Ralph Lee Smith: A Musical Marvel

Playing the dulcimer is not just a hobby for Ralph Lee Smith, but rather a true passion. Recognized as “the foremost authority on the dulcimer’s history and music,” Smith plays traditional Appalachian folk music and appreciates every opportunity to share the dulcimer, its history and its music, with others.

Ralph Lee Smith was born in Cheyney, Pennsylvania in 1927. He attended Swarthmore College where he graduated with a BA in English Literature, and went on to earn his Master’s of Education degree from the University of Virginia. Smith served in the Air Force before heading to New York where he worked in editing from 1954 to 1957.

In 1957, Smith moved into an apartment in Greenwich Village, where the folk music revival was quickly spreading all around him. Throughout the 60s, Ralph continued to live in Greenwich Village while teaching himself to play the dulcimer and harmonica, and working as a free-lance writer. Ralph left the Village in 1972 and years later he wrote a memoir about his experience living there, entitled Greenwich Village: The Happy Folk Singing Days.

Smith may have left Greenwich Village, a place where his love for the dulcimer and folk music took root, but he did not leave behind his enthusiasm for sharing his musical gift.

With time, Smith became as interested in the history of the dulcimer as he was in playing the instrument. In the 1970s, Ralph began travelling through the Appalachian Mountains. While visiting Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky, Ralph met old-time dulcimer makers and players, and also picked up several antique and traditional dulcimers along the way.

Since his days in Greenwich Village and venturing through the Appalachian Mountains, Ralph has continued to keep himself busy. From performances and demonstrations at the White House, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, to teaching mountain dulcimer traditions and music workshops at Western Carolina University, Appalachian State University, and Shenandoah University, Ralph Lee Smith has enjoyed sharing with others his musical talents and passion for the mountain dulcimer and folk music. Today, Smith continues to write his column “Dulcimer Tales and Traditions” for the Dulcimer Player News magazine. To learn more about Ralph and his upcoming events, please visit RalphLeeSmith.com.
Workshop participants will select classes from the following areas:

• Mountain Dulcimer  • Autoharp  • Hammered Dulcimer  • Guitar

Evening activities will include folk dancing, staff performances and a music sharing session for participants. Jim Miller will also be leading jam sessions throughout the weekend.

The best part is that all classes, concerts, jam sessions, vendor area and meals will be held inside the Terrace Hotel. So, after you check in, there is no need to leave the facility for any of the weekend’s activities.

Learn more at http://dulcimerU.wcu.edu
Hog fiddle, harmony box, lap dulcimer, and mountain dulcimer: all of these names have been used when talking about the Appalachian Dulcimer. But what is the Appalachian Dulcimer and from where did it originate? The dictionary gives a basic description that a dulcimer is a modern folk instrument that is related to the guitar, but the dulcimer is really so much more.

As Europeans began settling in the United States, they brought with them their musical instruments whenever possible. For those who could not bring their instruments with them, they re-created these European musical instruments using native materials. These pioneers are thought to have brought over instruments we now recognize as the fiddle, guitar, pianoforte, lute, horn, and accordion. It is not known with exact certainty from where the dulcimer originated, but it is believed the instrument was developed in the Shenandoah River Valley region, and that it has characteristics similar to European folk instruments, such as the fretted zither, the German scheitholt, the Swedish hummel, and the Norwegian langeleik.

The body style of a traditional dulcimer varies between straight sides and a lozenge, or diamond, shape. Today, dulcimers typically have a rounded single-bout shape or an hour-glass shape. The single-bout shaped dulcimer can be dated back to the early 1800s, originating in southwestern Pennsylvania and western Virginia. The hourglass shaped dulcimer became popular in Kentucky and West Virginia after the Civil War and in North Carolina in the late 1880s. In the dulcimer’s early days, a dulcimer could be purchased from a dulcimer maker by mail order or directly from the sellers’ carts, as they travelled from town to town. In the 1890s, a hammered dulcimer could be purchased for $20.00 from the Sears Roebuck catalog. Dulcimers can now be purchased at music festivals, instrument shops, on the internet, or from private sellers, and prices typically start around $200.00 and can go anywhere from $350.00 and higher.

Various methods have been used when playing the dulcimer. In its earliest days, dulcimers were strummed with turkey and goose feathers, or with wooden sticks called “noters.” Today, dulcimer players use plastic picks to play their dulcimers.

The word dulcimer comes from the Latin word “Dulce,” meaning sweet, and the Greek word “Melos,” meaning music. Indeed, the dulcimer makes sweet music, many of the songs being rooted in English and Celtic traditions. Songs typically played on the dulcimer include fiddle tunes, dance tunes, ballads, and religious songs.

It wasn’t until the 1950s that the dulcimer actually gained popularity beyond the mountains, due to musical influences such as Jean Ritchie, Richard Farina, Howie Mitchell, and Anne Grimes. Today, playing, and making, dulcimers has become a hobby for many people throughout the United States. People have formed Dulcimer Clubs and hold meetings and conferences many times throughout the year. While there have been variations to the size, shape, and name of the dulcimer, it has still become one of the most recognizable and most popular folk instruments in the country.

Bibliography
Lee Cagle, Blue Smoke Risin’ on the Mountain: A beginner’s guide to the mountain dulcimer, leecagledulcimers.com/id62.html.
Ralph Lee Smith, Appalachian Dulcimer Traditions, 2nd ed.
In July 2012, Dulcimer players of all levels came together for the Dulcimer U Summer Program at Western Carolina University. Host instructors Elaine and Larry Conger were joined by first-class instructional staff from all over the country to provide classes for beginners to advanced dulcimer players. Classes focused on developing skills, improving techniques, expanding musical styles, and experiencing the versatility of the mountain dulcimer. Participants were able to choose between classes such as Building Workshop, Learning to Teach Dulcimer, and Dulcimer Music Healing and Therapy.
DULCIMER CLUBS

DULCIMER CLUBS IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA:

MOUNTAIN STRINGS DULCIMER CLUB
76 Main Street, Bryson City, NC
Contact: Ann Carvalho, 828.488.6697 or cherry37cove@frontier.com

NIKWASI DULCIMER PLAYERS
66 Harrison Avenue, Franklin, NC
Contact: Sally DeLawter, 828.524.1040 or hdelawter@gmail.com

OLDE TYME STRUMMERS
Buncombe Street, Hendersonville, NC
Contact: Al and Joy Williams, 828.692.0276, awilliams500@bellsouth.net

PICK AND PLAY DULCIMER GROUP
18 Jackson Street, Sylva, NC
Contact: Donald Selzer, 828.293.0074, dm selzer@aol.com

WESTERN NC DULCIMER COLLECTIVE
Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 382, Asheville, NC
Contact: Steve Smith, 828.697.6388, steve.kc5f@gmail.com
Club website: http://wncdc.org

Looking to join a Dulcimer Club in your area? Go to Everything Dulcimer to find a club near you!

UPCOMING EVENTS

2-3 November, 2012  |  18th Annual Heartland Dulcimer Club Festival  |  Elizabethtown, KY
Website: http://www.heartlanddulcimerclub.org/

9-11 November, 2012  |  Smoky Mountain Dulcimer Retreat  |  Townsend, TN
Website: http://www.knoxvilledulcimers.org/

16-17 November, 2012  |  Upper Potomac Music Weekend: Irish Session Lads  |  Shepherdstown, WV
Website: http://upmw.smad.us/

3-6 January, 2013  |  WCU Winter Weekend  |  Lake Junaluska, NC
Website: http://www.wcu.edu/5049.asp

If you have any information you would like to contribute to upcoming issues of the Dulcimer U Journal, please send it to Wendy at wsbuchanan@wcu.edu.

What dulcimer news do you have to share?

Dulcimer U is now on Facebook!