

Harp Guitar Gathering 23 Trip Report

By Dave Powell



Playing Arkansas Traveler with Stephen Bennett while traveling to Arkansas, or placing 2nd in the first (and hopefully annual) international harp guitar championship were major highlights while I attended the harp guitar gathering this year, but there was one moment that literally brought me to tears. And that moment was Canada's Don Bartlett performing Wreck of the Edmonds Fitzgerald, on the 50th anniversary of the wreck, on a harp guitar I built (below). Perhaps it was because the late Gordon Lightfoot was also Canadian, or because I got to see one of his last performances of it in Arizona with our friend Carter Lancaster playing that signature lead line on guitar a few years

ago, or just the way Don's unique chord voicings on this song so hauntingly complimented the tale of that fateful voyage. I used to listen to that song on one of my dad's cassette tapes growing up and that may have also injected an amount of sentimentality and nostalgia causing me to well up inside. 'Twas definitely a memorable moment for me as a contrast to most of the rest of the time that was filled with so much laughter and excitement at our annual musical pilgrimage. I've heard if you laugh and cry in the same performance it was a perfect show.



Some of the other memorable moment honorable mentions were Andy arranging a harp guitar version on the fly of Abba's "Dancing Queen", getting kicked out of the after-jam conference room for being too loud (just after Martin started on the banjo), and getting my picture with all the Larson owners who attended with the living relatives of Carl, August and Hilma (below).



Also, I found out after the Saturday concert that our host's significant other, Emily, is the niece of Jesse Brock, mandolinist for one of Bluegrass' top bands, Authentic Unlimited. So, I got my picture with her and her parents also (braggin' rights to my pickin' buddies)! But definitely check out the band's chart-topping hit ["Fall in Tennessee"](#), it's a doozie :)

OK, now that is out of the way, this next bit dialog's a bit of my initial journey while also being somewhat of a PSA to traveling musicians. My trip started at 4:15 am, rising to get to the airport by 5:30 for my flight on Southwest Air. Being one of the last groups to board I was slightly concerned about getting an overhead bin dedicated to my somewhat oversized carryon. When I got to the back of the plane and not finding any, my heart did flutter for a second until the stewardess asked "is that a guitar?"

"Yes," I replied (thinking to myself I'll save the hassle of explaining what a harp guitar is to everyone around me.)

"That can go in here," and pointed to the closed bin next to me which, upon opening, had only a couple small medical supply bags inside. "Southwest rocks" I again thought to myself.

My connecting flight from Vegas to Little Rock was more full than the previous one so I decided to ask the desk attendant if I needed to “stroller check” my carryon.

“That don’t look like no stroller honey” the cheerful ticketing agent exclaimed to me, “why do you need to put that with the strollers?” She asked.

I explained about the guitar needing extra overhead room to which she said “Darlin’, lemme hook you up, now let’s see that boardin’ pass,” and continued to create me a new pass to immediately take up to the scanning clerk in front of the line. Again, Southwest rocks. (Flying with a harp guitar many times every year for the past couple decades I’ve hardly had any issues taking them on board. For those reading this and perhaps worrying about it can know it’s safe, even if you run into the occasional grumpy attendant.) They did end up putting it safely in the pilot closet on this 2nd flight.

(Update* I’m writing this as I fly home on Delta, the agents asked to store it in the closet which happened to be already full but the bins were plenty roomy, i did board the plane earlier than my zone for needing extra time, and I continue to get the feeling there is more accommodations for air traveling guitarists.)

Arriving in Little Rock I decided not to rent a car and was going to uber to Travis’ house for a pre-gathering soiree. He wasn’t quite ready for me so I caught an uber, but apparently, I selected the wrong destination and it had me going in a loop around the airport for \$10, thankfully my driver was a southern belle who advised and took me to a great BBQ place near down town called Wrights BBQ. We don’t get good collard greens like they have in the south so this was a real treat with my point cut smoked brisket.

My 2nd uber was a local who lived out near Travis and I was his last fare so it worked out for both of us. Upon arriving in Travis’ dining room, I immediately collided with one of our features, Don Bartlett from Canada who I mentioned before, and apparently who had only met 2 other harp guitarists before me, so I was the 3rd. The other 2 being in the same room, Matt Thomas and Travis, our host. Don was playing most beautifully on Travis’ Mayson harp guitar. We immediately bonded and passed around multiple instruments between the 4 of us. Soon after C and J showed up with catering supplies to prep for the weekend.

Antoine Dufour and his significant other arrived later in the evening to which I was relieved as they were my next carpool back to the hotel. I had not met Antoine before this day so I was very much looking forward to it. I grew up in the beginning of the home video game console era similarly to Travis, just a decade or so earlier than him, but he had a rack with at least a dozen retro game consoles including two I had as a kid plus more I had never seen, and extras like early hand-helds and original game cartridge in their factory packaging. Most of the consoles were hooked up to the same screen and we could pick any of those old games to co-operatively play

simultaneously! Some of these forgotten titles are outrageously fun namely Mario tennis to which we played multiple bouts. As some old and newly found comrades we mashed buttons and picked tunes into the wee hours.



At Travis' place pre-pre gathering, w/ Don, Matt, Antione and Kyle

Thursday Chuck and I got to enjoy breakfast with some early attendees including SB and Joe and have a bit of a relaxing day catching up, a calm before the storm.



Post-gathering BBQ lunch w/Joe, SB, Nancy, and Linda