

“Because It’s There,” Harp Guitars, The Shape of the Land, 植村直己物語, 冰峰物語, and Lost in the Wilderness

by John Stropes

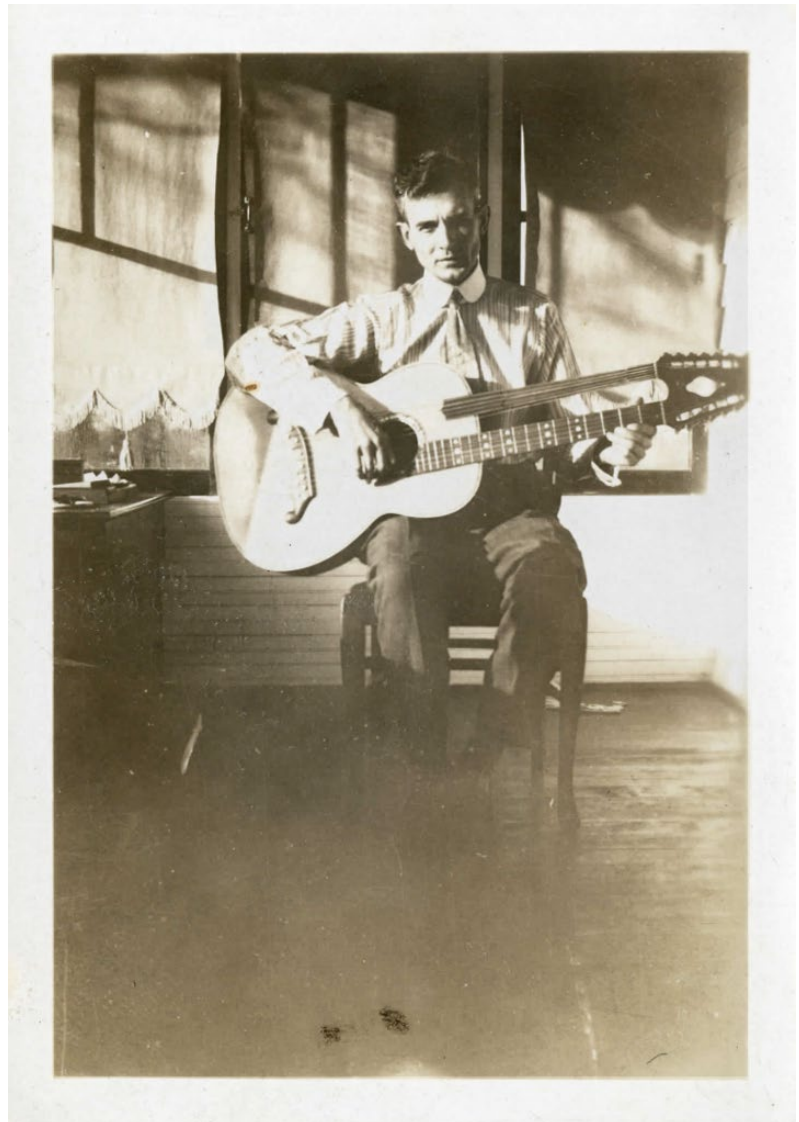
January 24, 2025

Michael Hedges’ composition “Because It’s There,” first released on the recording *The Shape of the Land* in 1986, was a milestone in guitar literature — a major event.

The harp guitar was fashionable in the US in the early 1900s, but it was rarely used in virtuosic music. While its photogenic qualities were without equal (a person simply looked more wonderful playing a harp guitar), its expanded range was typically used simply to add occasional low bass notes.

With “Because It’s There,” Hedges exploited the capabilities of the harp guitar in a new way, playing melody on the sub-basses with right-hand string-stopping while using the six-string neck for accompaniment.

Both of my grandfathers, Ira V. Stropes and Gordon B. Miruch, played harp guitar, and so I felt I was genetically predisposed to have one.



Ira V. Stropes, Sr.
with harp guitar.
Sturtevant, Wisconsin
c. 1920s.



Gordon B. Miruch with Gibson harp guitar. Racine, Wisconsin, c. 1930s.

In the 1970s, I had picked up a 1914 Gibson harp guitar with 10 sub-basses from Milwaukee luthier Bob Pascoe. This instrument had been bequeathed to Pascoe by David Phillips who played bass in the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and was enamored with string instruments that could speak with a low voice. This instrument brought photographic glory to whomever possessed it.

I had a riot playing this harp guitar with the Milwaukee Mandolin Orchestra — and they let you dress up!



(l-r) Paul Ruppa and John Stropes perform “Stahl’s Minstrel Parade March” (Duet) by William C. Stahl in a program of the Milwaukee Mandolin Orchestra at the Lakefront Festival of the Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1984.

And I played briefly with the Milwaukee Zither Club where I felt honored to sit next to Austrian emigre Hans Gliber who played a Hermann Hauser, Sr. contraguitar from the late 1930s.

Then, in the 1980s, I got to know Bob Hartman, the grandson of Carl Larson who, with his brother August, built Dyer harp guitars in Chicago. Hartman was devoted to documenting his family history. I wrangled two Dyer harp guitars from him, one of their earliest models with a Florentine headstock on the horn, and a glorious style 8.

In 1985, Windham Hill was contacted to produce a soundtrack for a film on the Japanese adventurer, Naomi Uemura, who had died in 1984 at the age of 43. Windham Hill Records and new age music were at their peak at this time. In the blush of this success and in the original spirit of the movement, Windham Hill provided a beautiful soundtrack featuring Phillip Aaberg, Michael Hedges, Will Ackerman and others. Hedges’ first composition for harp guitar, “Because It’s There,” became the opening track. This soundtrack was released in 1986 as a CD, LP, and cassette titled *The Shape of the Land*.

WD-1055

THE SHAPE OF THE LAND

植村直己物語



Windham Hill Music from the film
"The Story of Naomi Uemura."

Composed and performed by Philip Aaberg
with additional compositions and performances by
William Ackerman and Michael Hedges.

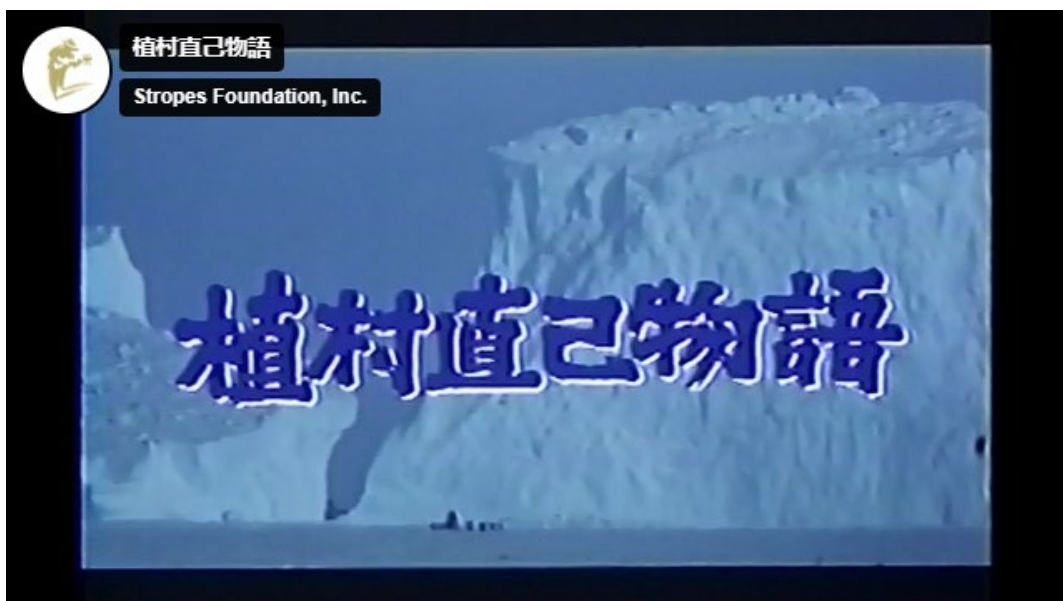
The Shape of the Land, Windham Hill Records, 371055-1, 1986. LP cover.

The title of the film in Japanese was 植村直己物語, which translates as *Naomi Uemura Story*, the first four characters being the name Naomi Uemura, and the last two meaning "monogatari," which is a Japanese word for epic adventure stories and narratives. It was released in Japan in theaters, as a 10-part series on Japanese television, on DVD, and shown extensively in elementary schools. Naomi Uemura was embraced as a model of self-discovery, idealism, and bold adventure.



植村直己物語 (Naomi Uemura Story), handbill for Japanese theatrical release.

Hilleary Burgess, Hedges' manager, was kind enough to send me two VHS videotapes containing the film as it had been broadcast on Japanese television. (Click image to play.)



In 1988, when I was returning from teaching and performing in Beijing, my wife and I were walking down the street in Hong Kong and happened to pass a movie theater in the window of which I noticed a movie poster with some images from the film. We went in and learned, sadly, that the movie had already closed. Given my peculiar interest, and the fact that the film had already closed, the theater manager allowed me take the poster. I have remembered this amazing coincidence with nostalgia ever since.



冰峰物語 (Ice-Capped Mountain Story), poster for Chinese theatrical release.

The title of the film in Chinese was 冰峰物语. The first two characters mean ice-capped mountain and the last two, as in the Japanese title, mean “monogatari.”

Our China traveling companions, Walter and Yanhua Teague, have provided this translation of the text on the Chinese poster:

Another earth-shattering piece after *Antarctica* and *The Adventures of Milo and Otis!*

ICE-CAPPED MOUNTAIN STORY

Adventure of the consummate explorer Naomi Uemura!

He loves his wife deeply, but loves adventures even more.
The two passions are intertwined, yet combined into one
A story of valor and sadness!

Internationally recognized “Bravest Human”
1974 Crossed the Arctic Circle alone for 12,000 km
1978 Reached the North Pole solo

International Award for Valor in the UK
Award in the US
National Honors Award in Japan

Quote from Uemura: “Adventure is a matter of returning alive!”

The only hero in human history who conquered all the highest peaks in five continents solo
1966 Mont Blanc, highest in Europe
1966 Mount Kilimanjaro, highest in Africa in 1966
1968 Mount Acungagua, highest in South America in 1968
1970 Mount Everest, the world’s highest peak in 1970
1970 Mount. McKinley, highest in North America in 1970

Starring: Nishida Toshiyuki (Station to Heaven); Chieko Baisho (Tora-San, the Expert);
Leading Roles: Muga Takewaki; Ryo Ikebe; Go Wakabayashi; Yasuaki Kurata

Director: Junya Sato
Producer: Junichi Tanaka
Script: Yoshiki Iwama
Original Script: Naomi Uemura
Photography: Hiroyuki Namiki
Music: William Ackerman

Presented by Sil-Metropole Organisation, Ltd.

Appearing at Shuangnan Cinema Line

(Incidentally, in English, even though it was never released in the US, the title of the film became *Lost in the Wilderness*.)

In 1996, the first individual transcription that Stropes Editions, Ltd. published was “Because It’s There” which seemed like a stepping stone into an exciting future. Typesetting this music using Finale was an adventure in itself. Dan Schwartz and I spent many enjoyable hours in the summer of 1994 at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music dreaming up this first modern transcription of a harp guitar solo with tabuli in our teeth.



(l-r) Michael Hedges, John Stropes, young John Stropes, Dan Schwartz. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1994

“Because It’s There” not only brought the harp guitar back into the consciousness of guitar players, but was the catalyst for a new generation of harp guitar players and luthiers.

Those sub-basses could be used for more than the occasional bass note!



Michael Hedges with a glorious Dyer harp guitar, style 8. Racine, Wisconsin, 1995.

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