

Press Kit
Phil Passen
Hammered Dulcimer Player

Contents Pages

About Phil Passen, Contact Information	1-3
A Brief History of the Hammered Dulcimer	4-5
Interview with Phil Passen	6-7
About Swinging on a Gate	8
About Cold Frosty Morning	9
About Tramp, Tramp, Tramp	10
Library Programs	11-13
Workshops	14
Black-and-White Photo, Phil Passen	15
Color Photo, Phil Passen	16

About Phil

Few musicians play the hammered dulcimer. Fewer still sing while accompanying themselves on this fascinating instrument, whose name means “beautiful song.” Phil Passen does both.

Phil plays and sings primarily old-time American and traditional Irish music. Can such upbeat dance music be called soothing? With rhythmic playing on fast tunes and sensitive playing on slow numbers, Phil’s music often elicits that word – “soothing.” And though it may seem contradictory, listeners also dub the music “happy” and “bouncy” as they tap their feet to the beat. The songs he sings include familiar American folk songs such as *You Are My Sunshine* and *The Sloop John B*; old-time songs such as *Sail Away Ladies* and *Coo Coo Bird*; and contemporary folk songs such as *Kilkelly, Ireland* and *Hot Buttered Rum*.

Phil played for 500 people at Borders State Street store in Chicago for Maeve Binchy’s only U.S. autographing. He frequently performs for the Chicago Department of Aviation’s tourist programs at O’Hare Airport, where travelers often thank him for providing pleasure on a stressful day, and at the Green City Market. He also played in the World Symphony Orchestra’s performance of *The Lord of the Rings Symphony* at Chicago’s Auditorium Theater.

Phil regularly performs at area libraries, and is included in the *Best of the Best* by the Library Administrators and Coordinators of Northern Illinois.

Library patrons and staff alike react with delight and enthusiasm to the mix of music and information in Phil’s programs. Audiences are fascinated by the uncommon, trapezoidal-shaped hammered dulcimer. After Phil’s performances, members of the audience, young and old, musicians and non-musicians, come up to take a closer look at the dulcimer and try their hand at it.

Phil’s newest CD, *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp: Music of the Civil War on Hammered Dulcimer* is a fascinating solo recording of music commemorating the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. The hammered dulcimer was popular in the

United States during the Civil War, and music of that era seems right at home played on this unique instrument. Many tunes and songs in this program are still familiar today, such as *The Girl I Left Behind Me*; *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*; *Home, Sweet, Home*; *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys are Marching*. Others, such as *Lorena*; *Lincoln and Liberty*; *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, *The Marching Song of the First Arkansas Regiment*; *Shiloh Hill*; and *John Brown's Dream* are less familiar but just as beautiful, rousing, and inspiring.

Phil's second CD, with guitarist Tom Conway, is *Cold Frosty Morning: Christmas and Winter Holiday Music*. Beautiful melodies such as *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* and *What Child Is This*; old favorites such as *My Dreidl*, *Jingle Bell Rock* and *Here Comes Santa Claus*; and contemporary songs such as *Winter Solstice* and *Hot Buttered Rum* are featured on this diverse and exciting recording.

Swinging on a Gate: Traditional American and Celtic Music, Phil's first CD, was a "most popular" choice on Amazon.com. The all-instrumental CD, with Phil on hammered dulcimer and Tom Conway on guitar, features old-time American dance and fiddle tunes and Celtic music. Tunes include *Twin Sisters*, *Bonaparte's Retreat*, *Miss MacLeod's Reel*, and *John Ryan's Polka*.

Phil was born in Toledo, Ohio; grew up in Monroe, Michigan and Toledo; and graduated from high school in Ashtabula, Ohio. He attended Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, before participating as a full-time activist in the antiwar and civil rights movement of the 1960's and 70's.

After Phil and his wife, writer Barbara Gregorich, settled in the Chicago area in the early seventies, they joined the Old Town School of Folk Music, and Phil began to itch to play an instrument. He really wanted to play the drums, but the set he had in mind didn't fit into a nine hundred square foot apartment.

Although Phil heard the hammered dulcimer for the first time on John McCutcheon recordings in the late seventies, he didn't immediately make

the connection between hammering strings and hammering drum heads. Finally, at a John McCutcheon concert at the Old Town School in 1994, the light dawned. Inspired anew as John played the dulcimer, Phil thought: "I can do that." And now he does.

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A Brief History of the Hammered Dulcimer

The trapezoidal-shaped hammered dulcimer, coming in sizes from 3 to 5 octaves with 40 to 100 strings, is the direct ancestor of the piano. In this country it's called the hammered dulcimer to distinguish it from the lap, or Appalachian dulcimer (a strummed 4 string instrument originating in the Appalachian mountains in the 1800's). The two instruments have nothing in common except their names, and that they are both usually classified as members of the zither family.

The commonly accepted theory about the the hammered dulcimer's beginnings is that it originated in Persia; that it was brought into western Europe between 900 and 1200 by the Moors and by returning Crusaders; and that it was brought into eastern Europe by the Roma people. But in his well researched and documented book, *The Hammered Dulcimer*, Paul Gifford presents an alternative opinion, arguing that the dulcimer developed independently in Europe in the early fifteenth century and was related to the European psaltery, a plucked instrument which in turn may have been related to the Mideastern psaltery.

Whatever its origins, by 1600 the dulcimer was firmly established in Europe and was popular in the court of King James I of England. In the Book of Daniel in the King James version of the Bible, Nebuchadnezzar's band was said to contain a dulcimer, leading people to assume that the dulcimer existed in biblical times. Subsequent research has shown that the Hebrew word translated as dulcimer actually meant something else – bagpipe or string drum or perhaps flute.

Once the dulcimer was firmly established in Europe, harpsichord players and builders took particular interest in the instrument. A harpsichord has a very limited dynamic (soft to loud) range because its strings are plucked when its keys are depressed. A dulcimer, on the other hand, has a very wide dynamic range because the player can strike the strings very lightly to achieve a soft sound or with great force to achieve a very loud sound. In the late 1690's, seeking to combine the tone and range of the harpsichord with the soft-loud dynamics of the dulcimer, German dulcimerist Pantaleon Hebenstreit built a dulcimer over nine feet long, with over two hundred strings. Then, in the early 1700's, Italian harpsichord builder Bartolomeo Cristofori developed a keyed dulcimer - the original pianoforte. The pianoforte keys

activated hammers: the sounds produced were loud or soft or somewhere in between, depending on how the keys were struck. From the pianoforte came our modern piano.

The dulcimer arrived in North America with the colonists of the early 1700's and went westward with the expanding population. The instrument was highly popular in 19th century lumber camps. Dulcimer factories sprouted in upstate New York, and in the late 1800's piano manufacturer Lyon and Healy built and sold dulcimers. Dulcimers were sold in the Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck catalogs around 1900. But by 1906 Sears no longer carried dulcimers, Lyon and Healy stopped manufacturing them, and the interest in the instrument declined sharply.

Meanwhile, from Europe the dulcimer spread over the world. It is still played in the Mideast, where it is known as the santur. In Eastern Europe it is the cimbalom, a staple of Gypsy music and also heard in klezmer music. In India it is the santoor: players sit cross-legged on the floor, balancing the santoor on their laps while playing lengthy ragas. In China it is the yangqin. There it is played in classical and folk music with long, flexible bamboo hammers. In Mexico the salterio is a hybrid of the plucked psaltery and the dulcimer.

In this country from the 1920's through the 1940's Henry Ford revived interest in the instrument with his Early American Orchestra. Featuring a dulcimer and a cimbalom, Ford's orchestra played for dances in Michigan, released recordings on the Victor and Columbia labels, and aired a weekly national radio program. With Ford's death in 1947 the orchestra disbanded and interest in the dulcimer waned once again.

The current resurgence of interest in the dulcimer began in the 1960's. Along with other forms of traditional music and folk instruments, the dulcimer grew in popularity during the folk revival. Today there are several thousand people in this country who own dulcimers and perhaps a few dozen professional players.

Interview with hammered dulcimer player Phil Passen

Q: *What is that strange instrument and where did it come from?*

A: The short answer is that it's a hammered dulcimer and it either came into Europe from Persia between 900 and 1200 with the Moors, the Roma people, and returning Crusaders; or it developed independently in Europe in the early fifteenth century. The hammered dulcimer is the direct ancestor of the piano. Look at a dulcimer and you're looking at the inside of a piano.

Q: *Isn't there another kind of dulcimer?*

A: Yes, in this country there are two kinds of dulcimers. The hammered dulcimer is a trapezoidal instrument with 40 to 100 strings which are struck with hammers. It originated 500 to 1000 years ago. The lap, or Appalachian, dulcimer is a long and narrow strummed or plucked instrument with 4 strings. It originated about 150 years ago in the Appalachians. The two have nothing in common except their names and that they are both usually classified as part of the zither family.

Q: *How much does that thing weigh?*

A: It weighs about thirty pounds in its case with hammers, tuner, and a few supplies.

Q: *How often do you have to tune all those strings and how long does it take?*

A: The dulcimer I play most often has 97 strings and takes from 20 minutes to an hour to tune. I tune several times a week. Any significant temperature or humidity change will shrink or expand the wood and drive the dulcimer out of tune. A well-made instrument like mine will stay in tune with itself, so if I'm just practicing at home and the dulcimer is a little sharp or flat, I won't retune. I always tune before I perform or play with other people.

Q: *What got you interested in playing the dulcimer?*

A: I love music and I've listened to all kinds of music all my life, but my only experience playing an instrument was taking cornet lessons for a few months in grammar school. As an adult, I really wanted to play the drums, but my wife couldn't stand the thought of a drum set in our 1000 sq. ft apartment. I had heard the dulcimer and loved the sound of it, but never considered playing it until one night

at a John McCutcheon concert at the Old Town School of Folk Music when I thought, "That's for me!"

Q: *How did you learn to play?*

A: I took lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music from 1994 until 1996. For several years I attended workshops at folk and dulcimer festivals and took week-long classes at the John C Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina.

Q: *What kind of music do you play?*

A: I play primarily old-time music, which is music that developed mainly in the Appalachians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has roots in the music of Ireland, Scotland and Africa. It is primarily social music – played and sung in noncommercial venues by people making music for themselves and their friends, relatives and neighbors. I play a lot of old-time dance music – mainly fiddle tunes traditionally played for barn dances. Old-time music is the root of bluegrass.

I also play traditional and contemporary American folk music, Irish music, a little jazz, a little rock, and some blues. When I started taking lessons I asked my teacher if could play Hawaiian slack key guitar music on the dulcimer and she said, "Sure. If it's music, you can play it."

Q: *Where do you play?*

A: I play at coffee shops, private parties, receptions and benefits of all kinds, store openings, teas, club meetings, weddings, holiday events, libraries, farmers markets, and the airport. Chicago's department of tourism sponsors music at O'Hare and Midway during busy travel times, and those are among my favorite gigs, because weary travelers are so appreciative of our music. One afternoon, a sociologist who had been listening for four hours to me and the guitarist playing with me told us that he had observed all the people passing by and that they were 70 percent more likely to be smiling when we were playing than when we weren't. I also especially like doing library programs because the audiences enjoy both the music and the information about the music so much.

Swinging on a Gate

Phil Passen
Tom Conway

Hammered Dulcimer & Guitar



Traditional American and Celtic music played with energy and emotion. Driving dulcimer and percussive guitar make this first CD sparkle.

Track Listing:

One-Eyed Cat/Cuckoo's Nest; Blackberry Blossom/Ol Woodard's Tune; Whiskey Before Breakfast; If Ever You Were Mine;
Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine/Bonaparte's Retreat;
Star of the County Down; O'Keefe's Slide/Morrison's Jig;
Da Slockit Light; Maeve's Reel/Miss MacLeod's Reel;
Down by the Sally Gardens/Swannanoa Waltz;
When You and I Were Young, Maggie; Christmas Eve/Swinging on a Gate;
Si Bheag, Si Mhor; Twin Sisters/John Ryan's Polka ; Hewlett

Available From:

CDBaby.com, Amazon.com, and iTunes

More Information at:

www.philpassen.com



Familiar and not-so-familiar seasonal instrumentals and songs evoke the many moods of winter and the holiday season.

Track Listing:

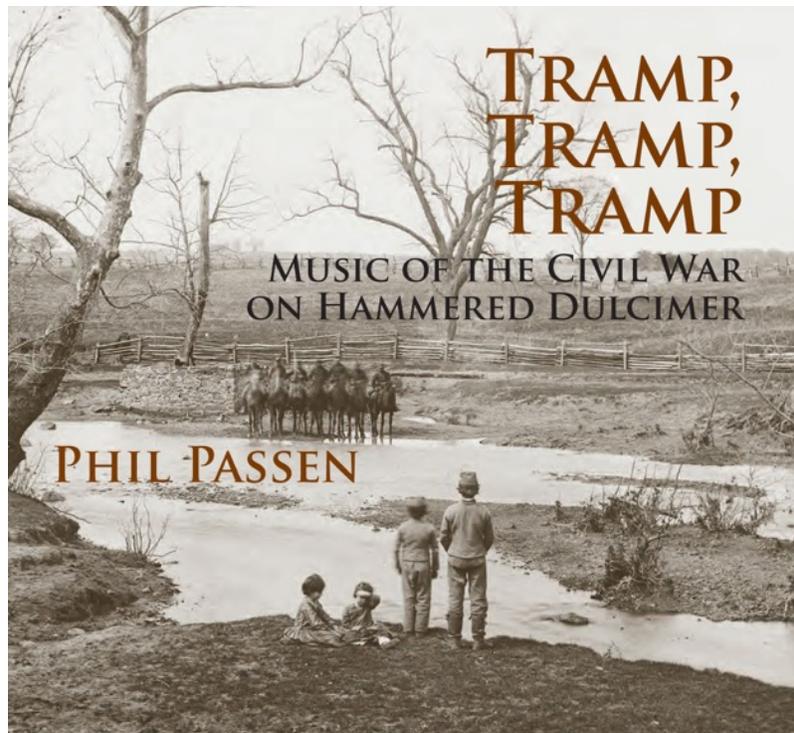
Kenyan Christmas Carol; Christmas Time's A-Coming; Il Est Ne/Christmas Eve; Oh Chanukah/God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen; Winter Solstice; Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring; Welcome Christmas Morning/Breaking Up Christmas; Here Comes Santa Claus/Turkey in the Straw; Jingle Bell Rock; Los Reyes Oriente; On A Cold Winter's Day/Cold Frosty Morning; Hot Buttered Rum; What Child Is This?; Go Tell It on the Mountain/Year of Jubilo; Let It Snow; Shalom Chaverim/This Little Light of Mine/ My Dreidl; Little Drummer Boy

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Tramp, Tramp, Tramp presents the music of the Civil War in progression, from beginning to end. Experience the history of the war through this emotional music.

- 1) Dixie / Battle Cry of Freedom**
- 2) Lincoln and Liberty**
- 3) They Swung John Brown to a Sour Apple Tree / John Brown's Dream**
- 4) Shiloh Hill**
- 5) John Brown's Body / Battle Hymn of the Republic / Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Brigade**
- 6) My Darling Nellie Gray**
- 7) Zolly's Retreat / The Year of Jubilo**
- 8) Lorena**
- 9) Paddy's Lamentation**
- 10) Garryowen / The Girl I Left Behind Me**
- 11) Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching / Camp Chase**
- 12) Quince Dillon's High D / Bragg's Retreat**
- 13) Home, Sweet, Home**
- 14) Marching Through Georgia**
- 15) Rebel's Raid / Booth Shot Lincoln**
- 16) Taps / When Johnny Comes Marching Home**
- 17) Hard Times Come Again No More**

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Phil Passen Library Programs

Overview – Library patrons and staff alike react with delight and enthusiasm to the mix of music and information in these programs. Because audiences are fascinated by the uncommon, trapezoidal-shaped hammered dulcimer, I intersperse information on its intriguing history throughout my performance. Afterwards, members of the audience, young and old, musicians and non-musicians, come up to take a closer look at the dulcimer and try their hand at it.

Acclaim – Selected Best of the Best by the Library Administrators and Coordinators of Northern Illinois. Library Program Coordinators exclaim:

“The information was fascinating...and the music was just heavenly. ”

“Thank you for a delightful afternoon of music.”

“The audience members of all ages, and I, were simply delighted with your music.”

Seasonal Programs

St. Patrick’s Day Program – The tunes in this program of traditional Irish music range from beautiful slow airs to rousing reels and jigs, including some very recognizable melodies such as *Irish Washerwoman* and *Danny Boy*. Also included are rousing songs such as *No Irish Need Apply*, *Johnson’s Motor Car*, *Brennan on the Moor*; and ballads such as *Leaving of Liverpool*, *John O’ Dreams*, and *Kilkelly, Ireland*. This is not just for St. Patrick’s Day. Audiences love Irish music any time of the year!

Winter Holidays – The beautiful sound of the dulcimer is showcased in this program with traditional and modern melodies and songs celebrating Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, and the winter solstice. Beautiful tunes such as *Jesu*, *Joy of Man’s Desiring* and *What Child is This?* share space with family favorites such as *Let It Snow*, *O Chanukah*, and *Here Comes Santa Claus*. An Irish Reel may make an appearance, as will a French or African carol and perhaps an old spiritual and a wintertime tune or two from somewhere else in the world. A wonderful and exciting way to hear familiar and not-so familiar holiday music!

Anytime Programs

Music of the Civil War – The hammered dulcimer was popular in the United States during the Civil War, and music of that era seems right at home played on this unique instrument. Many tunes and songs in this program are still familiar today, such as *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*; *Home, Sweet, Home*; *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys are Marching*. Others, such as *Lorena*; *Lincoln and Liberty*; *The Battle Cry of Freedom*; *The Marching Song of the First Arkansas Regiment*; *Shiloh Hill*; and *John Brown's Dream* are less familiar but just as beautiful, rousing, and inspiring. This is a fascinating program of historical music.

Old-Time and Celtic Music – The lively songs and tunes in this program illustrate the relationship between traditional Irish and old-time North American music. Reels and polkas include *Miss Macleod's*, *Mason's Apron*, and *John Ryan's Polka*. Slow tunes and waltzes include *Star of the County Down* and *Down by the Sally Gardens*. Familiar melodies such as *Turkey in the Straw* and *Irish Washerwoman* and old-time songs such as *Red Rocking Chair*, *My Darling Nellie Gray*, and *Sail Away Ladies* round out this highly entertaining performance.

Old-Time American Music – American roots music shines in this program of songs and tunes running the gamut from fast and lively, to slow and lovely, to haunting and plaintive. The familiar *Turkey in the Straw* and *Arkansas Traveler* or the not so familiar *Grub Springs*, *Shove that Pig'sfoot a Little Farther into the Fire*, and *John Brown's Dream* might have some in the audience on their feet and dancing. Songs such as *Wagoner's Lad*, *Coo Coo Bird*, and *Sow 'Em on the Mountain* capture the essence of old-time music. The beautiful sound and versatility of the dulcimer shine in this captivating performance.

When That Great Ship Went Down: Music to Commemorate the Sinking of the Titanic

Early on the morning of April 15, 1911, the passenger liner Titanic sank in the North Atlantic. Of the 2,224 passengers on board, 1,514 died. Orchestras in first and second class on the Titanic that night played popular songs of the day. Irish musicians in third class played rousing jigs and reels. Popular songs such as "The Glow Worm", "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine", and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" are included in this program along with energetic Irish tunes and songs about the sinking of the great ship. An informative and enjoyable program of popular music from a bygone era.

The Music of Thomas Hardy – Novelist and poet Thomas Hardy is considered one of the greatest English-language writers, yet most lovers of English literature have no idea that he was a lover of English country dance. As a young fiddler, he accompanied his father in playing for local dances. In this program, I play music which comes from the tune books Hardy transcribed and collected. I read from his novels some short descriptions of tunes, sing songs relevant to Hardy and his work, and read *The Convergence of the Twain*, his great poem about the sinking of the Titanic. This program is particularly timely in April (National Poetry Month) and June (the month of Hardy's birth).

Songs from Carl Sandburg's American Songbag – Carl Sandburg was an avid collector of folk songs from all over the United States and performed folk songs, accompanying himself on the guitar, at his poetry readings. In 1927 he published this collection of 255 songs, with words, music, and a little history of each song. In my program I describe the book and sing songs such as *Boll Weevil*, *I Was Born About Ten Thousand Years Ago*, *Frog Went a Courting*, *The Sloop John B*, *Red River Valley*, *C.C. Rider*, *Ain't Gonna Study War No More*, and others, all from Sandburg's book. In many cases I describe how the song evolved into a more modern, well known song. This is a great program any time, but especially appropriate in January (the month of Sandburg's birth) and April (National Poetry month).

Phil Passen Workshops

Singing With the Dulcimer: The goal of this class is to give students confidence that they can learn a method for arranging, learning, and actually singing a song while accompanying themselves on the dulcimer. Gone will be the common fear that “I can’t even talk while I play, I could never sing.” I use a step-by-step approach to put singing together with playing. Students work on accompanying themselves and each other, so that they also feel comfortable accompanying other singers.

Beginning Hammered Dulcimer: My goal in this class is always to get students excited enough that they continue with the hammered dulcimer instead of sliding it under the bed and leaving it there until the next beginners’ class comes along. In addition to learning the basics – finding the notes, tuning, good hammering technique – each student gets a chance to just hammer away and improvise, with some direction, so they feel comfortable interacting with the dulcimer. Students learn at least one tune, some fun exercises, and, if time allows, the rudiments of learning tunes both by ear and from written music.

Beginning to Jam: This class helps beginners and advanced beginners take the biggest step toward a lifetime of enjoying music – playing with others. I cover basic jam etiquette, and we play a few tunes the students know and a lot they don’t know to help them overcome the fear of being lost. I point out how to determine the key the tune is in if you’re afraid to ask, basic chording and some things to do when you can’t figure out anything but the tune’s key. This workshop replaces fear with fun.

Beginning to Perform: One of the most rewarding aspects of playing music is sharing one’s music with others by playing for them. This class offers a systematic approach to overcoming stage fright, preparing for a performance, and knocking ‘em dead. We review building repertoire and set lists, the differences between practicing tunes and rehearsing for a performance, stage presence and stage patter, basic amplification strategies, and finding places to perform. Each student performs at least once for the whole class.



