical Copyright Protection Society Ltd) **Knutsen “zither” harp guitar**



This was once a sort of “theme song” for me; the first tune I taught myself on the harp (before I could even play the instrument!), from the album that introduced me to my lifelong love affair with Irish and similar music: the *Barry Lyndon* Soundtrack. The Chieftains famously performed this – as hauntingly beautiful as it gets – and their late harpist Derek Bell did a little harp solo reprise of it. It’s not strictly “traditional” – it was composed by O’Riada, a fascinating Irishman who played harpsichord and led a groundbreaking band that eventually spawned The Chieftains. The original version is a song, with Gaelic lyrics whose varying syllabic scans give very different melodic phrasing to each verse. Knutsen’s unprecedented “zither harp guitar” was the obvious choice to adapt this piece; treble harp banks on both sides of the neck (with some tuning overlap) were utilized on the first verse for both melody and the ends of various arpeggios.

13. *Miner Lullaby in a Major Key* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) **Merrill harp guitar**

This original tune stemmed from feelings much like those evoked by “Shenandoah” (Track 20) – specifically, an “extremely poignant yearning.” However, I’ll keep the particular subject private and let you listen with a blank slate – hopefully to receive your own impressions and feelings.



14. *Fossils* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP)

Dyer harp mandolins, Larson brothers 5-course harp mandola, Dyer harp guitar



This piece is based on a simple riff that I came up with in the 1990’s on my Gibson mandocello – just something that sounded cool on the giant cello-pitched mandolin. Finding myself with this group of all Larson-built instruments, I adapted it, changing the key to fit on the octave/tenor mandola with harp guitar doubling it an octave lower. Next was to come up with interesting things for the dual mandolins to do. Finally, finding places for the mandola and harp guitar to fit percussion in (assorted hits and knocks on the bodies, with the occasional slap harmonics) was the fun part. While for the most part I eschewed “special effects” reverb for this album, this piece just begged for it.



15. *Return to Deserted Island* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) **Knutsen Symphony harp guitar & harp steel guitar**

I made this return to my “Deserted Island” from *Beyond Six Strings* to add a steel guitar part that I always felt it sorely needed. The original version was one of my mid-70s multi-tracked extravaganzas with acoustic guitar, lap steel, mandolin, harp, flute, percussion, synth and who knows what else. I thus had a lot of different voices and lines to try and incorporate into this single harp steel. The four super-trebles manage the mandolin part in the first chorus, the five subs beef up some of the harp guitar’s basses even further, while the slide does the flute line in the second chorus and many of the lap steel’s original effects along with some new licks.



16. *Glad Dave’s Rag* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP): **Merrill harp guitar**

The Dave in the title is my ‘70s fingerstyle guitar idol Dave Evans, who through an incredible but completely coincidental bit of fate became part of the harp guitar community and a special friend in 2007. I wasn’t writing much at the time, and at one of our Harp Guitar festivals he sidled up to me and quietly suggested “You should write more.” And thus, *this* – which really isn’t in Dave’s style, nor necessarily suggestive of him (other than its quirkiness) – but he instigated it! The title is a play on his “Sad Pig Dance,” which I also cover on this album.



17. *Perplexual Movement No. 2* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP)

Knutsen harp taropatch & tenor harp steel guitar

Like “Perplexual Movement No. 1,” an example of “pure music” – i.e: it’s not “about” anything; it’s a simple little experimental study (though what exactly I’m supposed to be *studying* I have no idea!). This one began with a pattern of rapidly arpeggiated randomly fingered chords I kept noodling with on a uke. Ultimately, I think the double-strung taropatch gave it a bit more fantasy. As is often the case, I studiously avoided thinking theory or even acknowledging the “math” of the fingerboard; to this day, I don’t know what these chords are! I couldn’t even figure out the root key, so pretty much picked one out of a hat, tuning the little harp steel’s two “sub-basses” to a mid-range and a high B♭. The slide melody on the neck strings is pure fantasy.



18. *Os Amores Libres* (traditional Galician)

Otto Anderson wrap-around-arm 6-string guitar & Knutsen harp mandolin with sub-basses



Throughout my life – one filled with lots of playing, but even more listening and enjoying – my most cherished musical moments have been discovering new tunes that fall under the category of “hauntingly beautiful.” This one instantly fell into that group. I found it on Galician piper Carlos Nunes’ CD *Os Amores Libres*, which featured members of The Chieftains. I haven’t quite done it justice but captured it as best I could, as I just wanted to share it with others.



19. *The Black Rock (Heman Dubh)* (Traditional Scottish) Knutsen “zither” harp guitar

 This is one of the many gems from the 1972 Alan Stivell classic *Renaissance of the Celtic Harp*, from which I learned several tunes on the harp. Truthfully, I hadn’t quite expected to pull off *Women of Ireland*, as the melody had to jump between two opposing banks of strings. This one was similarly impossible – *just do-able*. It has more – and higher – melody notes, so I had to restring one bank. The right hand jumps back and forth between the two treble banks on the body while the left-hand hammers and pulls the chords.

20. *Shenandoah* (traditional) Knutsen Symphony harp guitar

Sometime after our first dog (Shaanti) died, I heard this classic song playing somewhere, and it just seemed to click – somehow summing up my feelings precisely. I subsequently did a lot of research on it – all its fascinating variations in title, lyrics, and morphing permutations across continents and eras. The unifying thread seems to be a sense of loss and something treasured that may not be regained.



21. *Harvest Home / We Gather Together* (hymns) Otto Anderson wrap-around-arm 6-string guitar

My friend Dave Marchant once suggested I do “We Gather Together” for another holiday album someday. That lovely tune, which we always sang in church around Thanksgiving time, reminded me of another: “Harvest Home,” with its fabulous chord surprise on the second enharmonic line. My mom sent me my old Methodist hymnal for reference and here’s the result (“Harvest Home” starts it off).



22. *Peaceful Piece* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen 5-course harp mandola & harp mandolins



Nearing the end of this project, I still had two Knutsens I hadn't used, and tried them on all sorts of old existing tunes of mine. Finally, one clicked – another mid-70s Illinois untitled piece that captured me in a rare relaxed and patient musical mood. I switched out the original guitar for this trio of interweaving mandos, the large one giving me a low G an octave down and some nice new color.



23. *Perro* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Knutsen nylon-strung harp guitar & “baby pineapple” steel guitar



This tune may have the oldest backstory of any. Back in 1972, my high school friend and bandmate Steve, who was a *drummer* mind you, told me one day he had “written a song” which he called “Perro” (Spanish for “dog,” he was a dog lover, as am I). It was literally *two bars* only – the first C then F chord patterns that open the piece. But it was a lovely easy-to-play little motif, so over the years I finished it, keeping those original two bars intact. It seemed to need some other part, ergo the slide melody (perhaps the soul of perro?), originally played on a lap steel, and now played on a short scale Knutsen “pineapple-shaped” steel guitar, tuned to high G.



24. *What the Soul Wants* (G. Miner; String Fever Music, ASCAP) Merrill harp guitar

The chorus of this tune came to me in a dream – yes, a cliché, but the first and only successful time for me in all my musical life. It was apparently the soundtrack to one of those long, meandering dreams that you can’t remember when you wake up. Of course, in the cold light of day, the “the greatest melody in the world” that your dream state created invariably turns out to be terrible. Nevertheless, as I slowly drifted awake, I forced myself to continue playing the theme in my head to retain it (a simple melody over simple tonic notes). I quickly stumbled into my recording closet in my pajamas, with just enough brain cells firing to think to turn on the machine, hit REC, and quickly find the notes on a handy harp guitar. Later, fully awake, I was stunned to find that I loved it as my dream-self did. I then worked backwards to imagine what would have come *before* to get the verse. The basic chorus remains exactly as dreamt. Letting the bridge (C section) just sort of come, it then finished itself.



25. *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)* (Lennon, McCartney; Sony/ATV Tunes LLC dba ATV obo ATV (Northern Songs Catalog) Knutsen harp mandola, steel guitar & company



I was originally planning to call this album *Knutsenology*. It was my Weissenborn and Knutsen researcher pal Ben Elder who ad-libbed the new title one day (please tell me you get it or he’ll be crushed). As things were coming to a close, it occurred to me that there might be a riot if I then didn’t actually do the Beatles tune the pun comes from! This is pretty much every instrument on the album doing something. The Knutsen harp mandola starts it off, while the main melody (John Lennon) features my last remaining instrument – the psychedelic Knutsen 6-string steel guitar!



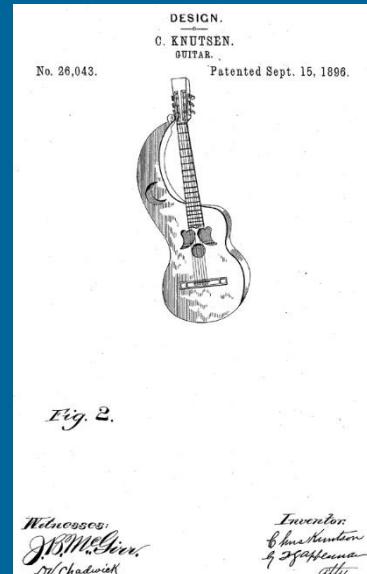
The Incredible Imagination and Instruments of Chris Knutsen

Welcome to the wonderful world of Knutsen! (P.S: The “K” is pronounced) For everything you might ever want to know about the Norwegian immigrant maker of these fascinating American musical instruments, you may want to follow up with the Noe/Most book *Chris Knutsen: From Harp Guitars to the New Hawaiian Family* and my own Knutsen Archives on the Internet.

The condensed version: Chris Knutsen (born Johan Christian Kammern) emigrated to the U.S. from Norway at three years of age, growing up in Minnesota where he learned basic masonry and carpentry skills while playing guitar and violin. He eventually moved to the state of Washington, where in 1896 seemingly out of the blue he patented a design for a 6-string guitar with a hollow arm emanating from the bass side of the body (he called it “harp shaped”). The concept had been introduced by various builders in Europe both before and after, but it’s entirely possible that Knutsen dreamt it up on his own. Two years later, he was granted a second patent, this one with a longer arm on which he could affix floating “sub-bass” strings. His wasn’t the first *harp guitar* in America, but it was the first *hollow arm* version and is the origin of all the popular hollow arm harp guitars built and played today. It led directly to the “Dyer” harp guitar – the popular vintage American instrument that so captured the imagination of today’s players. This model was built for the W. J. Dyer & Bro. Company of St. Paul, Minnesota by the Larson brothers of Chicago, luthiers par excellence, who improved Knutsen’s design. The Dyer firm had briefly distributed Knutsen’s own harp guitars, but soon licensed his patent instead, so they could contract the more professional Larsons to build them. Because of this direct connection – the Larsons having first built Knutsen’s own Symphony model design, then their own model with the recognizable “cloud shape” headstock – I included my Dyer instruments in this project as well (along with the best of the modern “Dyer copies” made today).

A more recent twist to the Knutsen story was the 2002 discovery that a Port Townsend neighbor named Otto Anderson built around 200 of Knutsen’s first instruments, most commonly the two early patent design models. I don’t own any but was able to borrow the incredible Otto Anderson 6-string guitar described shortly.

Knutsen himself built the bulk of his own instruments but is now thought to have had help from family members or local hires on occasion. It’s hard to tell – Chris Knutsen’s own workmanship ranged from exquisite to stunningly amateurish – often within a single instrument (his most egregious shortcuts inside the body where they weren’t easily seen). Ironically, his poor construction – light and poorly braced for the amount of string tension – often yielded incredible tone. So, his instruments were quite popular and appreciated...until they self-destructed! (Some of my own instruments have been re-braced in order to be functional as playing instruments.)



Knutsen was also one of the first luthiers in the States to become aware of, and immediately start building, Hawaiian guitars. The narrow-shouldered shape he used for these was later copied in Los Angeles by H. Weissenborn, whose instruments today are collected and copied around the world. We still have no idea if Knutsen came up with this iconic shape himself.

America's Hawaiian music craze really took off in 1915 after the San Francisco Exposition introduced Hawaiian music to the public on a daily basis. Knutsen took that as his cue to stop building standard harp guitars and solely concentrate on his "New Hawaiian Family" consisting of all manner of steel guitars (played on the lap with a steel slide bar), "convertible" steel guitars (played either on the lap or in standard position), along with harp mandolins, harp ukuleles and more.



Even with such a momentous decision and commitment to his new instruments, Knutsen's labels remained shoddy and rushed out. The New Hawaiian Family label would be used for years, even though it depicts older instruments, including his discontinued standard harp guitar.

My online Archives explain that Knutsen almost never used model or style or serial numbers – and if he *did* print something specific on a label – like "Sole Patentee of the 11-stringed harp guitar" (above) – he would use that label indiscriminately in instruments with completely different stringing; it held no meaning other than simple advertising. So, with random use of labels and no serial numbers or consistency of any kind, I came up with "Knutsen Archives Inventory Numbers" to collect and record information on every specimen found by this maker. It's do-able because no two of his instruments are exactly alike. Many are extremely distinctive and quite individualistic, and even vaguely standardized models can be identified by different woods and other features. For reference, in the instrument profiles that follow I've included the inventory numbers of my own small portion of the 400-plus instruments I've now cataloged online. Every year or so, someone discovers a new Knutsen "one-off" – a new extreme shape or stringing arrangement or decoration. It makes studying, collecting and playing his instruments endlessly fascinating. I hope you find these examples similarly so!



(copyright and courtesy Norma Grinstead)

Bessie Keaunui, aka Hawaiian performer Beatrice Kealoa Cook, with her Knutsen steel guitar



Track 18: *Os Amores Libres*

EADGBE

Track 21: *Harvest Home / We Gather Together*

EADGBE

Otto Anderson “Wrap-Around Arm”

Harp Guitar (owned by Flip Breskin)

c.1895–c.1898 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGP16



As mentioned earlier, many of Knutsen's early harp guitars were built by Port Townsend neighbor Otto Anderson and labeled as Knutsens. Anderson also built a few personal instruments for his family, with a charming miniature Knutsen-style hollow arm 6-string for his daughter surviving, preserved by Anderson's granddaughter Jeanette Detlor (from whom our Anderson history comes from).



(copyright & courtesy Jeanette Detlor)

Jeanette with her "Knutsen" harp guitar built by her grandfather, Otto, in front of the family home that he built in 1898 in Green Lake, WA. The home, like the guitar, is still owned by the family!

More fascinating are the two “wrap-around arm” 6-string guitars Anderson built. These are unlabeled and likely Anderson’s own idea of an “extreme Knutsen” – Knutsen himself never made or labelled any.

One is owned by another Anderson relative, while this one is in the possession of folk singer Flip Breskin, who kindly loaned it to me for Archive research and this recording project. The strikingly-grained top – of unknown wood – is now incredibly warped, as it was long ago strung in steel (originally built for light gut strings). But the fingerboard has been adjusted to compensate and it sounds spectacular.

Discovered in 1969, I believe it is the very same instrument appearing in the photograph of an unknown string quartet from the Detlor archives!



(copyright & courtesy Jeanette Detlor)

Unknown string quartet, c.1895-1898

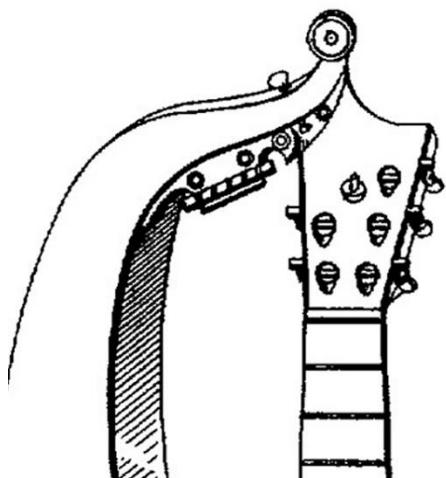
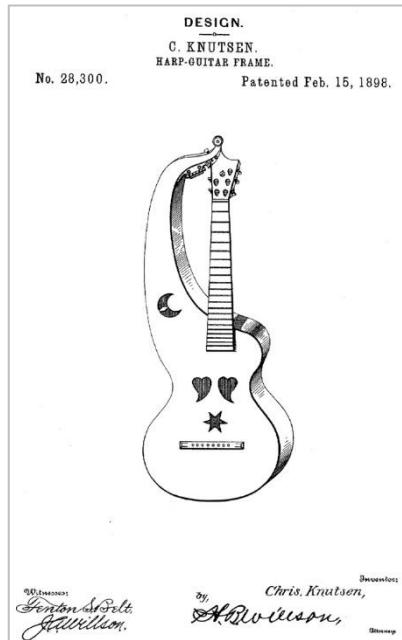


Knutsen "1898 Patent Style" Harp Guitar

c.1897–c.1898 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGP1

Two years after Knutsen's first design patent – the 6-string guitar with a short hollow "arm" – he was granted a second patent for the same basic idea but with an important difference: the arm was much longer and could now accommodate floating sub-bass strings, becoming a true harp guitar. Examples are known with either 5, 3, 2 or occasionally *no* extra bass strings.

Mine is representative of the patent drawing, which has a simple narrow protrusion holding a small nut for the bass strings, some of which must be threaded across it at extreme, impractical angles. When I received it – the first such example anyone had seen – this small extension was broken off, and I hadn't the means to track down a decent resolution image of the patent drawing (detail below), which depicts the tuners and nut for 5 sub-basses fairly accurately. So, my longtime repairman Kerry Char and I came up with a shaped fiberglass variation – it's not historically correct but does put the 5 subs in the correct (if terribly awkward) location.



Track 3: *Mood for a Day*

GA#BC#D / EADGBE

Track 23 *Perro*

GABbCD / FADGBE





An original 1898 Patent style sub-bass nut.
Knutsen made them from either wood or bone.

The late Knutsen expert Dan Most believed that most of these early instruments were built for gut strings, so mine is strung in the modern equivalent. Listen closely to Track 3 – *which has no reverb added whatsoever* – to hear the incredible sympathetic vibration of the five floating strings (activated by virtually any note played on the neck). Weighing in at an impossibly light four pounds, this is the most resonant, “alive” harp guitar I’ve ever encountered.



(copyright the National Cowboy Museum)

A well-dressed gentleman playing an early 1898-patent-style harp guitar with three sub-bass strings.





Track 11: *The Magic Pony*

DGACF / DADF#AD

Track 15: *Return to Deserted Island*

GBbCDbEb / FGDGBbD

Track 20: *Shenandoah*

ABCDG / EADGBE



Knutsen Symphony Harp Guitar

c.1898–c.1899 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGT1

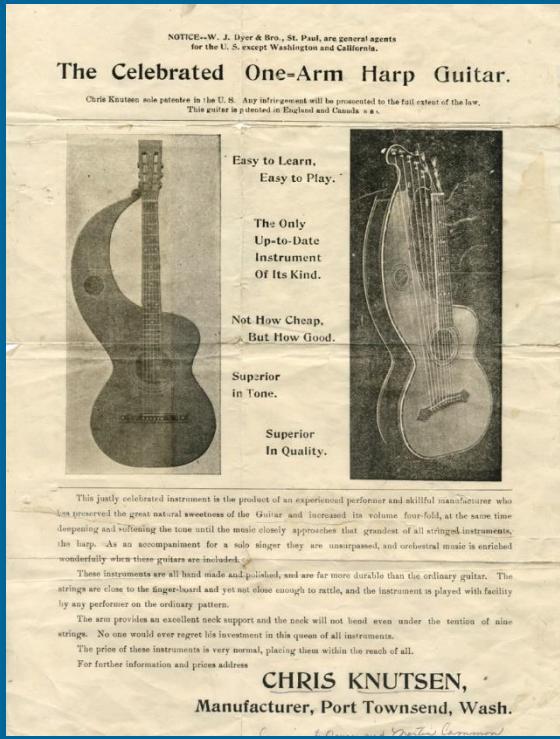
The best-sounding steel string harp guitar on the planet but difficult to capture in recording. Unbelievably airy and woody, loud and overflowing with complex overtones. Easy to play (with modern re-fret), a joy in every way.

I suspect that part of the magic is the metal tailpiece that someone long ago added. This has probably been a component of the long-term settling of the under-braced top, the haphazard engineering creating by sheer luck a mild form of “reverse (or neutral) tension bridge,” allowing more freedom for the soundboard to vibrate.

Fine construction details include subtle yellow and green wood purfling inlaid into the lovely satinwood sides. The whole instrument is gorgeous until we get to the headstock. How on earth did Knutsen think the crude, gouged-out tuner slots was a nice design choice?! This model has brass screws that serve as sub-bass string “nuts.” I removed them in an experiment into how these affected the tone and sustain of the basses. It turns out they dampen it just a bit, so I left them off – a design/construction concept that many modern harp guitar builders subsequently copied!

By now, Knutsen had settled on five sub-bass strings, tuned G-A-B-C-D, i.e: descending diatonically from the low E string on the neck. This specimen was built while Knutsen was still in Port Townsend but is coded with my “HGT” designation, as the majority of the Symphony models were built in Tacoma (1900–1905). Knutsen’s Symphony model lasted for several years, though he would simplify the bass head, and occasionally add slightly slanted frets (designed for comfort apparently). He also switched to a solid headstock and geared tuners.

I consider the design of Knutsen’s early “Symphony” model, especially the shape of the arm and bass head, to be his most sophisticated and aesthetically successful.



This flier, discovered in the case of a harp guitar still in Knutson's distant family and shared by his distant cousin Jean Cammon Findlay, revealed that W. J. Dyer & Bro. originally distributed Knutson's own instruments before contracting the Larson brothers to build more consistent models.



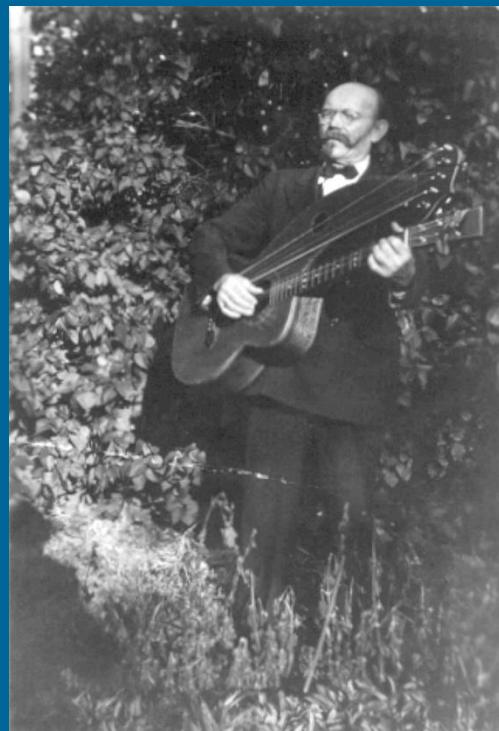
(copyright & courtesy Neil Smith)

Knutson players are invariably full of character.



1900-1902 flier from Knutson's Tacoma, Washington period. We believe the gentleman is Chris Knutson's brother Eddie.

Nothing is more exciting than finding a new Knutson harp guitar specimen with some accompanying history. The owner of the surviving instrument sent in this photo of his colorful grandfather, Paul Mathias Pihlman, playing his c.1900 instrument in 1920.



(copyright & courtesy D. Pihlman)



An unidentified women's guitar club circa 1900 with a Knutsen Symphony harp guitar.



(copyright & courtesy Gary Wright)

This spectacular cabinet card captures the Knutsen family circa 1897-1898 in Port Townsend, Washington. Chris Knutsen married his cousin Anna in 1888. Bertha (with violin) and Evalda (front) were followed in 1907 by a third daughter, Myrtle. Anna plays one of the earliest Symphony harp guitars built, while Chris holds a "missing link" instrument; the bass head is a transitional "elephant trunk" shaped affair that he experimented with before quickly settling on the final shape. He built himself several left-handed harp guitars, always with super-trebles.

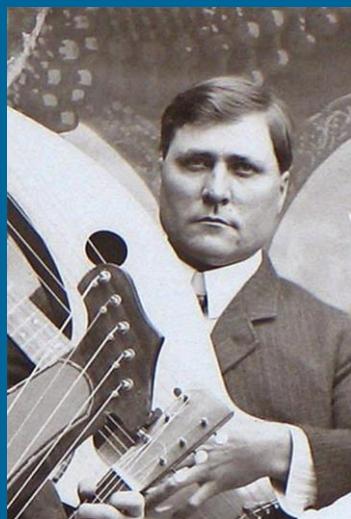


Glass of 1902.

PAYNE'S MANDOLIN AND GUITAR SCHOOL. *Loryea, Photo.*

(copyright & courtesy Dirk Vandenberg)

The single most astounding image of Knutsen harp guitars appeared in the August, 1902 Cadenza magazine with a review of a performance by Lester Payne's Mandolin & Guitar School Orchestra in Spokane, Washington. Our astonishment grew several fold when the original 23" x 14" framed photograph was discovered in 2003 and we learned that it was created by photographing the 75 members on the same photography studio stage in smaller separate groups, then developing, printing and compositing the four separate 8 x 10s together by painstakingly cutting out around the heads of the people in the lower two photos. The biggest surprise was not the 11 Knutsen Symphony harp guitars among the players but finding Chris and Anna Knutsen among them!



Chris Knutsen in 1902, now cleanshaven, and with a new left-handed 18-string harp guitar. His wife Anna, with her own new harp guitar.



Knutsen short-scale “Double Point” Harp Guitar

c.1906–c.1908 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGS72

In 1906, Knutsen moved to Seattle, where the remainder of his harp guitars would be built. He later left for Los Angeles sometime during 1914. At this same time, he changed the shape of the body, perhaps in an attempt to differentiate his instruments from the now-popular Dyer harp guitars. No longer would the four corners (“bouts”) be round; the lower bass side would now feature a pointed flare and, less commonly, Knutsen would add another flare on the opposite corner.

At this time, he also began making a significant percentage of his instruments smaller sized with much shorter scale lengths – again, never truly standardized but in the neighborhood of 19–21" as opposed to his standard 24-½–25-½" scale. We assume these short scale instruments were intended to cater to his many female and younger customers and were probably just tuned to standard pitch. I chose to tune it to a “terz guitar” (historical guitar tuning a minor third higher), so strung it accordingly and am playing this piece in “Drop D tuning” on the neck, but pitched in F.

While a charming if unusual looking instrument, combining the short scale (19.5" in this case) with his double-point body was a terrible idea. There’s zero room for a proper neck block, so these instruments simply cave in – and are tricky to get back into playing geometry. (Knutsen never used a “heel,” dovetail or otherwise, only a crude butt joint for the neck-to-body attachment.)

Popular vaudeville group Vardon, Perry & Wilber played a succession of Knutsen instruments between 1905 and 1915. Here they are circa 1907 with an early Knutsen Symphony inlaid with custom pickguards for Vardon’s aggressive picking, a one-of-a-kind double-flared mandolin and a short-scale double-point harp guitar.

Track 6: *Ode to a Heloderm*
FD♭EbAbB♭ / FCFB♭DG





Knutsen jumbo body 14-course “Lower Bass Point” Harp Guitar

c.1911–c.1913 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGS73

This wonderful Knutsen has incredibly low bass tone to spare! That's because its body is the largest known to date – significantly oversized at 18-3/4" wide, 4-5/8" deep and extra long. It also has a record eight original sub-basses (5 was the norm), so I was able to get some extra bass range and chromaticism for this tune.

Curiously, Knutsen stuck a fairly standard 25-3/4" scale neck on this – even though we know he occasionally used a longer scale. As mentioned in the previous entry, his harp guitars would now have the pointed flare on the body – what I classify as a “Lower Bass Point” style. I should add that it allows these guys to stand up by themselves without rocking over, handy in the studio!

Note that I use “course” instead of “string” for describing Knutsen instruments, because he was in the habit of doubling up certain strings (into a paired “course”) – as seen in the next entry.



The instrumentation of the “Versatile Harmony Four,” who played the 1914 season at Santa Monica, California’s Nat Goodwin Cafe, included three Knutsens. One may be the largest Knutsen known, at least equal in size to my own surviving harp guitar.

Track 9: *Sad Pig Dance*
GAbABbCDEbE / FGDGBbD





This postcard has "1914" written on it, the year Knutsen moved away from Seattle and stopped building his "lower bass point" harp guitars, like this typical specimen.



Knutsen had started doing black top finishes around 1910-1912. In his Seattle period he also offered some short-arm harp guitars like this one with just three short sub-bass strings.



How 'bout this "power trio"?!
Baritone sax and two Knutsen
harp guitars from his mid-Seattle
period. We can tell this from the
shape of their bass headstocks
and the lower bass body point
on the one visible.



I have now found two images
of the "Linrud Family Orchestra,"
which featured a Knutsen Seattle-
period harp guitar.
In both photographs, the
entire family remains
uncompromisingly dour.



Track 4: *Sea of Life*

GABCDFG / EADGBE / CDEGACD

Track 7: *Humming Song*

FF#GABbCD / EADGBE / ABDEABD

Knutsen 20-course

“Lower Bass Point” Harp Guitar

c.1913–c.1914 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGS1



This is a fascinating Knutsen harp guitar in *so many ways*.

Here we introduce Knutsen’s important invention that has influenced so many players and builders today: “super-trebles.” He installed these on a small percentage of his c.1898–1902 Symphony harp guitars, then stopped for a while. When he brought them back in Seattle, they were still 7 in number, but were now harmonically “backwards” – becoming longer (and thus lower pitched) as you move away from the neck. He obviously had a logical and musical reason for doing so, we just don’t know what it was. Neither do we know how he meant for them to be tuned – a chord, a scale, a pentatonic glissando? Most players opt for the scale, though I used two specific tunings for my tunes – one a chord that worked differently in two keys, the other a pentatonic scale covering a Chinese melody. Note that, strung in steel, they sound like a fretless zither (or even piano-like), rather than a harp (they are in fact strung in the manner of a zither).

Extremely few of Knutsen’s harp guitars have more than 5 subs – this one has 7, on what had now become an almost vertical bass headstock on his last Seattle harp guitars. Knutsen built a couple of 12-strings-on-the-neck harp guitars, and also a couple with just the *third G string* doubled. We have no idea why. This one has the top *three* strings doubled. All are strung and tuned in unison (on the standard 12-string guitar, the 3rd course would be tuned in octaves, I thought this would make more sense), and it lends a wonderful “chorus pedal” effect to the two tracks it appears on.

The instrument features an early use of koa wood – for the entire top, back and sides. It has the intriguing “Harp Guitar Factory” label. This location may have been the biggest space Knutsen utilized, but what went on there?! How many workers actually contributed to what still seems to bear the marks of only Knutsen’s own hands?



When found, this instrument included many modifications, many of which bore the signs of Knutsen’s own hands. I put this through two separate restorations with Kerry Char, leaving all the modifications for the first go-round, then removing all but two, while duplicating the original mahogany bridge so that we could install a completely new saddle for the neck strings to get it to properly intonate.

Originally there was a metal tailpiece screwed into the concave side where the endpin would be. The bridge or the sub-bass strings directly were likely tied to that in some way for support. To support what was probably a caving-in top, three small wooden braces were added to the outside of the soundboard. Another Knutsen is known with this exact same modification and it looks exactly like something Knutsen would do for a quick fix when the instrument came back to him for repairs.





For its second restoration, I took the gamble of having those removed to see what condition the top was really in. Surprisingly, the bars didn't seem to be necessary and the wood underneath was pristine. A bit of re-French polish and Kerry was able to get this looking like new. By the way, the screws in the bridge – on all the instruments you see – are original to Knutsen instruments (not incorporated into the replacement bridge).

I decided to leave the other two modifications that I attribute to Knutsen. Originally there would have been his standard L-bracket joining the two headstocks. Perhaps Knutsen predicted the unavoidable twist to the neck (which happens to some extant to all Knutsens), and beefed up the area with an entirely new, shaped joining block connecting the two heads.

All Knutsen harp guitars – other than those built by Otto Anderson – eschewed neck heels for a simple crude butt joint, as this one surely had when originally built. This one now has an “add-on” heel, which may or may not have been done by Knutsen. Normally he would have simply added an extra supporting metal bracket or two (seen on many of his instruments). This one is a crudely-carved chunk of wood patched in with a pearloid heel cap.



(copyright and courtesy Robin Amend)

Two short-scale “lower bass point” Knutsen harp guitars with super-trebles and doubled neck G strings (mentioned earlier) appear in Bert Amend’s remarkable “One Armed String Orchestra.”

So that I could better tune and record this Knutsen, I also replaced its original tuners (below) with a new strip of geared tuners and, for the friction tuners, 4:1 banjo tuners like those we use today for sub-bass strings.





(copyright and courtesy Robin Amend)

Bert Amend (on the right) plucks the strings of the band's left-handed Knutsen short-scale harp guitar while his bandmate – paired up due to his missing the opposite arm – frets the neck. This is an example of the fanciest instruments Knutsen made, and obviously a custom order for Amend, circa 1912. Note the doubled 3rd (G) string on the neck and the carved rib bone saddle for the super-trebles.



Knutsen “Zither Harp Guitar”

c.1911–c.1913 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HGS40

And now things *really* get interesting...

On this one-of-a-kind Knutsen, either Chris himself or his customer thought it would be cool to have not *one* treble bank, but *three*. They'd have to do without sub-basses, as Knutsen would use that arm and real estate to put two additional separated banks of strings.

The logical choice here would be not 3 different scales (though that would work too), but three *chords*. Indeed, it was found with each “zither bank” strung low to high with very thick to very thin strings, which would have resulted in extremely wide chords.

For “Little Martha” I found it more useful to have the first (normally located) bank continue an arpeggio of the open D chord on the neck (creating a 13-note 6/9 chord glissando!). The opposite bank provided the IV chord and the weird-sounding bank high on the arm became a Dom7sus V chord. All are pitched lower than typical super-trebles such as with the common John Doan tuning. For the two Celtic tunes, I utilized them for both extended arpeggios and melody. As I needed more than 7 melody notes, I strung overlapping scales on Banks 1 & 2, which I would then jump between as needed. Bank 3’s strings would ring in sympathy, so I still had to keep them flawlessly tuned to the key to avoid out-of-tune ambience!

For optimum tone, I ended up removing the original bone saddles for the treble banks (see next page). I suspect these were original as they match the one in the previous Amend photo and they seem so perfectly Knutsen – where *nothing* goes to waste. They literally look like they were carved from the remains of his pork rib dinner!

Track 2: *Little Martha*

DADF#AD / Treble bank 1: F#ABEF#AD /

T2: GBDEGAB / T3: GADEGAD

Track 12: *Women of Ireland*

CGDGBbD / T1: EFGABbCD / T2: BbCDEFGA /

T3: ambient (tuned to key of song, sympathetic)

Track 19: *The Black Rock*

CGDGBbD / T1: GAGAbBbCD

(first 2 strings an octave up)/

T2: BbCDEFGA /

T3: ambient





The original rib bone bridges were held in simply by tension. I eventually had Kerry Char do a second restoration on this instrument, re-French polishing the top with black dye-impregnated shellac to smooth out all the wear and tear from the saddles and creating a duplicate bridge (this time re-using the screws) in order to intonate the neck properly. He also removed the back to install new pin blocks for the treble tuners so the tuning pins would better hold pitch.

Note the original metal brackets to support the neck to body butt joint and joining the two heads.

All in all, this is a wonderful and practical musical instrument invention that could only come from the mind of Chris Knutsen!

My previous koa wood “Harp Guitar Factory” specimen shown (p.30) was one of the very last of the “pure” harp guitars Chris Knutsen made. No sooner had he left Seattle – in 1914 we believe – than he decided to dedicate himself to his “New Hawaiian Family” of instruments. This would include harp guitars, but of very different sort – they would be “convertible,” in order to play lap steel style when the need arose.



It's ironic that Knutsen stopped building his standard harp guitars in 1914 to concentrate on Hawaiian instruments – especially when so many Hawaiian bands would feature those abandoned harp guitars for another full decade. Here are just a few of the better images that feature Seattle-made Knutsen harp guitars.



(copyright and courtesy Donatella Moores)

A spectacular hand-colored vintage photo c.1919 of The Hawaiian Novelty Five featuring King Benny Nawahi (playing mandolin) with his brother on a Dyer harp guitar and another playing a c.1913 black-top Knutsen.



Bells Famous Hawaiians was a well-known Hawaiian music and dance group that played nationwide, including the Western Vaudeville Circuit.



(copyright and courtesy Don Stewart)

Holldorff's Royal Hawaiian Serenaders featured a c.1913-1914 Knutsen "double point" harp guitar with a 12-string neck.



The 1934 Hollywood film *Down to Their Last Yacht* featured Sol Hoopii (center) leading a Hawaiian band. The harp guitarist plays a Knutsen double-point like the previous instrument, except that *all eleven* string courses (neck and sub-basses) are doubled!

(copyright and courtesy Soren Venema)

Knutsen 12-course Harp Steel Guitar

c.1920–1928 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HHW1

Track 8: *Perplexual Movement No. 1*

AE / BDGABD / AC#EA



Knutsen was one of the very first American luthiers to build a dedicated acoustic guitar solely for Hawaiian-style lap steel playing – that is, a guitar that lies flat on the lap played with a “slide” (typically a steel bar) in open tuning. From the beginning, he made them with this delightful body shape – something that became “standard” for California acoustic Hawaiian guitars, often known today simply as “Weissenborns,” after their most popular maker.

For several years, Knutsen built just 6-string versions, though many were “convertibles,” with short necks that allowed simple first position fretted chords to be optionally playable. Eventually, he made all with fully hollow necks (technically neckless, just the upper body tapering into the headstock at some point along the way).

It didn't take him long to decide to add harp strings to these models as well. First, he attached two sub-bass strings via a simple arm screwed to the side.



Less often, he added four additional short treble strings. We have no idea how he intended any of these strings to be tuned, especially the trebles – what does one *do* with just four high-pitched strings?!

I tuned them to notes meant to counterpoint the simple ukulele part for my tune, and at the same time, strung them in Nylgut rather than steel as on the neck, for a different sonic experiment (they sound great in nylon!). The basses are steel strings, tuned to the I and V chord, while the neck tuning is my own – in fact, the tuning itself forms both the melody and harmony of the piece (*that* simplifies things!).

Many of Knutsen's steel guitars from his last period – 1920 until his death in 1930 – are quite ornate; a common feature is the “wave” portion of the top, made from a different colored wood (possibly “monkeypod” on this one). If I squint, the larger spruce part reminds me of a Gibson Les Paul – I just love this design element of his! This one has a beautiful book-matched back of Brazilian rosewood.



My code designation for these instruments – “HHW” – stands for “Harp-Hawaiian, Weissenborn-shaped.” That’s what Dan Most and I called them back in the late 1990’s. I now call them “Harp Steel Guitars” (*harp steels* for short) after finding evidence that that’s what Knutsen himself called them.





(copyright and courtesy of Robert Armstrong)

Circa 1918: The Hawaiian guitar player in The Sunshine Trio plays an 8-course Knutsen harp-steel.



(copyright and courtesy of Ben Elder)

This unbelievably obscure stereo card is from a c.1917-1920s silent comedy short starring Bobby Vernon, his mother Dorothy, and Florence Lee. Mother is about to bean her son with a Knutsen harp-steel that has had its arm and two sub-bass strings removed for a better grip.



Track 17: *Perplexual Movement No. 2*
B♭B♭ / B♭F G A B♭ D

Knutsen 8-course Harp Steel Guitar

c.1920 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HHW25



This adorable custom Knutsen is both abnormally slender and somewhat smaller than a typical Knutsen steel guitar. It has a 23-3/8" scale in place of his "standard" steel scale of just under 25". Thus, I *should* have strung and tuned it to a higher pitch. Instead, I strung the neck to a close, mid-range "melody chord" in B♭ and the two sub-basses in higher octaves for the "drone" part for the tune.

It has the same arm attachment for its two sub-basses as #HHW1, so has a "2+6" configuration. It's made almost entirely of solid mahogany and sounds lovely. In fact, all of Knutsen's steel guitars have good to great tone, no matter what woods or body shapes and sizes he used.





Knutsen-reconfigured 6-course Steel Guitar

c.1925–1930 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HHW18

Track 25: *Norwegian Wood*

F♯ADF♯AD



This one is fascinating. It may be Knutsen's most outrageously-decorated instrument ever, but it wasn't always this wild. It's probably easier to just read its entry in the online Archives with its many additional photos, as there's a *lot* going on here!





In short, this started out life as a left-handed 12-course (2+6+4) harp steel, then was switched over to a right-handed instrument with the same configuration, and finally, turned into a plain 6-string instrument.

I believe all this was done by Knutsen himself, and as he went along, every time he had to move strings around and plug holes, he simply inserted new decorations where the previous holes were! So it just got fancier and fancier, though he cheated on the screw holes on the sides of the neck, merely filling them with decorative bridge pins. Note that I still give it the HHW code since it *did* begin life as a harp steel.

Amazingly, it's still in one piece and still sounds great. Another Knutsen puzzle is the fact that his tops are *literally* puzzles. All those different shapes of wood or plastic are not inlaid into the top – they *are* the top – thin pieces assembled like a puzzle, all crude butt-joint joinery, with the flimsiest bits of cloth tape underneath (if *that*) to help secure things. It's astounding that any have survived.





Knutsen “Teardrop” Steel Guitar

c.1915 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HTD5

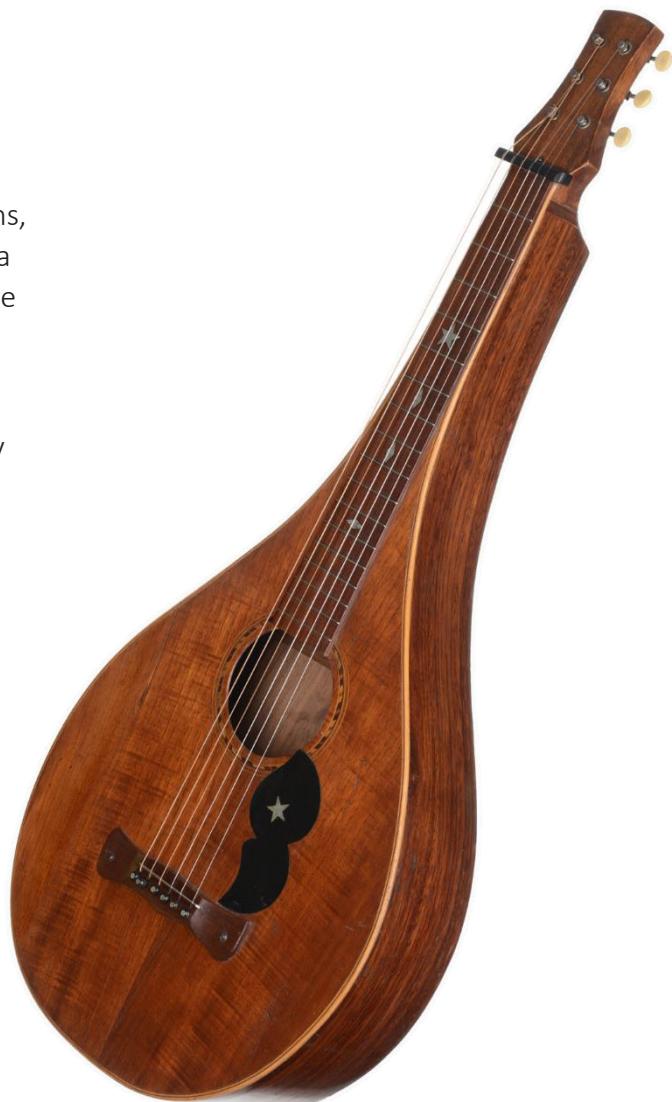
Track 4: *Sea of Life*

GCFGBD



Here's another Hawaiian guitar body shape that Knutsen may or may not have come up with. Both he and Weissenborn came out with versions, Weissenborn's being wider and shallower, with a more severe triangular shape, while Knutsens are deeper – this one has a very resonant 5" body depth – and are more rounded in shape.

My guesses for the woods are flamed mahogany for the top and Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides. Either way it is perhaps my favorite Knutsen steel guitar for tone; ironically, its full range was unused, as I only played 2 or 3 strings for the simple melody on its selection. Still, subtlety and sustain were required, and this instrument had plenty of both.





Knutsen "Baby Pineapple" Steel Guitar

c.1914–1920s Knutsen Archives Inventory #HP6

Track 23: *Perro*

EGCDEG



Knutsen's restlessness led him to create additional sizes and shapes for his steel guitars. During his New Hawaiian Family phase, he introduced yet another, which I dubbed the "Pineapple" model, as its squarish shape seems to emulate the pineapple-shaped ukulele introduced by other makers in that period.

I dubbed this one a "baby" as it is much smaller, with a short 20-5/8" scale. Hence, for this recording, I strung it to a higher pitch to match.

Knutsen 10-course “Upper Treble Point” Convertible Harp Steel Guitar

c.1914–1920s Knutsen Archives Inventory #HCP1

As discussed earlier, in 1914 Knutsen jumped headlong into the Hawaiian music craze – so much so that he would never again build a standard harp guitar, even though his older models would remain popular and in use in Hawaiian bands for years.

In their place, he designed a new “convertible” instrument that could be played either Spanish style (fingering the frets on the neck as normal) or Hawaiian style (on the lap with a steel bar). This was accomplished by severely adjusting the action (“action” is the height of the strings off the fingerboard) with brute force – close to the neck for standard playing, and higher off the neck for slide playing. He already had all the elements in place from his earliest Symphony harp guitars – an L-bracket connecting the 6-string and bass heads, and a simple butt joint attaching the neck to the body, often strengthened by another bracket.

For the fully convertible guitar, all he had to do was lengthen the head bracket and include a longer slot for a wingnut to tighten it, then reduce the neck-to-body joint to a minimum, scooping out the neck near the body and securing it with two L-brackets. It *does* work, although the fretted necks are never as comfortable to play as his earlier dedicated harp guitars. In fact, on many specimens, he didn’t even bother with this option, instead using *inlaid* frets, and a tall Hawaiian nut. This prevented any possibility of playing as a standard guitar as these “harp guitars in appearance” could *only* be played on the lap!

For its tune, which I originally imagined as a “bottleneck guitar” technique, I ended up just playing Hawaiian style, but with the ability to add syncopated sub-bass notes at the same time.

Track 1: *Midwest Memories*
GCDE / GBDGBD





(copyright and courtesy Amy Mills)

This charming female quintet chose to include three of Knutsen's unusual New Hawaiian Family instruments in their group: a harp mandolin, convertible harp-steel guitar and Weissenborn-shaped harp steel.



Knutsen 15-course “No Point” Convertible Harp Steel Guitar

c.1920–1928 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HCN3

This rare version has fooled many into thinking it was a standard harp guitar – but no, it’s just like the previous convertible, with the difference that the body has no pointed flare on the upper bout, the common design. Additionally, Knutsen included 5 sub-basses, the only harp steel to have this many (why others don’t is a mystery). Like his Weissenborn-shaped steels, Knutsen’s hollow-neck convertible harp-steels often included super-treble strings.

There is just one other Knutsen steel guitar (a 6-string) with this “Fender-style” 6-tuners-in-a-row headstock. This one is backwards, with a very uniquely shaped sub-bass head to offset it.

Again, I used this only as a Hawaiian guitar, the three string banks and pitch registers providing unique voices for various parts of the tune’s arrangement.

Track 15: *Return to Deserted Island*
E♭FGB♭C / GBDGBD / DEGA





Knutsen “Lower Bass Point” Harp Mandolin

c.1906–1908 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HM35

For some time, I assumed Knutsen built his first harp mandolin at the end of 1910, when a competitor’s 14-year Design Patent ran out. But this instrument has a label that appeared in the 1906-1908 timeframe, which may be accurate; in fact, this could be his earliest harp mandolin.

It’s different from others in being quite small – just 9-3/8" wide. The body’s pointed flare is on the *bass* side (hence my “model designation”), which may indicate an earlier specimen. More common are those with the flare moved to the treble side (seen next). The scale is Knutsen’s standard of about 13-5/8" (with the saddle moved to 13-7/8" to intonate properly).



Track 22: *Peaceful Piece*

GDAE



You’ve obviously noticed that it has no extra bass strings – so why is it called a “*harp* mandolin”? Because the body emulates the look of his harp guitars – and remember that his first harp guitars had no extra bass strings either – the *hollow arm* was the point, advertised as improving the tone (highly debatable on these smaller instruments).

Wearing my scholar’s hat, I *call* these harp-mandolins, but *classify* them as hollow-arm mandolins (which keeps me out of trouble).

This one is a nice sounding instrument, clean and quiet, but nothing exceptional.

Two more (fully-limbed) members of Bert Amend’s group seen earlier, one plays a full-size Lower Bass Point Knutsen harp mandolin.



Track 7: *Humming Song*

GDAE

Track 22: *Peaceful Piece*

GDAE



(copyright and courtesy Colin McCubbin)

Knutsen “Lower Treble Point” Harp Mandolin

c.1910–1915 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HM1

As mentioned earlier, eventually Knutsen switched around the body design to put the flare on the right or treble side. Or he may have done both simultaneously, as he never seemed to settle on any one design for long. He rarely even bothered to make a permanent form mold for production!

These flat top instruments usually sound wonderful, as – hollow arm effect or not – they have large wide bodies and are typically underbraced. This is my favorite-sounding Knutsen mandolin, quite rich and resonant.



A black-top “Lower Treble Point” Knutsen harp mandolin appeared as part of Awai's Royal Hawaiian Quartet, which performed at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco in 1915. Curiously, Knutsen's harp mandolins seem to have been created before the seemingly more obvious harp ukulele.



Knutsen “Guitar-Shaped” 8-course Harp Mandolin

c.1910 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HM2

Early on, I found myself fantasizing about Knutsen “What If?” instruments – the most obvious being a “true” harp mandolin with additional sub-bass strings. The late Dan Most and I were *sure* something that wild would have to turn up eventually...and so it did!

This was the first one ever discovered. Dan found it hanging one day in a Tacoma vintage guitar store and tried unsuccessfully to obtain it; years later I managed to talk the owner out of it. I’ve since cataloged a total of seven of these attractive guitar-shaped harp mandolins that have the four additional bass strings. No suggested tuning for the subs has ever been found, so owners have free rein.

Knutsen started using black dye-impregnated shellac around 1910 and made a huge number of striking instruments with red mahogany bodies and black tops.

Track 5: *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*
F#BDF#/GDAE



(from the collection of the late Bob Brozman)

This photograph was found in an oversize instrument case containing a matched pair of black-top “Lower Bass Point” harp guitar and “Lower Treble Point” harp mandolin.



Track 10: *The Friends I Finally Met*

EbCGD / GDAE

Track 18: *Os Amore Libres*

DDEE / GDAE

Knutsen “Lower Treble Point” 8-course Harp Mandolin

c.1913 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HM3

Though the “Lower Treble Point” was Knutsen’s most common harp mandolin style, he rarely chose to add bass strings to it as with the guitar-shaped style – in fact, this is the only example known so far.

I did some experimenting with the basses for the Galician duet piece. Instead of four individual low notes – which I didn’t require for the arrangement – I grouped them into two double-strung courses like those on the neck. This was to extend the melody range by two additional notes I was missing on the fretted neck. They appear only once, and it was much more trouble than it was worth!

For the “Friends” solo, I used the entire instrument like a miniature harp guitar, using every contemporary trick in the book. There is very little reverb added – that cavernous knock you hear is a natural effect of the strange woods. These woods have never been identified, some type of walnut being a frequent guess. The key ingredient here is that we’re seeing some of Knutsen’s infamous “re-purposed wood.” It might have been part of a table or other fine piece of furniture at one time, with the original finish possibly being left on!

In the “Friends” piece, I got additional tuned high-pitched notes by inserting individual bone pieces under each string course. I decided to just leave them in for the photo session.





Knutsen 5-course Harp Mandola

c.1913–1914 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HMA2

Another “Knutsen fantasy instrument” on my wish list was a harp mandolin in a larger size, corresponding to the tenor and octave mandolas and mandocellos so ubiquitous in mandolin orchestras of the time. Knutsen was surely aware of this craze, so perhaps he was so single-mindedly concentrating on his Hawaiian line that he didn’t go after that market.

He *did* make two harp mandolas and one incredible harp-bandurria; perhaps others will be discovered as well. The other mandola is a standard 4-course tenor mandola, this one is an unusual *five*-course version, perhaps inspired by the Vega Company’s combination mandolin-mandolas of 1914.

The scale is 19-1/4", so was probably meant to be tuned in fifths covering the range of a tenor and octave mandola. The problem is those instruments are a *fourth* apart, so the open 4 notes of each don’t overlap. I chose a compromise that gave me bits of each and a nice modal chord for my piece in G. It’s a wonderful sounding instrument.

Track 22: *Peaceful Piece*
GDGDA





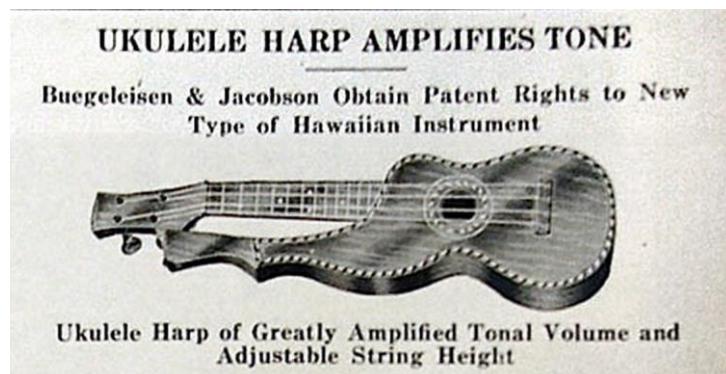
Track 8: *Perplexual Movement No. 1*
GCEA



Knutsen Harp Ukulele

c.1915–1930 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HU16

It's not clear when Knutsen started making his harp ukuleles, but he certainly started going full blast after 1915, and he continued making them until his death. Like his standard harp mandolins, they only had the hollow arm, never any extra strings.



(copyright and courtesy of Glenn Cornick)

This young and fully-engaged harp-uke player's name is Audell Wilson, c.1930.

Many of them have a "Patent Applied For" label, which would have been Knutsen's third patent, but it was never granted. It pertained to the "convertibility" feature discussed earlier in his harp steel guitars. In this case, it wasn't in order to play using two very different techniques, it was for a simple *action adjustment* (the height of the strings off the fingerboard). This patent would have then theoretically applied to *any* of his past and future instruments with a hollow arm. *All* have a bracket connecting the two heads – it need only be slotted and tightened with a screw or wingnut – and all of his instruments always had the neck attaching to the body with a simple butt joint. The necks could thus be forcefully (if unwisely!) torqued, bent and re-secured for the player's fretting comfort.



Knutsen Harp Taropatch

c.1915–1920 Knutsen Archives Inventory #HT5

During the Hawaiian music craze, American builders created their own version of an obscure ukulele variant – the “taro-patch fiddle” or simply, *taropatch*. America’s version would be double-strung, typically of a larger size, and always rare and non-uniform.

Knutsen jumped right into this new concept with two sizes of taropatch – this small tenor-sized version, of which three are known, and a giant baritone size (2 known). This one is made out of Knutsen’s infamous “fake koa” – actually red gum. My restorer (Bill Fiorella on this one) had to partially refinish it, including a patched side, and mentioned how the unknown wood was reacting – saying, “It’s weird, it’s so...I don’t know...gummy.”

The doubled course stringing gives it more of a “fantasy” quality, perfect for my little musical experiment.



Track 17: *Perplexual Movement No. 2*

GCEA



This incredible personal Knutsen family photograph was taken in Los Angeles in 1916 or 1917 and includes (l-r) Chris Knutsen's daughter Myrtle, his niece Margaret, and his granddaughter Lacretia.

The three Knutsen harp ukes they're holding include a standard ukulele, a large taropatch, and a large ukulele.

(copyright and courtesy Linda Cameron)



Track 1: *Midwest Memories*

GABCDE / EGDGBD

Track 14: *Fossils*

A_bABCDE_b / EGDGAD



Dyer Style 8 Harp Guitar c.1910

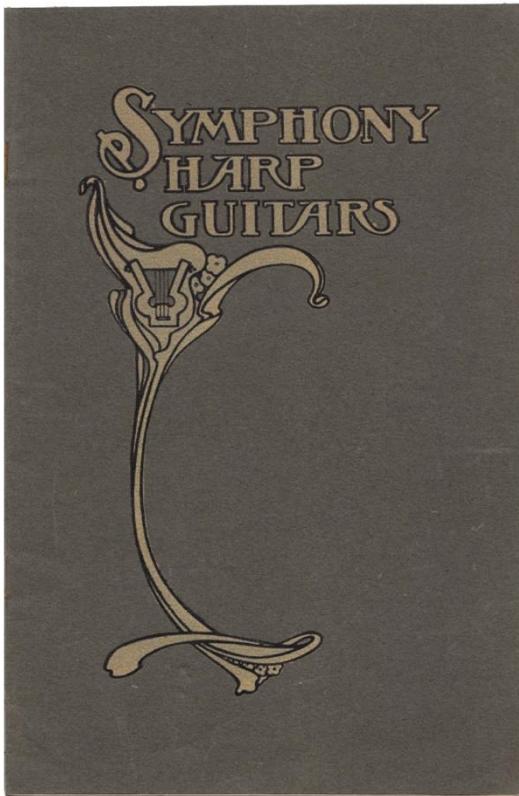
We now leave the specific instruments built by Chris Knutsen and proceed to “the Dyer harp guitar.” As mentioned in the introduction earlier, the large Midwest musical instrument firm W. J. Dyer & Bro. of St. Paul, Minnesota briefly distributed some of Knutsen’s harp guitars. Although Knutsen’s instruments were extremely fine sounding, and – at that time – fairly solidly and cleanly built, the Dyer firm seems to have quickly grown weary of Knutsen’s lack of consistency and occasional unprofessional shortcuts in his instruments.



(copyright and courtesy John Hansen)

Patent holder Chris Knutsen hand signed the Dyer labels during the first years of production.

After a short period (somewhere between a year and a few years), they convinced Knutsen to instead *license* his patent design to them and hired August and Carl Larson of Chicago to build the “Symphony harp guitar.” The Larsons’ first instruments were patterned closely after the typical c.1900 Knutsen model like my Symphony specimen #HGT1. But by the end of 1904, they had aesthetically redesigned the instrument into this form (which I categorized as the Dyer “Type 2”). Today, it is the most ubiquitous and recognizable harp guitar in the world. Within a few years, they also added a sixth sub-bass to Knutsen’s five. Though never published, it’s almost certain that the new standard tuning was thus FGABCD which the Gibson Co. and others had introduced earlier.

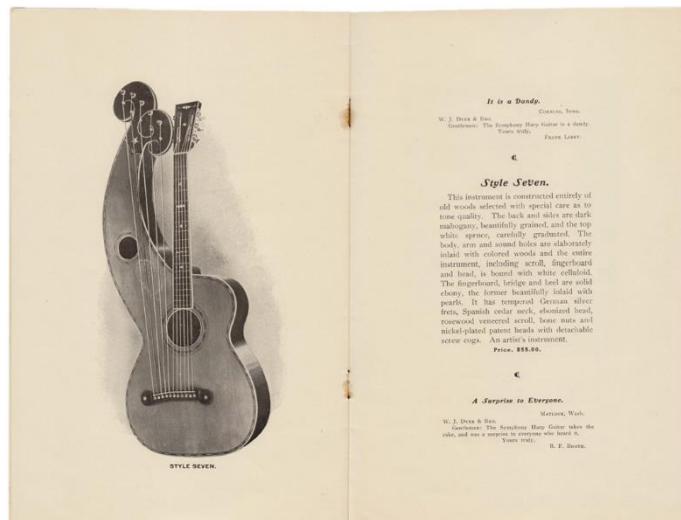


(copyright The Harp Guitar Foundation)

W. J. Dyer & Bro. Symphony Harp Guitars
catalog, c. 1906

Two Dyer catalogs – long hoped for as potential “Holy Grails” of harp guitar history – have recently been found. Unfortunately, neither sheds light on exactly when the instruments were introduced, nor details on their serial number sequences. The catalogs show only four of the five “styles” (trim levels); mysteriously missing is the top-of-the-line Style 8, with its full “tree-of-life” mother-of-pearl fingerboard and abalone binding. Though ostensibly made with higher grade woods and finer attention to detail, there doesn’t appear to be any tonal qualitative differences between the models.

Of the many dozen Dyers I have heard and played, nearly all sounded great to spectacular. I’m happy to report that this Style 8 is one of the latter.



(copyright The Harp Guitar Foundation)

A page from the catalog



(copyright and courtesy Rick Mummert)

This nattily-attired Dyer player is Jessie Runyan Hughes, born in Iowa in 1872 and died in Nebraska in 1922.



**Valentine Abt praises the
"SYMPHONY" HARP GUITAR**

Messrs. W. J. Dyer & Bro.,
St. Paul, Minn.

Dear Sirs:- Let me express my appreciation of the good
you have done guitarists in the manufacture of your
Symphony Harp Guitar.
The guitar with its added basses, its excellent tone
and far reaching quality, should prove to be quite a boon
to all having the advancement of the instrument heart.
Very truly yours,
VALENTINE ABT."

The "Symphony" has no rival in combined **power** and **quality** of tone.

Sold on Easy Payments.
Write for Free Catalog.

W. J. DYER & BRO.
Dept. 85, ST. PAUL, MINN.



Valentine Abt

This ad appeared in the May, 1910 issue of *The Crescendo* and ran for several months. Valentine Abt was an unusual multi-instrumentalist "virtuoso" player of America's BMG movement (Banjo, Mandolin & Guitar) in that his two main instruments were the mandolin and the pedal harp. Like most in his field, he played and taught guitar as well. He may or may not have actually owned or played a Dyer, but clearly had first-hand experience hearing and assessing it, or he would not have written his testimonial, a boon for the Dyer firm.



(copyright and courtesy of Robert Armstrong)

Circa 1919: The Hawaiian Novelty Five, featuring King Benny Nawahi on steel guitar, must have presented quite a visual – two Dyer harp guitars and a c.1913 black-top Knutsen! Note the extreme playing wear on the instruments.

Todd Jones, c.1921.

His descendant Perlita Henry writes:

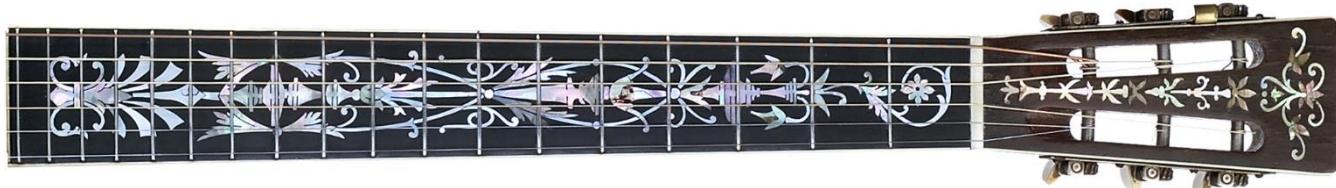
"Todd Jones (my maternal grandfather) was born in 1897 in Warm Springs, Virginia. He was the sixth of eleven children born to Albert Sidney Jones and Eliza Brooks. Todd inherited his musical ability from his mother's side of the family. He and his brother Bernard and older sister Beulah all played instruments. In 1918, Todd married Alice Bolden Fortune (1899-1997), who also lived in Warm Springs. He served in the armed services during World War I. The couple had three children. Todd worked as a waiter at the Homestead Hotel at Hot Springs. He also played with a local music group, which included his brother Bernard and other men from his community."



(copyright and courtesy of Perlita Henry)



A proud Dyer owner and adoring fan, circa 1915



Track 14: *Fossils*
GDAE

Dyer Style 20 Harp Mandolin c.1907–1908

The second discovered Dyer catalog, which was issued by the fall of 1907 revealed that the Larsons introduced their hollow arm harp mandolin at or before this date, and likely beat Knutsen to market with it. At this stage, the body's pointed flares were on opposite sides, just like Knutsen's "double point" harp guitars.



Page from the 1907 Dyer catalog



Dyer Style 35 Harp Mandolin c.1916

The previous harp mandolin body plan – in two styles of trim – was made for about two years, at which time the Larsons redesigned it so that the pointed flares were on the same side. Though I’m only guessing, I imagine a scenario in which Knutsen complained to the Dyer Company that the first model copied the double-point harp guitars that he had introduced perhaps a year before.

These two somewhat different specimens sounded identical to each other, so I strung the first in softer-sounding silk & steel, and this one in full steel (bronze winding).



Track 14: *Fossils*

GDAE



In late 1917, Dyer expanded the line with harp mandolas and harp mandocellos, creating a complete "Symphony Harp Plectral Quartet." (Cadenza ad, Nov, 1917)





(copyright and courtesy Erik Carter)

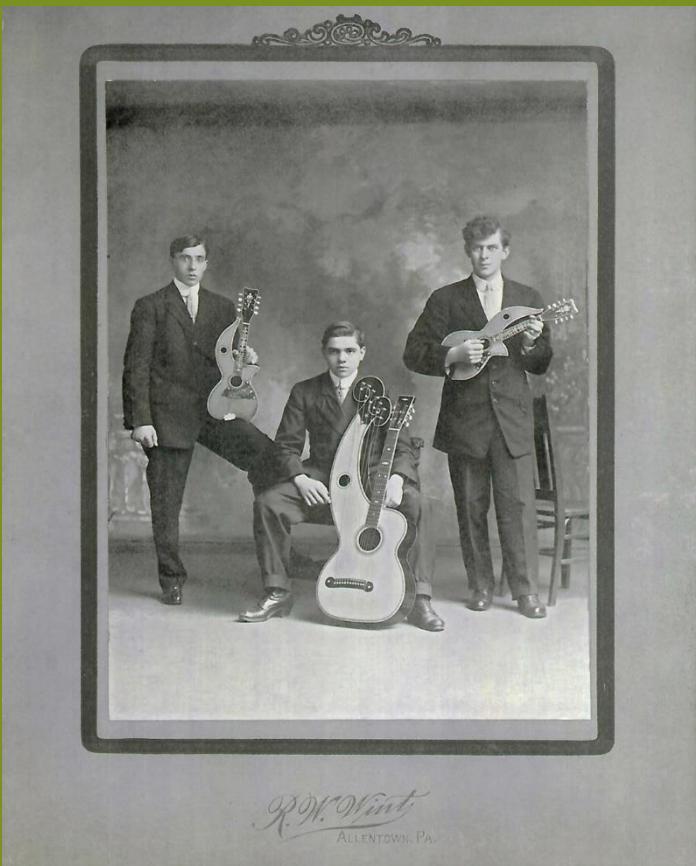
Different ensembles circa 1910-1915, each with multiple Dyer harp mandolins and harp guitar.

Top left, the Greater Invincible Concert Company from Kansas City, with Gibson harp guitar and mandolins alongside the Dyers.

Top right, matching instruments and outfits.

Left, an Allentown, Pennsylvania cabinet card of a well-dressed trio. Both gentlemen play the top-of-the-line Style 50 Dyer harp mandolins with vine inlay on the fretboard.

Below, the Dyer Symphony Harp Quartet from the Nov, 1910 *Cadenza*.



(copyright and courtesy Gordon Dow)



5-course Harp Mandola

Attributed to the Larson Brothers c.1915–1920

Though it has no label or markings, certain features – and just the very *vibe* – of this fantastic instrument point to it being built by the Larson brothers. The strip of ebony showing underneath the edge of the fingerboard binding is one of their telltale “trademarks.” It’s just over 16” wide and 4” deep, the dark mahogany body appearing like a perfect mate to a Dyer harp guitar. The scale is 18-1/4” – shorter than the comparable Knutson seen earlier – but with its huge size and depth, not to mention fine design and construction, it is a stunning-sounding instrument. The original intended tuning may have been a combination of octave and tenor mandola, which is what I did, tuning it fully in fifths starting from a low G.

Track 14: *Fossils*

GDAEB





Merrill Harp Guitar 2007

The first accurate reproduction of a Dyer harp guitar was probably the one Stephen Bennett commissioned from Jim Merrill in 2000. Known for exquisite Martin copies and similar high end acoustic guitars, Merrill carefully duplicated Stephen's 1909 Dyer Style 4 ("Big Mama") and knocked it out of the park. (After playing it professionally for years, Stephen eventually switched to a new Kathy Wingert harp guitar.) Merrill sporadically made additional Dyer copies, all great to wonderful. This one – his 14th – came through my Harp Guitar Music business on consignment. Though defective (a cracked arm), it was the finest harp guitar I had ever heard – so I asked the buyer if could record a couple pieces with it before shipping it off. He agreed, and I include them now in this project. It turned out that Jim Merrill had experimented with this instrument by using laminated braces (ebony sandwiched between spruce), just as the Larson brothers had patented and used in a few of their own harp guitars.



Track 13: *Miner Lullaby in a Major Key*

GABCDE / F♯GDGAD

Track 24: *What the Soul Wants*

GABCDE♭ / EGDGAD





Track 16: *Glad Dave's Rag*
GABCDEb / EGDGAD

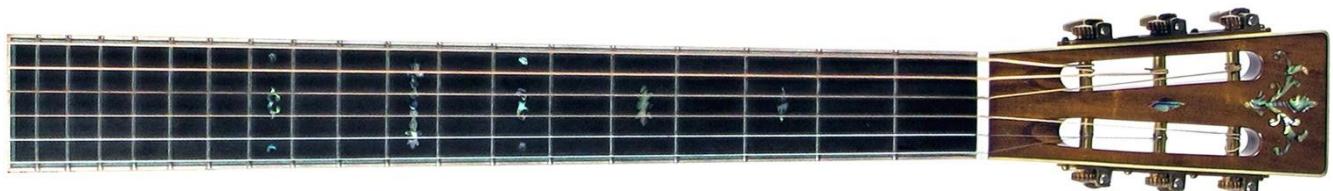


Merrill Custom Style 7-½ Harp Guitar

2014

Though a die-hard fan of vintage instruments, I eventually decided that I should keep my near-irreplaceable Dyer Style 8 at home and get a modern instrument for taking out of the house. By this point in time, the modern harp guitar craze was exploding and numerous boutique luthiers had built Dyer “copies,” variants, or their own Dyer-inspired hollow-arm designs. After weighing my favorite builders, I finally went back to Jim Merrill, with the goal of creating something like serial no. 14 that I loved so much (see previous pages). My first request was to utilize the same laminated braces – just in case it was part of the magic. I had a big hankering to use koa for the back and sides – due no doubt to my love of Knutsens – and he happened to have a set. Having built one with an identical set and pronouncing it his favorite-sounding instrument, I was then convinced. I designed a “fantasy” model of trim – somewhere between a Dyer Style 7 & 8, with extravagant but subtle multi-ply binding and Paua abalone. A stunningly beautiful instrument, with tone similar to #14, it was wonderful. Yet in a serendipitous twist, I sold it after winding up with Merrill serial no. 1, the iconic instrument played on many favorite recordings by my hero Stephen Bennett.





Chris Knutsen's Legacy

Over the last two or three decades, dozens of luthiers have made copies of the Dyer harp guitar; these new instruments now number in the high hundreds – more, possibly, than the 500–600 that the Larson brothers themselves built in total. The reason is simple: the design looks spectacular, sounds fantastic (if built properly), but most importantly, it was given iconic status by Michael Hedges, Stephen Bennett, Andy McKee and many more that have followed.

On the other hand, I know of extremely few “copies” of Knutsen harp guitars – certainly none that are meant to be actual recreations. His smaller instruments have ironically fared better. Canadian Michael Dunn has built many popular Knutsen-inspired harp ukuleles, and more recently the Powell brothers in Idaho introduced their Tonedevil harp mandolin, patterned after my black top guitar-shaped specimen. Their harp guitars also feature a very Seattle-period Knutsen-esque sub-bass headstock, and the brothers have been a fan of his instruments since the beginning.

Perhaps another reason that Knutsen copies aren’t attempted is because, while there is *one* consistent Dyer Type 2 design (their other two models are extremely rare), there are *endless* Knutsen designs – and none have ever become remotely iconic.

As far as vintage instrument collectability, here again the Dyer reigns supreme, for all the reasons mentioned above. Knutsens have their fans among collectors and players alike, but an equal number disparage Knutsens for their inconsistency, unattractiveness and often terrible condition when found. To be sure, they require a lot more work to restore, and even more alterations to make fully playable.

Yet, in the world of harp guitars – and here I include historical, modern, America and worldwide – Knutsen may be the most important creator of them all. Beyond his boundless creativity and output (400 instruments known and counting) he gave us the American steel string hollow arm harp guitar, which, in his hands, and then the Larson brothers’ via the Dyer Co., has proven the most popular harp guitar form now and for the foreseeable future.

That alone cements Knutsen’s place in the history books, but look also at what happened with his new Hawaiian guitar shape: it was productionized by Hermann Weissenborn to become another hugely popular icon today with vintage and modern instruments in the thousands being played.

His hollow arm harp ukuleles and harp mandolins have also inspired copies and variants by many luthiers across the globe, besides those mentioned above.

And finally, a “novelty” offshoot of Knutsen’s original 1898–1900 harp guitars is especially significant: his additional treble harp strings. However he meant them to be used, in John Doan’s hands in the 1980s they became melodic “super-trebles,” directly spawning a modern redesign, the “Sullivan-Elliott concert harp guitar” that, with its own offshoots and variants, has today become nearly as ubiquitous as the Dyer.

Knutsen would have loved it.



(copyright and courtesy Linda Cameron)

Chris Knutsen (center), circa 1916–1917 at a family picnic, perhaps in Los Angeles' Echo Park, near his home.



The End?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jaci Rohr and Frank Doucette for their meticulous editing and proofreading.

The Musical Mischief of Gregg Miner
meets
The Imagination and Instruments of Chris Knutsen

