



Christian with Gibson harpguitar.

The Harpguitar

Its History And Its Only Practitioner

By Dennis E. Hensley

It was only through a series of bad breaks that Neil G. Christian became America's leading exponent of, and only full-time performer on the antique harpguitar.

In the Forties, Neil was handicapped by a serious speech impediment; then his high school counselor suggested that he take up singing to overcome pronunciation difficulties. Neil followed the advice, and also began playing violin and guitar; he joined Minnesota's Northfield High School choir, and worked with a friend singing duets at Farm Bureau meetings.

When World War II began, Christian enlisted in the Marine Corps. After more than six years active duty and almost fifteen in the reserves, he retired in 1970 as a lieutenant colonel. In 1953, he had been hired by the Honeywell Corp. as an evaluating engineer in fluidic systems, but in late 1970 the government cancelled work on the infamous SST jet, as well as many projected space programs. Neil Christian then found himself standing beside thousands of other scientists in America's unemployment lines.

Being almost fifty, and with a family to support, Neil found it impossible to start life over again in another field. But all during his military career and civilian work years, he had kept active as a guitarist, singer, and folk song collector, so he naturally fell back on music and began "singing for our suppers."

About this same time, a neighbor presented Neil with an eighty-year-old Dyer harpguitar. Christian restored it and, with the advice of the Gibson company, learned how to restring it. The harpguitar had languished in a basement, collecting dust for almost half a century.

An early Gibson catalog from around

1915 described "The Gibson Harpguitar, Style U" this way:

...select spruce top (sounding board), of regular straight grain, finished in an exquisite blend from dark mahogany to sunburst... mahogany neck, reinforced... thoroughly air-seasoned, thin, maple rim (reinforced at regular intervals by perpendicular bars), graduated back; dark mahogany finish... ornamented head-piece, veneered front and back, front inlaid with "The Gibson" in pearl... Upright narrow, hard maple, perpendicular compensating bridge, with solid ebony saddles... stationary tortoise-celluloid elevated string attachment, with ebony pegs inlaid with pearl... artist extension finger-board, with nineteen ovaled, narrow frets; pearl position dots on finger-board and position dots on upper side of neck.

Today Neil Christian tours America, performing for youth groups, churches, at cafes, lounges, fairs, and social clubs. He can be reached at 2318 Standish St., St. Paul, Minnesota 55108.

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How is a harpguitar played?

It's a standard guitar, in part. The neck has six strings and nineteen frets, and is tuned and played exactly like any flat-top guitar. It has six sub-bass strings which are positioned above, but parallel to, the playing strings. They're supported by a box beam, which comes from the soundbox and runs parallel to the playing neck.

Can the sub-bass strings be played?

They can be, but I've never played them. When I do solo work on the harpguitar, I simply let them resonate as sympathetic vibrators, or what some musicians term "parasitic oscillators."

On both my Dyer and Gibson models, the upper and lower (all sixteen on the Gibson) strings share the same bridge. It communicates between the playing strings and the sub-bass strings; the bridge excites the sub-bass strings, causing them to borrow energy from the box of the guitar, thereby amplifying the companion intonations. All this means is that anyone who can play a regular guitar can play a harpguitar; it's just bigger and has more bulk.

How are the sub-bass strings tuned?

The top one is one octave lower than string 5, the A, on a regular guitar. Coming down, the sub-bass strings are B, C, D, F, and G. This is on the Dyer Brothers model. The Gibson has ten sub-bass strings; there's a post coming out from the body running parallel to the neck. The strings connect at the top onto a bridge which links the bar to the head of the guitar. They're tuned from top to bottom, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, F, F#, G, and G# — ten of the twelve tones in the standard chromatic scale.

Why are A natural and E natural not included?

Because the top two strings of the regular guitar neck are A and E when played open, and they can fulfill the rest of the scale. Gibson did make a few harpguitars with the A and E sub-bass added above, but they found that they and the sub-dominant and dominant associated harmonics overemphasized; so the production model was changed back to the ten sub-bass strings.

What harpguitar history have you turned up?

It was introduced into American culture during the late 1880's, and remained popular until World War I. The Dyer was manufactured just before the turn of the century, but the Gibson

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was built between 1904 and 1920. Before 1912, the Gibson models had a black ebonized finish on the front; after that year, it was a sunburst or natural tone.

How many harpguitars are in existence?

There's no official tally, and I don't really know. I'm aware of four brands that were sold in this country: Dyer Brothers, Gibson, Washburn, and Knutson. There was also a harpguitar which carried the brand of the Southern Music Company, but it was only sold in North and South Carolina. Except for Gibson, they were all identical and were made in the same jig. They were manufactured in London, then exported to the U.S., where the various distributors put their own names on them. Gibson made only 400, of which about 97 are still in existence; of those, only 23 still have good tone, and can be tuned properly. My own is probably the finest. Gibson stopped making harpguitar strings in 1971.

Didn't [banjoist] Eddy Peabody play a Gibson harpguitar?

That's right; during the early Thirties, he played one at the old Eighth Street Theatre in Chicago. For variety in his act, and in response to requests, Eddy used the harpguitar on occasions

as late as 1962. I saw him in August of 1970, when his career was inactive; he said he used to play the sub-bass strings from time to time for bass embellishment, but usually they just provided the sympathetic drone for his lead work on the regular neck.

How much did the instrument cost?

The Gibson sold for \$377.50 in 1918. Then in 1921, the year after they stopped making them, the price jumped to \$443.25. The last time they appeared in a Gibson catalog was 1927, and the price was \$300.00. The Dyer harpguitar was a cheaper instrument, and probably sold for \$100.00. Mike Longworth of Martin told me that in 1914 Martin quoted a price of \$95.00 to a customer who wanted to convert his Martin into a harpguitar.

Can harpguitars be made today?

I visited the Hofman Music Company in Minneapolis and asked the same question. The chief engineer examined my Dyer and said it would cost \$1,500 to make a replica; he wanted twice that amount to copy the Gibson.

How big is the instrument?

The Gibson harpguitar is 42" long, and is 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " at its widest point. It weighs twelve pounds, and the Florentine curve over the top stretches to the 9th fret. The Dyer, on the other hand, is 16" wide and weighs less than four

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pounds.

What types of music did the harpguitar lend its sounds to?

Between 1890 and 1925 mandolin orchestras were in their heyday. There were mandolins, mandolas, mandocellos, and mando-basses for lead work, with large harps and harpguitars for the rhythm accompaniment. Gibson originally designed its harpguitar directly after the full-scale harp, because they were seeking the "hummy-thrummy" sound of the harp. The Dyer was very popular in the Midwest, and at one time in St. Paul there were dozens of harpguitar clubs.

What sort of material do you use in your act?

I'm very heavy on ballads and poems, such as Robert Service's "The Cremation Of Sam McGee" and "The Shooting Of Dangerous Dan Magrue," which I recite while playing the harpguitar in the background. And I sing old prohibition songs like "Little Blossom" and "Behind The Swinging Doors." I sing slave songs, chain gang songs, Civil War songs, and early British tunes.

Dick Spotswood of the Library Of Congress Folk Archives Division has written that your music "is the upper-Midwest style of playing; it's simple, the old oom-pa-pa, oom-pa-pa, one-four-five-seven chords, with a few uncomplicated runs thrown in."

He's right. I'm not a fancy flatpicker from Georgia, nor a thump-thumper from Tennessee. I'm strictly a rhythm guitarist from Minnesota.

How old are your two harpguitars?

The Dyer is about eighty; it was made by the Dyer Music Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. The company has been out of business since before World War II; the firm's senior partner, William Dyer, passed away in June of 1925, and the company began weakening after that. From checking serial numbers, I've found that my Gibson was originally made and sold somewhere between 1906 and 1908. ■