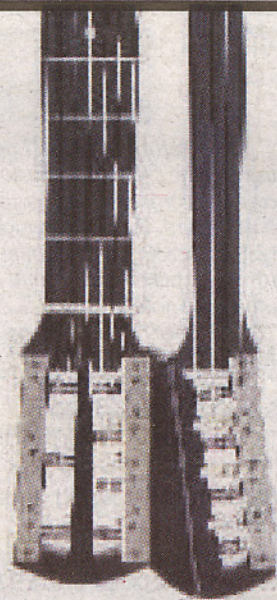


SHOWCASE

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA ENTERTAINMENT



odd little birds



If you've never
heard a harp
guitar — and
chances are you
haven't — here's
your opportunity

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This harp guitar by Luigi Mozzani, circa 1910-1940, is well-known in Italy, but not in the United States. *Courtesy Gregg Miner (6)*



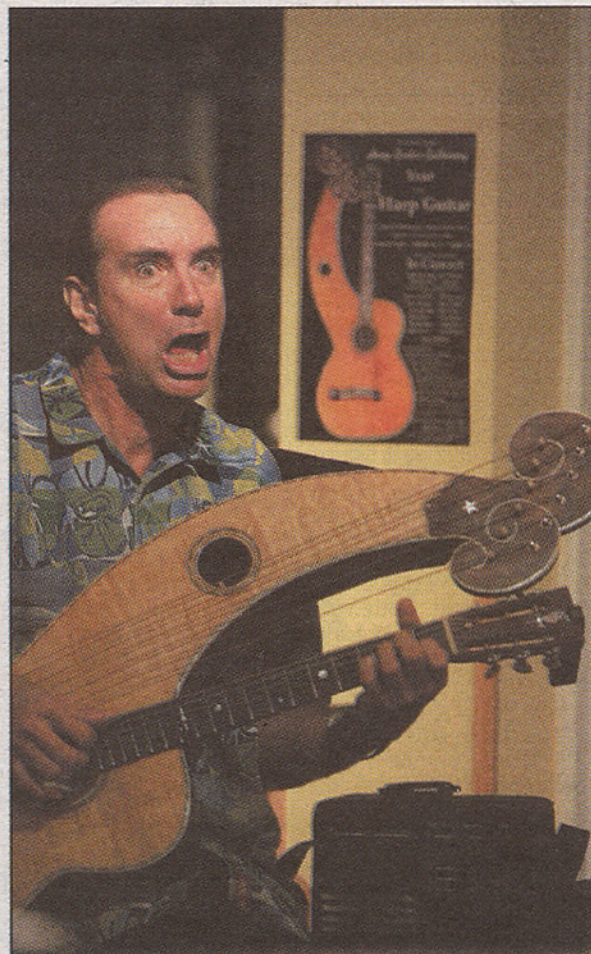
This is the only known specimen of a Hansen harp guitar, circa 1891, by an obscure Chicago maker.



The Gibson "Style U," circa 1915, was the most popular harp guitar in its day and is fairly commonly found today. Miner played this Gibson — the first harp guitar he purchased (in 1983 for \$1,500) — in the Los Angeles Mandolin Orchestra in the mid-1980s.

'ODDBALL STRING INSTRUMENTS'

Harp guitar aficionados work to reclaim the instrument's place in music with gathering at Norris Center this weekend



Local musician Andy Wahlberg incorporates funny lyrics and goofy faces into his performances.



Wahlberg fills the Village Pub with the sounds of his harp-guitar at the Village Pub from 7-10 p.m. every Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening. After purchasing his first harp guitar in 1972, Naples musician Andy Wahlberg began incorporating the instrument into his sets more and more. Now it's his primary instrument. *Anthony Souffle/Staff (3)*



Local musician Andy Wahlberg rocks out on his custom-built Edgar A. Vila 12-string harp guitar Thursday evening at the Village Pub in North Naples.

By TIFFANY YATES

Special to the Daily News

Call them the free-spirited cowboys of new frontiers — pioneers forging paths through underexplored territory. But Andy Wahlberg, Stephen Bennett, Gregg Miner, and John Doan aren't wielding six-shooters, and they aren't battling bandits. Their itchy trigger fingers rest on the strings of their harp guitars, strange-looking hybrid instruments that nearly fell out of the American musical lexicon altogether after their prevalence in the late 19th century. And the only territory the foursome is looking to reclaim is the harp guitar's place in music as a serious and honored instrument.

This weekend at the Norris Center in Naples, they will be participating in the fourth annual Harp Guitar Gathering, a celebration of the history, music and manufacture of the odd little instruments. Even if you

are a musician or an avid music lover, the chances are good you've not only never seen or heard a harp guitar — but that you've never heard of one.

Its checkered and misunderstood past encompasses a variety of definitions. No fewer than 11, according to self-appointed historian Gregg Miner's seminal Web site, www.harpguitars.net. But what most aficionados of the harp guitar will agree that it must have strings and encompass both fretted and nonfretted sections.

Beyond that, the classifications are wide and varied, but the most striking thing about most harp guitars in use today is its two-headed Hydra appearance: most look like fancifully shaped guitars with two necks, like Alice in Wonderland guitars.

In 1972, Naples-based musician Andy Wahlberg spent the last dollar in his wallet buying the first harp guitar

he'd ever owned — or ever seen, for that matter — at a pawn shop in Los Angeles.

"It's like stepping onto the surface of the moon," he says, describing his transition from the guitar to an instrument so far out-of-date there was no one to teach him and no reference books to consult. "You feel like you're going out there where no one's ever gone before."

The additional strings on a harp guitar increase the instrument's range — usually five octaves, rather than a regular guitar's three. And the strings are "open," or unfretted, so the notes continue to resonate without being continually strummed.

"It was such a sea change in my outlook on music," Wahlberg says. He began incorporating the instrument into his sets more and more, until it was his primary instrument. "Most of the people who make the switch to harp guitar never go back," he says.

The open strings give the instrument a warm, rich resonance that Stephen Bennett calls a "sustained

pedal-of-a-piano quality."

The father of the first Harp Guitar Gathering in his hometown of Williamsburg in 2002, Bennett unexpectedly discovered he possessed a family harp guitar legacy. In 1988, an uncle had given him one he'd rooted out of his basement — the harp guitar Bennett's great-grandfather used to play on a radio show in the 1930s.

"I had no reference whatsoever," Bennett recalls of trying to learn the complicated instrument. An Internet search yielded Wahlberg's name, and Bennett contacted the singer/songwriter. "It was kind of like being an orphan all of your life and then realizing that you have family," he remembers.

Miner and Doan similarly searched for other players when they discovered their own harp guitars in the course of studying and collecting what Miner calls "oddball string instruments." And the four were the engine behind the first gathering, originally intended

See **HARP GUITAR**, Page 22



The Zimmerman, circa 1900, is a common harp guitar in Russia. Russian guitars had 7 strings instead of 6, and were tuned to open G. The harp guitars were similarly tuned.



This one-of-a-kind Knutsen, circa 1913, built in Seattle, has three banks of treble strings. Chris Knutsen invented the American hollow-arm harp guitar (1895) that morphed into the Dyer instrument.



The Dyer harp guitar, circa 1915, is the most popular vintage model (1906-1920s). Gregg Miner will play this instrument this weekend at the Norris Center.

If you go

Harp Guitar Gathering IV

Where: Norris Center, 755 8th Ave. S., Naples

When: Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, with events throughout both days, and concerts at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: Tickets for individual concerts are \$15 in advance and \$20 at the door.

Full registration two-day pass (including both concerts and all workshops) is \$75 in advance and \$90 at the door. Tickets for individual workshops are \$8 in advance and \$10 at the door.

Information: Call (239) 213-3058 for tickets, or visit the Harp Guitar Gathering Web site at www.hggiv.com.

Harp guitar: Instrument opens up new realm not heard before

Continued from 21

to be simply a handful of aficionados coming together to play and exchange stories.

So many people responded that Bennett realized it would have to be something bigger, Wahlberg says, and the gathering drew attendees from 14 different states and two countries, with over 200 locals showing up for the concert performances.

This fourth gathering, which Wahlberg decided to host in Naples because "it really became my turn," he jokes, benefits from the organizers' experiences at the previous gatherings.

The roughly 60 delegates, as Wahlberg calls them, who are registered participants in the weekend's events are harp guitar players from all over the world

■ The weekend will include lectures, workshops and get-togethers. But the main attraction will be the two concerts the musicians will present Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, each open to the public for just \$15 in advance and \$20 at the door.

— one coming from as far as Indonesia — as well as manufacturers of the instrument, historians and others.

Gregg Miner — known as "the harp-guitar pope," a title he relates with barely hidden relish — will lecture on the history of the harp guitar, as he's done since the first convention in 2002, when, "I was only halfway done — they had to cut me off!" he recalls with a chuckle.

The aerospace engineer has developed a reputation as one of the foremost experts on the instrument, thanks to his vast scholarship on the harp guitar, and his definitive harp guitar Web site, www.harp guitars.net, a painstakingly thorough site that features the instrument's history, iconography, recordings and luthiers (those who manufacture string instruments).

"I'm the only guy that probably would or could do that," he says of his meticulous research into the harp guitar. "I have the passion and eccentric dedication not to let this instrument die."

Miner owns about 30 variations on a harp guitar — a mere fraction of his stringed instrument

collection, which numbers more than 200. "Ninety percent of the stuff I have, no one's heard or seen in a hundred years," he says.

The weekend will also include other lectures, workshops and get-togethers. But the main attraction will be the two concerts the musicians will present Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, each open to the public for \$15 in advance and \$20 at the door.

Don't come to the concerts expecting to see the polite resurrection of a quaint musical curiosity. Harp guitar players have an unmatched passion for their instrument and the kind of sound it's capable of creating.

"All the notes — every one of them — chime out of the guitar," raves Doan. "It's so full."

Wahlberg calls it "a very organic sound, a woodiness. You get a sense of the tree that made the instrument," he says poetically. "The only comparison I could make would be with hydroponic tomatoes versus good old home-grown tomatoes from the garden."

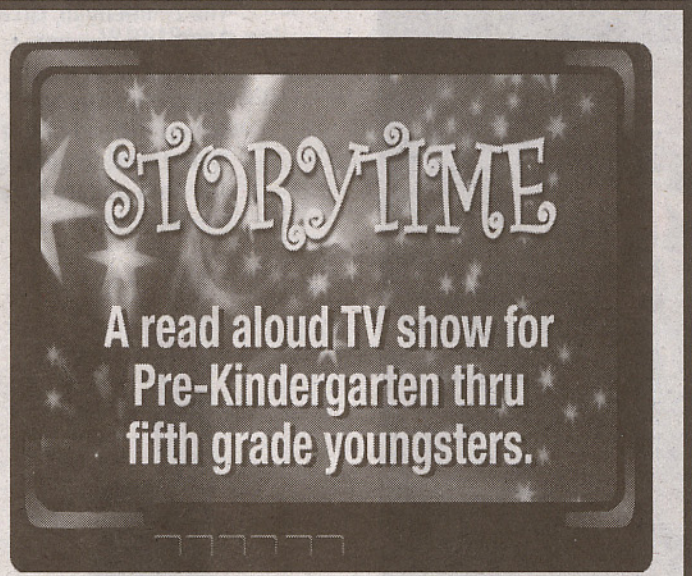
"Laypeople find the whole thing fascinating when they see it," Miner says. "The harp guitar just opens up a whole new realm that hasn't been heard before — ever, in the history of any type of instrument. ... It's almost endless, creatively."

The unique nature of the harp guitar — and its lack of mainstream popularity — means that most of the instrument's devotees have had to forge their own path with the instrument. The result at the gathering's concerts is a wide-ranging array of styles, everything from "funky blues jammers to 12th century madrigal," Wahlberg quips.

"I'll play Jimi Hendrix to John Fahey," says John Doan. "It's sort of like a vaudeville show. If you don't like what you're seeing now, wait a couple minutes," he says of the concert, which features each musician playing a few songs solo in succession.

But if past gatherings are anything to judge by, it may be the musicians in the audience who are truly transformed. Miner estimates that less than a hundredth of a percent of guitar players have ever even seen a harp guitar before. "When they come they're blown away by it because it's so unusual and has so many possibilities."

Wahlberg has seen the same phenomenon in his local gigs over the years, where his harp guitar is generally his instrument of choice. "Every guitar player I know wants to grab a hold of it and start playing."



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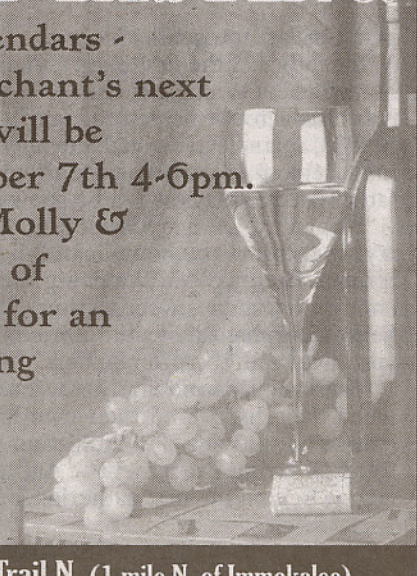
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For now, the Harp Guitar Gatherings are a labor of love for all concerned. Each participant pays his or her own way to the venue, and performs for free.

"It's sort of a gesture of enthusiasm and passion and love," Doan explains. "My mission is to give a little dignity to the instrument. Up to now it's just sort of been seen as a curiosity."

"It really is just a bunch of musicians hanging out together and having fun," Wahlberg offers, although he shares Doan's ardor to popularize the antiquated instrument and bring it back into modern music. "The harp guitar is just a conduit that stretches musicianship," he explains. "That sense of boundaries being stretched far out into the ether."

Doan — whose claims to fame include introducing both music legend Doc Watson and guitar wunderkind Eric Johnson to the harp guitar for the first time — maintains endless optimism for the future of this instrument that time nearly bypassed. "If history repeats itself, where it had been mainstream several times in history, why couldn't it be mainstream again?"