

the

QUARTER NOTES

Winter 1984 Volume 2 Number 1



The I & M
canal

Did You Hear John Hurt?

by: Mark Dvorak

"A peace above all earthly dignities.
A still and quiet conscience."

"King Henry VIII"

--William Shakespeare

When John Hurt passed away in 1966, he left behind him many thousands of sorrowing friends. Those who met him and those lucky enough to hear him play in person, could not help but feel that this man was his friend, and was saddened to see him go.

Although widely recognized as a bluesman, Hurt was not a raw, harsh chronicler of the human condition in the manner of many Mississippi-shaped blues story tellers. There was an uncommon gentleness in his music, which was not limited to the blues alone. Hurt's repertoire covered a wide range of material including gospel songs, popular standards as well as dozens of his own compositions. His guitar style was similar to his personality--quiet, simple, direct, gentle.

Mississippi John Hurt was born in Teoc, Mississippi, in 1892, and spent much of his life in Avalon, near Greenwood, Mississippi. His musical career began at age nine when his mother bought him a guitar. But like most Southern blues performers, Hurt of necessity had other vocations besides music. He was a farm laborer, picking cotton and corn; he also picked up jobs on the river and on the railroad. His music was played around home at dances and parties, having chosen not to wander and hazard the life as a full time musician.

In the late 1920's, he did travel to Memphis and New York to record, and his records were much in demand, but the Depression forced him to move back to Avalon to earn his living from sources other than music. Mississippi John Hurt was not heard from again until, after an extensive search, Blues collector Tom Hoskins found him in 1963 still living in Avalon and playing his music locally. At first, as the story goes, Hurt thought his discoverers were FBI agents. But at last convinced of their good intentions, he agreed to come north and resume his music career. There were recordings; appearances at the Newport Folk Festival, engagements at folk clubs and college campuses; throughout which he remained based in Mississippi with his wife and grandchildren.

No other musician had more influence on the guitar styles of the best known urban players of the sixties. Dave Van Ronk, Tom Paxton, Pat Sky, Eric Anderson, Tom Rush, John Fahey, Bob Dylan and many more all traced their guitar styles directly to Hurt's. He was every sort of paradox rolled into one. He was a brilliant musician but held this in no regard. He was a loveable flirt and a straight laced prude. He paid little attention money yet doubted the credit of the University of Chicago. He was innocently naive and he was Super Hippie.





John was a deeply religious man, and he truly lived the axiom of "Peace on earth, good will toward men." He had an inner peace and his Church to the Lord was wherever he was. He didn't need a roof over his head on Sunday morning to speak with his maker. He prayed by the side of his bed every night before he went to sleep and his nightly listings of the "...and please don't forget.." usually lasted until near dawn.

In his tribute to Mississippi John Hurt, (Sing Out!, Feb./March 1967) Dick Waterman (who managed Hurt and many other Southern Blues performers after their "re-discovery") relates one of his final meetings with Mississippi John Hurt:

...When he was playing the Cafe Lena last July, he was saying "good-bye" on his last night and the usual crowd was backstage. Someone asked him, "John, when will we meet again?"

He looked around at the young faces and it suddenly became very quiet in the room.

"Well, now, I'll tell you one thing for sure," he said slowly. He raised his finger upward, "It might be up there but I guess can't none of us know for sure which of us will make it there and which of us won't."

In the complete stillness of the room, time stopped and we watched as he lowered his finger and tapped his heart gently.

"But we are sure to meet in here. If I keep you in my heart--which I surely will--and if you keep me in your heart--and I hopes that you will--then we will always have the other person anytime that we want to look in our heart."

While we were waiting for a train one day, I asked John what he wanted out of life more than anything else in the whole world if his wish could be granted.

He thought about it for a long time until his face became serious and the wrinkles on his brow deepend. And then he leaned forward and said slowly, "If I was to have just one wish and I knew that wish was to come true, I would wish...I would wish that everyone in this whole world would love me just like I love everyone in this world."

His head bobbed and he laughed out loud. He laughed until tears came and then he smiled that cherubic impish grin of the Patriarch Hippie and added, "Man, what a cool world this would be!"

Amen.

Mississippi John Hurt Selected Discography
Mississippi John Hurt Today! (Vanguard, VSD-79220), The Best of Mississippi John Hurt (recorded in concert) (Vanguard, VSD-19/20), The Immortal Mississippi John Hurt (Vanguard, VSD-79248), Last Sessions (Vanguard, VSD-79327)



"The Spike Driver's Blues" is a well known John Hurt tune and is a fairly representative example of his guitar style. The entire piece is played while fingering a "G" chord with the left hand, and is a good exercise in playing melody notes over a single chord alternating bass pattern. This is a fairly difficult piece, but by no means impossible to for the intermediate guitarist. You may hear "Spike Driver's Blues" on Mississippi John Hurt Today! Other fine recordings include one by Doc Watson (Doc Watson On Stage, Vanguard, VSD-9/10) and one by Dave Van Ronk (Dave Van Ronk Sings the Blues, Verve/Folkways, FVS-9006).



"Spike Driver's Blues" by: John Hurt



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Instrument Care by: Ken Tobias

In past issues of The Quarter Notes, we've discussed the music we all love, and the people who perform it. Let's spend a few minutes on the tools we use to make that music.


Every craftsman has tools with which he or she performs specific tasks. Most are unique to the specific trade and all require care and periodic maintenance. Our tools require the same attention and some additional care because most began as a living tree. Our guitars, mandolins, fiddles, etc. (particularly new ones) retain a lot of the characteristics of a tree and like to respond, much to our frustration, to their environment. However, a little common sense care can reduce adverse reactions and prevent damage to your valued instruments.

The most harmful element to wooden instruments is rapid temperature change. Extremes in temperature can damage an instrument but rapid change can cause far greater problems. You can play your guitar all day long at 105° at an outdoor festival without having to do more than wiping off perspiration, but don't take the instrument out of your 65° motel and flip open the case in the afternoon heat. Give it a few minutes to warm slowly. Likewise in winter a guitar or fiddle can survive a cold day in the park, but don't leave it in the car trunk overnight and then open the case immediately in front of the fireplace. A little care with moisture control will also go far to prevent damage. A relative humidity of 45-50% is best for instruments but is not always possible to maintain. Little need be done in summer because the changes that occur naturally do so slowly and the average humidity is safe for instruments. In winter, during the heating season, adequate additional moisture can be provided by a commercial case or instrument humidifier or simply with a small, household sponge in a plastic bag in your case. With sensible handling and an occasional cleaning with a good quality instrument polish, your instrument can provide

many years of pleasure. An occasional treatment of the unfinished parts (fingerboards, etc.) with lemon oil is also recommended to replace lost natural oils.


An instrument owner shouldn't get upset if a problem occurs that requires professional attention. Most instruments require maintenance in their lifetimes. A problem that appears in a \$50 Sears guitar might also appear in a \$1000 Martin. They both started out as a tree. Most repairs can be accomplished easily and at a cost that is modest when compared to replacement.

Let's talk again sometime about instruments. I've grown quite fond of them over the years.




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Welcome to Brookfield,

Wisconsin (?)

by: David
Reynolds



That's right! Just a short drive south from Brookfield is a waterway that influenced the state in which you now reside, the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

When the first Europeans explored this wilderness in 1673 it was necessary for them to use the Chicago Portage, an area of land consisting of deep, moist prairie and wetland between the South Branch of the Chicago River and the Des Plaines River. The Chicago Portage National Historic Site in Summit, Illinois now marks this area. Father Marquette and Louis Joliet quickly saw this as the way between two opposing river basins - the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi.

The Erie Canal had cut across the state of New York, bringing prosperity to its major city. Shippers could then reach through the Great Lakes, but they still had problems moving raw materials and produce out of the hinterlands. St. Louis had become a trading center and the fledgling territory of Illinois began developing in the south, where the Ohio River flowed through Kentucky along Shawneetown and Cairo toward the Gulf.

Then came a proposal to build an "Illinois and Michigan Canal" through the Chicago Portage. New Indian boundary lines were drawn into an 1816 treaty to provide a wide corridor for a canal. When Illinois became a state two years later, a protective strip of land 61 miles thick was added to the northern border to keep the as-yet-undefined canal in one state. Fourteen northern counties - including Cook - otherwise might have been in Wisconsin.

The first shovel of dirt was turned at Bridgeport, Ill. July 4, 1836. This was a small community at the northern end of the canal route. Thousands of Irish, German and Swedish immigrants poured into slimy tent cities to dig the canal. The work was cruel - endless hours with hard tools and black powder in mucky mosquito-filled ditches. Pay was low and scrip issued by the impoverished state often was refused by merchants. Malaria, cholera, dysentery, brutal accidents and ditch-bank assaults left hundreds of men dead and maimed.

Work was completed in 1848 at a cost of \$6,000,000. Although the success of railroads had been demonstrated by the time it was finished, the canal showed a profit until 1879. After 1881 tonnage declined. Over 10 million tons of commerce was carried on the canal during its 66 years in existence. Grain, lumber, nails, spikes, and farm machinery accounted for most of the tonnage.

With the passing of an era, it appeared that the historic canal had outlived its purpose; however the I&M Canal from Joliet to LaSalle was rehabilitated in 1918-19 with the aid of federal funds to aid in the World War I effort. In the period following the war a mere minimum of maintenance was provided on the canal as planning and construction was being carried out on the Illinois Waterway. With completion and opening of the waterway in 1933, the I&M Canal was abandoned as an artery of traffic, being maintained only as a means of drainage control.

**THE AMERICAN DREAM—
DIGNITY, SECURITY, MUSIC IN THE HOME**

—Adlai Stevenson

Legislation is now pending in Congress to create the state's first recreational area along the canal, calling it the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor. The project, which likely would boost the area's economy, has been endorsed by the Reagan administration. Today, coexisting with industry are 200 historic structures in 17 canal towns, plus several geological and archeological sites. Fourteen of the of the original 15 locks still exist along with three lock-tender houses, two 19th century bridges, one mule barn and tavern, and three grain warehouses. A good part of the original mule tow path is suitable for trail development.

Watch out! Tommy Bartlet.

Children's Albums by: Marianne Mohrhusen

As I mentioned in the last issue of Quarter Notes, children are sometimes an overlooked segment of the music industry, and finding suitable albums for your child may take a lot of trial and error searching. The following is a sample of three excellent albums for kids by some well-known folk artists.

"Swing on a Star" with Jim Kweskin and the Kids. (Mountain Railroad Records--MR 53793) This album features Jim Kweskin on guitar and banjo, and "The Kids -- singing, clapping, and smiling." This is Kweskin's first album especially for children, and it includes, "I'm My Own Grandpa", "Crawdad Hole", "When I First Came to this Land", and 11 other songs. A rare surprise inside this record is a coloring book illustrating each song and a songbook with guitar chords and lyrics included.

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"You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song" by Ella Jenkins, with members of the Urban Gateways Children's Chorus. (Folkways Records--FC 7664) Ella is known to teachers and parents throughout the U.S. for her contributions to the teaching and enjoyment of folk music and rhythmic activities for children. She grew up in Chicago and is the creator of over 10 albums for children. She frequently comes to different suburbs with her children's concerts, and I highly recommend them even if you don't have kids! This album includes "This Train", "Miss Mary Mack", "Did You Feed My Cow?", and other child-participation songs.

Michael Cooney: Pure Unsweetened Live Family Concert. (Alliance Records--AR 001) Cooney plays guitar, 5-string banjo, Jews harp, and nose flute on this collection of traditional and more contemporary folk songs. Besides such standards and "Old Joe Clark", and "Turkey in the Straw", there's a medley of "Read! Kid's Songs" and an interesting talk about Jews harp and nose flutes. In one of his descriptive notes, Cooney makes a fine point about children's music:

"Why do most children's records have to be so cutesy-sweetsy anyway? Too much sweetness is as bad for the mind as it is for the teeth."
Amen!



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Confessions of a *by: Phil Cooper*
Dirty Guitar Player

The seedy bar atmosphere was clouded with cigarette smoke as I stepped down to take a break. Putting my guitar in the fireplace corner, out of the way, I wiped my irritated eyes and ambled over to the bar for a drink. The female bartender drew off a beer and poured me a shot of Jack Daniels saying, "You look like you could use it." I drained the shot and was sipping the beer when a sultry looking woman sat next to me. Without any preamble she said, "You're not bad, kid. But to make it great, you really got to get into it with your fingers..." So began an evening I would never forget. Later, when I left her, I silently vowed to practice till my fingers would make me The Dirty Guitarist.

**String him
 along...**



In actuality my quest to become The Dirty Guitarist did not begin in the scene I described above (it makes a good story, though). It began because, basically, I'm lazy. As I got tired of fumbling around my case for a flat pick or finger picks I just started playing without them and later found that that gave me better control.

Now, you may ask, what pray tell, is dirty guitar playing? Does it mean you have to wear a long, dirty coat and play pornographic songs to old women and little children on dark street corners? And, more importantly, is three days growth of beard and a bottle of MD 20/20 a strict pre-requisite for playing dirty guitar?

Actually, no. I define dirty guitar playing as not playing clean. By that I mean, say you're trying to play a fiddle tune on the guitar, there's two ways you can play it. The most common way is to flat pick the tune cleanly a la Doc Watson, David Bromberg, Norman Blake or many other fine guitarists.

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The second way, though not as common, will also get the same fiddle tune played. This way is dirty, though by no means sloppy, as played by guitarists such as Martin Carthy, Bert Jansch, Martin Simpson and John Renbourn.

What's the difference?

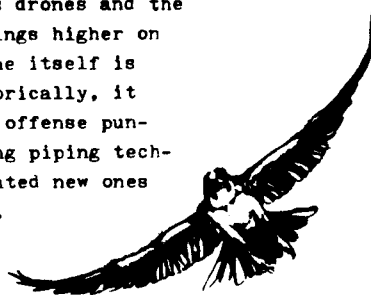
Well, stylistically dirty guitarists leave out some notes in a phrase that a flat picking clean guitarist would play. But more notably, the dirty guitarist uses more left hand tricks usually used by fiddle players themselves. They use hammer-ons, pull-offs, grace notes, and choked strings where a clean guitarist would concentrate on a single note melody line.

Dirty guitarists also tend to use a variety of open and cross tunings when they play. This is for a drone effect which tends to enhance the tune more than just playing the bare melody.

There are advantages and shortcomings to both methods of guitar playing. I think personal preference for whatever style should determine what you practice on. I prefer playing the dirty way myself mostly because I can get more into the music I'm playing if I get more physically involved with the guitar. By that I mean getting three or four notes from just hammering on with my fingers of the left hand (it takes some getting used to at first because you have to hit the strings

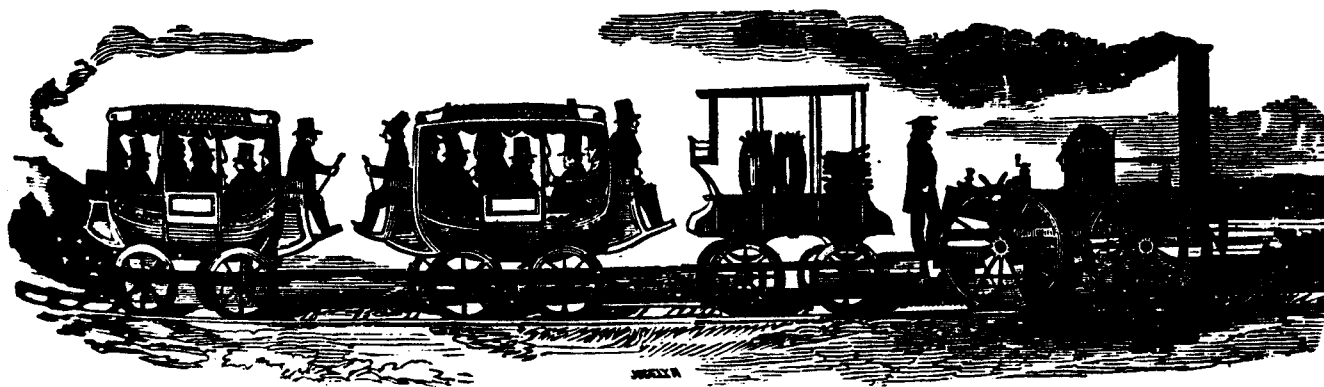
harder, and the muscles between the wrist and elbow will feel strained sometimes) and my right hand is directly involved in plucking the right strings instead of contact once removed using picks.

The tune is a Scottish reel and is played in standard tuning. The low E and D strings are used primarily as drones and the tune itself is played on the G, B, and E strings higher on the neck than usual for fiddle tunes. The tune itself is meant to be played at a moderate speed. Historically, it was written when playing the bagpipes was an offense punishable by death. Fiddle players took to using piping techniques and duplicated many pipe tunes or created new ones that sounded like pipe tunes (like this one).



"Burning the Piper's Hut"

trad., arr. by: P. Cooper



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"The Mosquitoes were as thick as
fiddlers in Hell" by: Don
Buedel

An odd expression, but one you hear from time to time. It implies of course that fiddlers (as well as other musicians) are somewhat less holy personages than your average citizen. I believe that this and other such figures of speech were coined by folks who were a bit upset by the fact that musicians spend a good portion of their time (not necessarily "spare" time) practicing to perfect their technique when they could have been busy doing other things like fixing the roof or working to earn more money.

Even the expression "playing" an instrument seems to imply that making music is an effortless task comparable to building sand castles or catching snow flakes on your tongue. Anyone who has taken a few guitar lessons can testify that this is certainly not the case. The fact is that learning an instrument requires a combination of mental and physical effort not unlike preparing for an athletic event.

The point is, if you want to be a performing musician, you have to spend a lot of time practicing. Sometimes your non-musician friends and family don't understand how you could "waste" all that time fooling around with that "infernal contraption" and it may be difficult to find a medium that pleases everyone. In spite of these hassles, there is no feeling like the one you get when you play a tune well, and watch the smiles grow (or the tears roll). Why do you suppose so many good musicians will play for hardly any money?

So the next time you see a performance anywhere, think about this: what you are hearing is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Appreciate the enormous amount of time spent in preparation for that four minute song, not to mention the sacrifices made by the performer and the folks who have to live with 'em.

Fiddlers in hell? Well, if that's where they all go, I want to go too. Maybe I can finally figure out a decent break on "Devil's Dream."

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