

# Harp Guitars of the House of Stathopoulos

Paul Fox & Gregg Miner



That sharp modern cutaway against the wide lower bout, set off by the lovely, flowing heart-shaped soundhole. *Epiphone*? No, but close. These are the early harp guitars of the House of Stathopoulos – before the formation of the Epiphone company in 1923.

Just three are known, with two surviving, and they are special indeed. In this article, Paul Fox describes the first of them found, while co-author Gregg Miner introduces its near match and an even more unexpected model!

We begin with Paul Fox's discovery, what he called "*A Surreal Missing Link.*"

## History

The House of Stathopoulo Harp Guitar is one of the rarest Epiphone instruments anywhere in the world, and the only example known to exist.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, it was acquired by Dave Berryman as part of a collection of the late Jim Fisch, co-author of the book, *Epiphone: The House of Stathopoulo*. It is also an instrument that provides a glimpse into a very transitional period during the formation of what would become one of the most recognizable names in guitar history, Epiphone, as well as establishing a definitive link to real origins of another legendary, one-of-a-kind instrument; The Roy Smeck Octochorda.

The first era of the Stathopoulo legacy starts in 1903, when a 40-year-old Greek immigrant named Anastasios Stathopoulo came to New York from the Turkish city of Smyrna. As evidenced by an early classified ad from the *New York Tribune*, he soon established himself as a “manufacturer of musical instruments, and repair services for violins.

DAILY TRIBUNE, SUNDAY, JUNE 3, 1906.		
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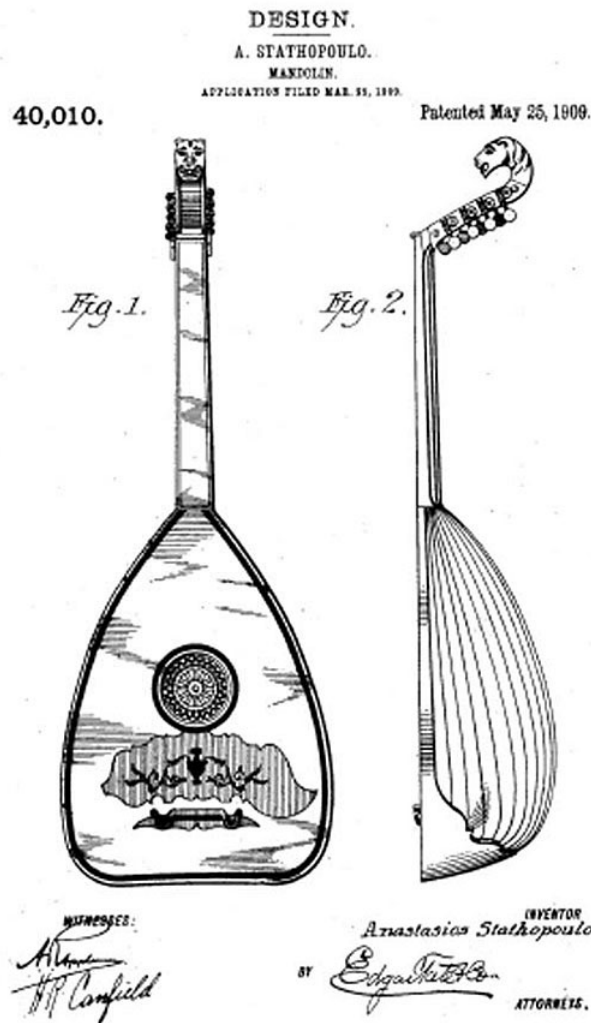
1906 classified advertisement from the *New York Tribune* for A. Stathopoulo claiming to “possess the secret to repair your violin.”



<sup>1</sup> Paul wrote this in 2010. In 2011, a very different harp guitar turned up, discussed next.

A fine example of his early work is a 1907 mandolin that was inconspicuously sitting on a shelf in Epiphone's Nashville offices (shown on next page). Although its basic design is quite similar to other 'bowl-back' mandolins of that period, it clearly shows the skills of a very experienced luthier, sporting intricate inlay and purflings made of mother-of-pearl and ebony and a carved solid tortoise-shell bridge and pickguard.

Right: 1907 Anastasios Stathopoulos mandolin with very ornate ebony and mother-of-pearl inlay and solid tortoise shell bridge.



In 1909 Anastasios, not yet a U.S. citizen and “a subject of the King of Greece, residing in New York”, patented a “new, original and ornamental design for the Mandolin’ (Pat. 40,010). its most striking feature was the cello-style scrolled headstock with a carved animal’s head that would appear on several instruments. Tragically, this era abruptly ended in 1915, when Anastasios, a 52-year-old husband and father of six, died from “a long illness.”



By 1917, the newly christened “House of Stathopoulos” ushered in the second era in the history of the family’s growing musical instrument business headed by eldest son Epi Stathopoulos. In 1916, at the age of 23 and only a year after his father’s death, Epi had filed his first banjo patent (1,248,196), followed by two more in 1920, and was granted four by 1929.

Left: Young Epaminondas (Epi) Stathopoulos.

Epi was well aware of what instruments Americans wanted to play and in a stroke of great foresight and genius, Epi got the jump on their Michigan-based rival by diving into a new market for the uniquely American instrument, the banjo. Realizing that they would not fare well against Gibson in the mandolin market, and knowing that manufacturing traditional Greek instruments was a market with limited potential, Epi and his brothers started exclusively manufacturing high-quality banjos. In 1923, the Stathopoulos brothers Orphi and Frixo established the Epiphone Banjo Company. Epi, short for Epaminondas combined his nickname ‘epi’ which is also a prefix from Greek meaning at the center, with “phone”, from the Greek word for voice or sound.

Unfortunately, little is known about this period following Anastasios’ death by way of catalogs or advertisements. A 1920 trade magazine “The Violinist” barely mentions the “Stathopoulos Shop” on West 39<sup>th</sup> Street, despite its self-proclaimed “forty years of experience” as a dealer and importer of “old and new violins.”

It would take several years before the name of Epiphone became synonymous with high-quality instruments like the Recording Banjos of the 1920’s and their legendary Masterbilt archtop guitars of the 1930s.

Right: The Stathopoulos family in America.



## The Harp Guitar

Since the first publishing of this article in the May, 2010 issue of *Vintage Guitar Magazine*, startling new information has surfaced that clearly shows that there were two versions of the harp guitar including both a 12-string with 6 sub-bass strings and an 18-string with a full complement of 12 sub-bass strings. There was also a 6-string guitar (more on that later).

There were no known official company catalogs offering a harp guitar, but a recently uncovered Greek-American instrument catalog (at right) shows a 6-string guitar version with a similar body design and information including prices for the 12 & 18-string harp guitar versions. It is presumed that the Stathopoulos brothers were marketing these instruments to Greek-Americans given the fact that it is in Greek, but with prices in U.S. dollars.

Right: Undated Greek-American instrument catalog with the 6-string guitar or "sextachorda." Translation: Harp guitar with 6 extra bass strings (that is 12 strings total) 26V.H. Same figure as # 25A.V...\$65.00; Harp guitar with 12 extra bass strings (that is 18 strings total) 27V.H. Same figure as # 25A.V...\$75.00

There is no mention of any of the three catalog instruments in the Stathopoulos/Epiphone book, and prior to finishing the book, Jim Fisch was unaware of the harp guitar's existence, which he later received in trade from a friend who found it in a music shop in Massachusetts. The label inside the body clearly establishes the "House of Stathopoulos, New York" as its maker, yet the harp guitar seems to lack the "quality workmanship, strength, and durability" stated on it. The missing lower-right corner of the label may have had a date, and the hand-written No. 781 doesn't help to narrow it down, since there are no serial number records prior to 1935 for any Epiphone instruments. Although previously dated as c.1910, it is far more likely that the harp guitar was made around 1920 and clearly not the work of a master craftsman like Anastasios Stathopoulos, which would have dated it to pre-1915.

The 12-string House of Stathopoulos harp guitar. Refinished spruce top, rosewood bridge, and missing pickguard and end pin.





The enormous two-piece rosewood back still has visible kerf-marks due to an apparent lack of adequate planing and scraping. All six linear feet of the higher-grade rosewood rims are nicely formed, but not quite a match to the back.

Left: The full back view shows the distinctive multi-ply laminated neck design typical of many later Epiphone instruments.



The shape of the mirrored pegheads may have inspired another Greek-American luthier, one Clarence Leonidas 'Leo' Fender, but are a bit crude with more visible saw marks, indicative of a novice builder.



They join each of the two necks with loose V-joints that long ago split and cracked under the strain of the strings. Scott Harrison, head of Epiphone's R&D department, pointed out numerous examples of poorly repaired cracks, sloppy refinishing and enough patches, extra bracing, and excessive glue inside the body for three harp guitars.

Harp guitar mirrored peghead design may have inspired Leo Fender. Note the three extra tuners holes on the main neck, which seems to indicate a 15-string version.



The massive rosewood bridge anchors the 6 guitar and 6 sub-bass strings, but three extra holes in the guitar peghead seem to indicate that it had a total of 15 strings at some point. The bare spot on the top was probably the pickguard's location, with no evidence of what type, or if it was original or added later. However, there are several design features that are distinctly Epiphone, including

the mother-of-pearl fingerboard inlays of varying shapes & sizes, and the seven-piece laminated neck construction.

The harp guitar is a bold, striking and a totally original instrument almost as if Salvador Dali himself added luthier to his resume and created this design that is truly surreal in every sense of the word. The dripping heart-shaped sound hole, off-center bridge position, and asymmetrical 20" lower bout almost melting away from the rest of the body are some of the most striking features that make it so unusual.

It stands alone as a one-of-a-kind creation and provides a glimpse into a very awkward and experimental phrase prior to the formation of the Epiphone Banjo Corporation. It also speaks volumes about the budding talents of the Stathopoulos brothers struggling to establish their own identity building new and original designs like their father had done before them.



## The Octochorda Connection

The harp guitar's immeasurable value is as a missing link that connects The House of Stathopoulos with another legendary instrument, the Roy Smeck Octochorda. For those of you who might not be familiar with the octochorda, it's a very unusual custom made 8-string Hawaiian guitar that up until very recently had never been associated with Epiphone. It was just one of many fretted instruments played by the legendary 'Wizard of the Strings', Roy Smeck.

There are a wide variety of stories floating around about the origins of the infamous octochorda. Several credit Sam Moore, a vaudeville-era novelty instrumentalist, as being the inventor of this 8-string wonder of the world. Moore was the first performer to use an instrument called the 'octochorda', but a 1922 article stated it was "invented by Harry Skinner of Chicago" who worked in Lyon & Healy's "violin department." Skinner also co-authored Moore's first hit record, "Laughing Rag," featuring Sam on the octochorda. A 1924 photo showed the vaudeville team of Moore and Freed as "enthusiastic users of Lyon & Healy Instruments" with Moore playing their Bell Guitar.

Right: The Vaudeville team of Moore and Freed showing Sam Moore playing a Lyon and Healy "Bell" guitar in 1924.



Left: Gage Brewer's Hawaiian Entertainers c.1931.

On the left is a rare Lyon & Healy 8-string "bell-shaped" instrument presumed to be the same Harry Skinner "octachorda" played by Sam Moore.



Sometime in 1923, another talented multi-instrumentalist, Roy Smeck, met Sam Moore while on the Orpheum and Keith vaudeville circuit, and according to Vincent Cortese, author of the biography "*Roy Smeck: The Wizard of the Strings in His Life and Times*", Roy said that "Sam Moore invented the octochorda tuning" (an open E7th) and "[Smeck] was the only other one to play the octochorda in vaudeville." Smeck also stated that his octochorda was "one of only two made", but [Sam's] "was a regular guitar, without the heart-shaped sound hole." A music trade editorial

from June 1924 also supports Smeck's claim and specifically mentions the octochorda as "the only one in its existence." This all seems to indicate that Harry Skinner's invention was most likely an 8-string version of the Lyon & Healy Bell Guitar, and not an earlier version of Roy's octochorda.

Several other accounts credit the Harmony Company with building the octochorda and Roy himself is mainly responsible for this story. "Roy told me Harmony built the octochorda", said Cortese, but after seeing pictures of the House of Stathopoulos harp guitar, his comment was "Now you got me scratching my head", and added that, "Almost everything happened for Roy after the Vitaphone film", including his association with The Harmony Company.

Cortese was of course referring to Roy's overnight rise to super-stardom after appearing in Warner Brother's 1926 Vitaphone short film, "His Pastimes". Roy was signed for \$350 by Harry Warner, one of the four original Warner Brothers, to appear in what became Smeck's chance of a lifetime. On August 6, 1926, more than a year before Warner Brothers released the first feature length-talking picture, "The Jazz Singer", highbrow New Yorkers paid a whopping \$10 to see the feature film 'Don Juan' starring John Barrymore. The 'Prelude' included a series of short 'talkies' of many renowned artists of the day like operatic singers Anna Case and Giovanni Martinelli, Ephrim Zimbalist Sr. and the newly discovered "Wizard of the Strings", Roy Smeck. As the New Times reviewer, Mordant Hall wrote the next day, "the seductive twanging of a guitar manipulated by Roy Smeck captured the audience. Every note appeared to come straight from the instrument and one almost forgot that the Vitaphone was responsible for the realistic effect." In fact, this was no mere guitar, but the then unknown octochorda.

In 1927, the president of Harmony, Jay Krauss, approached Roy with an endorsement deal to take advantage of the incredible success of the Vitaphone film, and the 'vita-uke' was introduced in June of 1927, followed by several other designs including the 6-string Vita-Guitar. Some of these "novelty" instruments had sound-holes shaped like trained seals, and some had an airplane-shaped bridge or 'aero-bridge', meant to capitalize on another celebrity, Charles Lindberg and the first successful trans-Atlantic flight in the "Spirit of St. Louis". It certainly paid off, as a reported 500,000 units were sold in the first two or three years. But the wonderful wizard had his octochorda long before Harmony came knocking on his door and it is certain that Harmony did not build it. Further proof is an editorial for 1924, announcing that Roy was signed by Paul Specht for "orchestral and solo recording work" with Specht's Alamac Orchestra, using the seven instruments played by this "exceptional, versatile musician", including the octochorda. This was after the tour with Olga Myra and the Southland Entertainers, when Roy first met Sam Moore.

Rare autographed publicity photo of the Paul Specht's (standing with violin) Alamac Orchestra and featured performer, Roy Smeck playing his Bacon & Day Silver Bell banjo, with the original octochorda laying on floor in front.

Courtesy of Jim Garber, former student of Roy, who found it in a memorabilia shop.

Unfortunately, the octochorda mysteriously disappeared prior to 1930. One account said it was stolen out of Smeck's hotel room, but another possible explanation is Roy's brief marriage and subsequent nasty divorce from Olga Myra around 1929. As most musicians would agree, a reputed contortionist/dancer/violinist is either a dream come true or your worst nightmare, and in Roy's case, the latter. Roy commented that, "She [Olga] left me with \$7.00 and a ukulele." Hell hath no fury, and Olga Myra was no exception. In fact, the octochorda doesn't appear on any Smeck recordings after that, and seemed to vanish from the face of the earth. That is until one fateful day in 1994, when Randy "RJ" Klimpert checked out a local antique shop called the Pot 'O' Gold, where he noticed a rather strange looking instrument, tagged "c1890 Handcrafted, possibly Spanish."



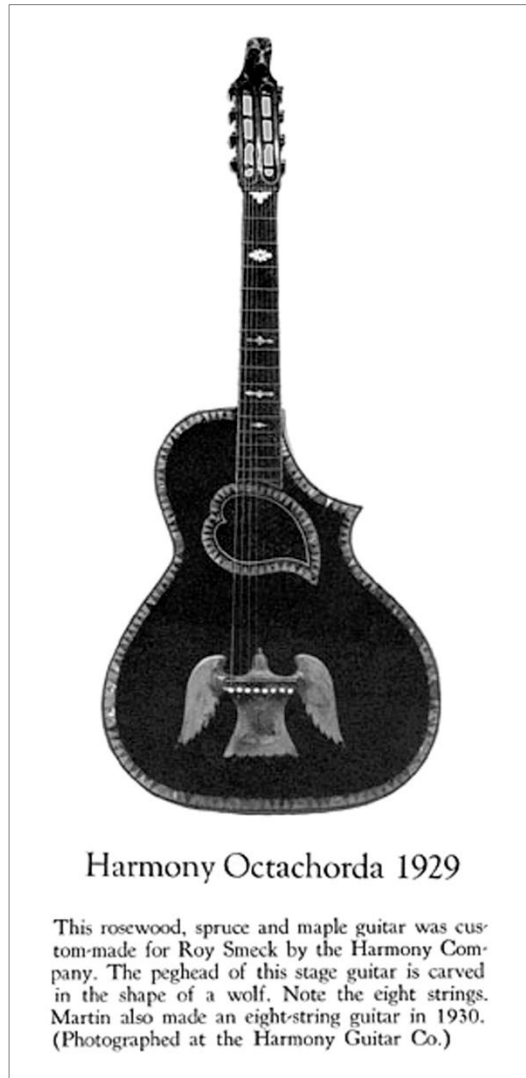


The owner of the shop offered quite a creative fairytale of his own, telling Randy that it was “made by slaves for their master during the Civil War.” Without even knowing what it was, Randy scraped together enough money to buy it. He soon realized that it was in fact, the long-lost Roy Smeck Octochorda, and in a cruel twist of fate, made the discovery just months after Roy Smeck died at the age of 94. No one knows how the octochorda wound up in this antique shop and unfortunately there are very few clues about its life after Smeck.

Left: The Roy Smeck Octochorda owned by Randy Klimpert, as photographed in 1994. Note the similarity between its striking carved animal head and the 1909 Anastasios Stathopoulos mandolin patent.

One exception is the 1973 book “The Steel String Guitar” by Donald Brosnac with a picture labeled “Harmony Octochorda 1929 – photographed at the Harmony Guitar Co.” As was the case when Klimpert bought it, the octochorda sported a new giant carved eagle bridge that was not original to the 1920’s version. Given Roy’s close association with the Harmony Company after 1927, it’s possible that they added the bridge and claimed the instrument as their own design. The fact that Smeck and Harmony did not join forces until 1927 clearly refutes the 1929 date and any possibility that it was made by Harmony.

Right: Picture of the octochorda sporting its new giant eagle bridge from Don Brosnac’s 1973 book “The Steel String Guitar.”



As it turns out, the harp guitar and octochorda were not the only two examples of these unique designs known to exist. This rare photo is an eBay find by collector Ben Elder. Putting aside the obvious racial stereotypes of this still-unknown 'black-face' minstrel group, everyone assumed that it was either Roy Smeck or Sam Moore playing the octochorda.



Unknown minstrel group with two Gibson harp guitars, one mandolin newly discovered House of Stathopoulos sextachorda player second from left.

However, our mystery man is *not* playing an octochorda at all. An extreme close-up revealed some startling differences in its design. The most obvious is the lack of fancy mother-of-pearl and abalone inlay and purfling around the body and sound-hole. More significant is the fact that it has 6 strings and not 8 which prompted Ben Elder to aptly rename it the 'Sextachorda'. To help dispel any thoughts that the inlay and two more strings were added later, the neck and peghead are also completely different. Although the sextachorda's peghead is obscured in this photo, the Greek-American catalog illustration clearly shows a standard 6-string slot-head configuration, coupled with the fact that it's being played like any other 6-string guitar, not Hawaiian-lap style. Still not convinced? The fact that the sextachorda has a standard 12-fret neck (12 frets free of the body), and that both the '20s version and 'eagle bridge' octochorda have a very unconventional 10 1/2-fret necks, should help clear it up. The catalog picture of the sextachorda also confirms these design features, although the translation does not give it a name, or refer to it as a "guitar" per se.

*Gregg Miner adds:* In 2020, still another sextachorda showed up in a rare photo of Henry Clark's band at the 1915 San Francisco Fair. His unidentified guitar player (at right) holds a similar 6-string Stathopoulo guitar, which we know was built by 1915, and possibly much earlier, judging by the top wear.

Whichever of the Stathopoulos built it, the question remains: How did a Greek maker's instrument built in New York end up in California with a Hawaiian band?!



Below, the three specimens: Black-face group, Greek catalog, 1915 San Francisco Fair.





Left: extreme close-up of sextachorda sound hole shows 6 strings and faint outline of label. Center: 1910 A. Stathopoulos bouzouki label. Right: harp guitar label.

The proverbial ‘icing on the cake’ – the faint outline of a House of Stathopoulos label inside its sound hole. A closer look at a 1910 bouzouki label shows the date as a printed “191” and a handwritten “0”. The “decade label”, as Dave Berryman commented, could possibly date the sextachorda to as late as 1919. The harp guitar’s label is altogether different from these two examples, and also unlike any other Epiphone labels of the mid-1920s, which suggests that it was made after the sextachorda. Unfortunately, the present-day octochorda has no label according to Klimpert, but the very ornate presentation-grade design is certainly the work of a more experienced luthier and suggests a date of manufacture of approximately 1923 or 1924, which also fits the time line established by Roy Smeck’s first encounter with Sam Moore. The crudeness of the harp guitar as compared to the more refined and ornate octochorda also suggests the Epi Stathopoulos had come a long way in honing his skills as a luthier during the 3-4 years between the making of these two instruments.

Undeniably, the Stathopoulos harp guitar, Roy Smeck’s custom-made octochorda, and the 6-string sextachorda share so many common design traits that they can only be the work of a single manufacturer, and possibly designed and built by Epi Stathopoulos, himself. All three also share the same distinctive downward slanting cutaway that would reappear on Epiphone’s Recording Guitars of the late 20s and early 30s.

In a poetic sense, the octochorda’s carved cello-style, scroll-top peghead is a fitting tribute to Anastasios Stathopoulos’s 1909 patented mandolin design and brings the whole story full circle back to the beginning, when a Greek immigrant wanted to make the “highest quality instruments” designed to stand out from the crowd.

Bravo, Stathopoulos family, you did it, and so much more.

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Thus ends the detailed investigative work of Paul Fox. Next, Gregg Miner shares the other two harp guitars.

## A Near-Duplicate Harp Guitar for Hawaiian Music



“Shaw’s Royal Hawaiian Troubadours” at “The Oaks” in Portland, Oregon in 1921. Patriarch James Shaw holds the harp guitar.

The story of the remarkable Shaw Family Hawaiian Entertainers was told in 2020.<sup>2</sup> James Shaw originally played banjo and other fretted instruments in the King of Hawaii’s Royal Court. He became a popular singer on the Islands and eventually drafted his entire talented family into the act, playing World Fairs and touring parts of America in the first decades of the 1900s. Shaw only used a generic 6-string guitar for some time, but was well acquainted with the many Knutsen and other harp guitars used by his many Hawaiian friends and bandmates. Shaw appeared on tour with his 6-string guitar into 1920. After his star daughter’s death in April 1921, the family returned to Portland, Oregon to regroup and train her replacement. Shaw also returned with a new instrument – his first harp guitar, a Stathopoulo! Whether it was new or used is difficult to say – much depends on whether we think the large plastic pickguard is original or not. To me, it looks like an oversize replacement to cover old pick wear.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.harpguitars.net/players/shaw/James-Shaw.htm>



By September 1921, the new Shaw family act was back on the road, James with his Stathopoulo.



Three views of James Shaw's House of Stathopoulo harp guitar.

Shaw's harp guitar is nearly identical to one the surviving Stathopoulos harp guitar that opened our story. Only the fingerboard inlays are different. It is difficult to see if Shaw's instrument has the oversize bridge; it appears to be a smaller, simple rectangle with inlays.



When James Shaw passed away in 1924, the harp guitar passed on to his son-in-law, musician Leo Cummins, Jr., who married Shaw's youngest daughter four months later.

Left: Playing with Leon Berger and his Versatile Boys circa 1920, Leo Cummins, Jr. is on the right, with bandmate Mike Hanapi of the Kalama Quartet.

Extremely difficult to see and identify, Cummins used the harp guitar in the 1927 Vitaphone short "Hawaiian Nights" with three members of Kalama's Quartet (below).



## The Third Harp Guitar



In 2011, a second – and quite different! – Stathopoulo harp guitar was unearthed at a local auction by Epiphone archtop collector and rock & roll photographer Peter Corrigan (pictured below with his treasure), who kindly shared these amazing photos with us.



The similarities to the original black one are obvious, while the differences are fascinating. The single fretboard is affixed to a single neck – or is it a conjoined double neck with two separate “V” shapes?! It was clearly meant to be a 6 + 6 harp guitar, but perhaps with additional chromatic fretting options intended - or was that simply a byproduct of the design? Only the last two strings are floating.

Sadly, there is no label on this one, only the stamp on the back of the headstock. This one will probably have us scratching our heads like the other regarding the timeline, dating (late 'teens?) and other provenance. Meanwhile, we can sure enjoy the photos!











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Paul Fox: 2 left, 3 left, 8 top, 11

Giannis Tsoulogiannis: 5 top, 13 bottom center

Mike Newton: 8 bottom

Jim Garber: 10

Randy Klimpert: 11 left

Ben Elder: 12, 13 bottom left

Peter Corrigan: 1 right, 18-23 all



### **About the Authors**

Paul Fox is a musical instrument researcher and historian with an emphasis on Gibson and Epiphone. He is also a luthier and his company, [www.fox-guitars.com](http://www.fox-guitars.com) offers “new vintage” custom-made instruments inspired by the great pre-war era. He also offers full repair and restoration services. His website also includes lots of FREE guitar history, including vintage guitar data, old magazines & advertisements, and much more.

Gregg Miner is, at various times of the day, a plucked stringed instrument collector, scholar, recording artist and performer. He is widely considered the world’s leading authority on harp guitars. His web sites include [Harpguitars.net](http://Harpguitars.net), [Harpguitarmusic.com](http://Harpguitarmusic.com) and [Minermusic.com](http://Minermusic.com).

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