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MAKING A JOYFUL NOISE

BILL ROBINSON AND THE ART OF THE DULCIMER

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Photographed by Richard Grayson

On this Easter Sunday church bells peal, pipe organs thunder, and choirs praise the Lord with joyful noise.

Bill Robinson of St. Charles, Illinois, doesn't need a 200 voice choir and a 16 rank pipe organ to make his joyful noise.

He plays the hammer dulcimer, an instrument mentioned in the Hebrew Bible two thousand years before Johann Sebastian Bach wrote his mighty organ chorales. Since then, the dulcimer in all its many variations has spread throughout the world.

Wherever people play their indigenous folk music, they play some form of the dulcimer.

If you have never heard a hammer dulcimer virtuoso play the instrument, imagine four performers on two grand pianos playing wondrous harmonies all at the same time. That is what one small dulcimer not even a yard wide sounds like when Robinson plays his arrangement of "Turkey In The Straw." No more than ten professional hammer dulcimer players in the United States merit top acclaim among their peers and Robinson is one of them.

Robinson got an early start. At the age of three he clutched a little ukelele in a family portrait. "I played backup chords for family singing when I was four. My father taught me to play the dulcimer when I was five. In fact, my cousins used to get mad at me because I wanted to play music with the adults

rather than go outside and play ball with them."

Robinson grew up on a working corn and hog farm near Macomb, Illinois, but the family's avocation was always music. "My German grandmother and my Welsh father both played the hammer dulcimer," Robinson says. "My Welsh grandfather brought over a dulcimer as a family treasure when he immigrated to the United States."

Robinson learned to play the dulcimer, piano, banjo, ukelele, mandolin, and guitar. Yet he never learned to read music. No problem. "If I can hear the music, I can play it," He used to play 'backup recording' and answered emergency calls around the country to fill in for other musicians. "I can improvise and follow along so closely that the average person can never tell that I don't know the music by heart."

He had already established his reputation in his early twenties. He played at the Grand Ole Opry and accepted gigs any place in the United States. Now, older and with a family, he has settled down in St. Charles. He works days as foreman of a machine shop - "I like to eat regularly," he confesses - but evenings and weekends are for music.

Every second Saturday night of the nine-month school year

he drives to Macomb, Illinois, to play in the Wagon Wheel Opera Show, the Illinois version of the Grand Ole Opry. His group, Bill Robinson and Friends, performs throughout Illinois. He records his own arrangements. He appears as guest artist at dulcimer festivals.

No matter how many instruments he plays, Robinson likes the dulcimer the best. "It is such a neat instrument, once you are hooked, you are hooked for life. It sounds complicated but it is really easy. I can have you playing simple arrangements in one lesson."

When the family dulcimer collapsed fifteen years ago, Robinson became a self-taught dulcimer maker, using the pieces of the old dulcimer as his pattern. "I experiment with different woods and construction methods. Rosewood makes the best sounding board. Each instrument sounds a little different."

So far he has made thirty-eight dulcimers, all signed and numbered. Those he doesn't keep for his own use, he sells to other dulcimer players.

He gave one of his handmade dulcimers to Roy Acuff of the Grand Ole Opry. It is now on display in a Nashville museum.

He uses four diameters of wire for stringing. The larger the wire diameter, the lower the tone. The four different tuning

methods used in the United States are utterly incomprehensible to any outsider, but Robinson understands and uses them all.

Sometimes Robinson uses wooden playing handles. Sometimes he uses corset stays because they are more flexible. He puts tape on the handles so they don't slip out of his hands. He adds soft wood and leather to the playing ends and wraps them with electrical tape. "If I want the music loud and hard I use shorter stays to apply more force when striking the strings. For light and easy music, I use the longer stays."

You can sit or stand to play the hammer dulcimer on its own special rack. Robinson likes to hold his dulcimer in front of his body with a special strap slung around his back and shoulders so that he can step up to the microphone quickly for his solo turns. "You can't electrify a dulcimer because there is just too much reverberation," Robinson says.

Dulcimer enthusiasts aren't a highly visible group like street gangs or politicians. But they are out there, many thousand strong. Amateur members of dulcimer clubs usually prefer to play the mountain, or Appalachian or fretted, dulcimer because it has only four or five strings which you pluck to play.

According to Jo McBride, spokesperson of the Dulcimer

Society of Northern Illinois, 800 households receive the society's annual bulletin. "People like the dulcimer because it is easy to play, it doesn't make a lot of noise, and it sounds good to other people," McBride says. "Everyone should have a real passion for something in life. Some of our members have a real passion for the dulcimer. Even professional musicians who play other instruments play the dulcimer for fun. We have members who never go out of town without taking their dulcimer with them. You can't do that with a piano."

Diane Hillard and the other members of the Champaign-Urbana Dulcimer Society meet monthly to share their love of dulcimer playing. Hillard first became captivated by dulcimers during the folk music resurgence in the 1950's and 1960's. "Listen to David Schnafer play the dulcimer on two of the Judd's recent albums - Heartland and Rockin with the Rhythm," Hilliard suggests.

Chicago area residents can get an introduction to the dulcimer by hearing Alex and His Cimbalom at the Belmont Hotel.

For your best introduction to the dulcimer and the chance to participate in an entire weekend of joyful noise, red circle the weekend of July 15th and 16th on your calendar when the second annual Gebhard Woods Dulcimer Festival will be held at Morris, Illinois. You can family camp in the state park or stay

at one of the many area motels.

Internationally famous guest artists will demonstrate the art of dulcimer playing and construction. Workshops will abound. Take your first dulcimer lesson. Join the old time music Saturday night dance. Praise the Lord with your own joyful noise at the non-denominational Sunday morning gospel worship service.

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For further information, call Bill Robinson at (312)377-0519, Jo McBride at (312)256-0121, and Diane Hilliard at (217)367-1359.