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# ALL FRETS



**ARNO HAGENAARS**

## *INSIDE...*

**FIGA 2007  
CONVENTION INFO**

**CHARLIE  
KHEDERIAN  
AWARD**

**BANJO LOST...  
& FOUND!**

**BANJO HALL OF  
FAME HONOREES**

**"BIG JOHN" BECKER  
HONORED**

**MIDWEST BANJO  
CLUB JAMBOREE**

*...and more!*







## ARNO HAGENAAARS

invited us into the store and led us past the construction zone and into the basement where the store's inventory was temporarily being stored. Not having any idea what sort of an instrument I would need to play Dixieland music, I followed the store owner's advise and went home with what later appeared to be a tenor banjo."

Although the hopeful musicians which made up Arno's first Dixieland experience had been a little overconfident ("Our band only existed exactly for one rehearsal!"), Arno thought it a shame not to utilize the investment made by his parents and began taking lessons from a local banjo player. "My teacher lived in the countryside and every week I biked all the way to his house with my banjo in tow. I also attended courses at the local school of music to improve my sight reading capabilities and to learn more about music theory."

Although living his passion for the tenor banjo for the past 25 years, Dutch banjoist, Arno Hagenaaars is something of a newcomer to audiences in the United States. Although his initial banjo inspiration and activity happened an ocean away, it is interesting to note that his story often mirrors those told many times by American banjo players of the current generation. The music, artists, composers and instruments which induce their magical appeal to banjo players here in the U.S. had an identical effect on Arno, proving once again that music - particularly banjo music - is universal in nature.

Hagenaaars first musical spark came from listening to recordings made by *The Dutch Swing College Band*, a well known European jazz band which played a traditional Dixieland repertoire. Arno recalls, "I was eleven or twelve years old when some of my soccer friends decided to form a Dixieland jazz band like the one on those records. All the instruments were represented except for a banjo. Designated to be the banjo player, I soon found myself on the train, together with my mother, headed for Breda (a city in the south of Holland). Noted for its annual jazz festival, Breda was also the home of a music store which was know to specialize in good banjos."

"However, when we arrived, our disappointment was big as we found the store to be closed for renovation. Fortunately, the shop owner was present and showed great compassion for our situation. He

"As I became more and more interested in the banjo and its history, I started to seek out other banjo players. Surprisingly, my high school math teacher turned out to be the banjo player in a local jazz band. At annual school parties, he introduced me on stage to join in with his band for a couple of songs - these were my first 'real' stage performances. But, it was when fellow Dutch banjoist, Tom Stuij, supplied me with recordings of Harry Reser, Perry Bechtel and Eddie Peabody that my banjo world opened up - I *had* to play like that!"

Like many aspiring banjo soloists, Hagenaaars was attracted by the phenomenal chord solo style of Eddie Peabody as well as the musicality and unheard of techniques of Perry Bechtel. Yet it was the consummate banjoist/musician/composer/arranger/performer, Harry Reser which became Arno's single major influence. The study of Reser's playing and solos became Arno's "uncompromising activity" for many years to come. "I got access to most of Reser's published and recorded music through the late Bill Triggs from the UK. He had one of the largest Reser collections in the world. Even though I have been studying the music of Harry Reser for years, I am still elated when I listen to his solo recordings. And, his orchestra work, as both soloist, arranger and musician was extraordinary. It's a shame that so little of Reser's vast recorded output has been reissued on modern sound media so everyone could know what I mean."





Arno jams with Buddy Wachter at a 1990 Dutch banjo convention.

As Hagenaa's studies on the tenor banjo suggested infinite possibilities as well as countless unanswered musical questions, his sources of influence and inspiration became numerous and diverse. Banjo specific ideas came from legendary musicians such as Elmer Snowden, Ken Harvey, Mario de Pietro, Giovanni Vicari, and Pete Mandell. Arno comments, "Pete Mandell wrote *Take Your Pick* which was the first banjo solo that I feel I had mastered. Giovanni Vicari (like de Pietro) was originally a mandolinist. Both adapted an intricate classical arpeggio technique to their banjo playing which I found most interesting. In a different way, the swinging jazz style of Elmer Snowden was just as interesting."



KLM Royal Dutch Airlines band appears in Miami, Florida in 1991.

"In my search for new ideas for my own banjo playing, I also often looked beyond the typical list of great banjo players. I've been inspired by and 'borrowed' many musical ideas from people such as Django Reinhardt (*a miraculous guitarist from another planet*), Paul Desmond (*a brilliant melodic improviser*), Oscar Peterson (*a true technical wizard of the piano*),

and Miles Davis (*a musical innovator and great trumpet player*)."

The multiplicity and musicianship resulting from his intense musical study prepared Hagenaa's to be at home in the wide variety of musical settings which awaited him. In the 1980s he became the youngest member of his first real band, the *Dixie Messengers*, using the money he made to purchase new and better instruments. As years passed, more interesting, and often challenging, opportunities presented themselves to the young musician. "In addition to playing with Dixieland and traditional jazz groups such as the *Down Town Jazzband*, *Tony's Wife Orchestra*, *Miss Lulu White Hot Creole Jazzband*, and the *KLM Swing and Sing Society* (a promotional band for Royal Dutch Airlines), I was also part of a small big band named Zjarretel which played in the style of Fletcher Henderson."



Arno (lower left) with the famous Dutch jazz orchestra, Zjarretel in 1987.

"In the 1990s, I also joined the *Beau Hunks*, a documentary orchestra which specialized in reviving and recording the works of unsung composers such as Marvin Hatley and Leroy Shield (*who, among many other things, composed the charming background music for Laurel & Hardy and Little Rascals films*), Raymond Scott (*a composer of 'descriptive jazz' whose music is most notably remembered from Warner Brothers cartoons of the post WWII era*), and Ferde Grofe' (*the arranger and pianist for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra*). In reconstructing these works we were privileged to use the composers original handwritten scores. The banjo part of Ferde Grofe's compositions and arrangements were particularly interesting as these contained personal performance notes by Whiteman banjoist, Michael Pingitore. Interestingly, the banjo parts of the early





A 2002 promotional photo of banjo soloist, Arno Hagenaaers.

Whiteman pieces were not arranged for a specific banjo type; the basic three or four-note chords that were used (written in musical notation) in many cases could not be fingered on either the tenor or plectrum banjo. So, Pingitore had to re-work these scores and added chord symbols and sometimes fingerboard diagrams to facilitate sight reading during performing and recording. The banjo scores of the later arrangements were based on chord symbols instead of chords written in musical notation. Pingitore's performance notes, which included reminders, crossing-outs, and references (for instance indicating cuts needed to shorten the duration of a piece to fit on a 78rpm record) added an extra dimension to the perception of the music while rehearsing and performing the pieces with the Beau Hunks Orchestra. I remember I was thrilled listening for the first time to the original Whiteman recordings while following through the banjo score what Pingitore had to play."

"My participation in the *Beau Hunks* projects (and a later similar documentary orchestra known as the *Dutch Metropole Orchestra*) typically lasted for a relatively short period intensively filled with rehearsing, touring and recording. But, the resulting products are most satisfying."



Arno joins Tom and Arlette Stuij in a performance at the "Jazz at the Castle" event in Breda, Holland, 2004.

Although the European live music and jazz scene seemingly offers more working and income potential for professional musicians than that of the U.S., Arno cautions, "Making a living is only possible when combined with playing in one or more bands and teaching. This applies to both four and five string banjo players. Playing the banjo is sometimes looked upon as being a curiosity here. Chances are clearly better for guitar players who play the banjo as a second instrument." This being the situation, Arno felt it wise to pursue an education in a more stable and established professional field. He attended the Universities of Nijmegen (The Netherlands) and Louvain (Belgium) where he obtained as Ph.D. degree in polymer technology (the science of plastics). "I combine my banjo playing with a job as researcher with the General Electric Company, and although I have a lot of freedom to plan my time, it is sometimes a real challenge to find

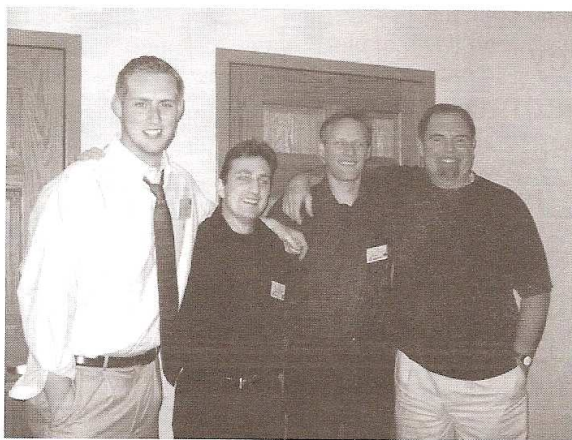


In 2003, Arno performs with the *Blue Rhythm Jugglers* - a Dutch orchestra which specializes in a 1920s dance band repertoire.



the right balance between the two careers. I try to devote as much time as possible on making music."

In that pursuit, Hagenaaers also studied for two years at the conservatory in Tilburg (The Netherlands), with tenor banjo as his main instrument. A similar serious study of music - with the tenor banjo being a focal point - is something that like minded aspiring musicians have found nearly impossible to achieve in the U.S. As such, in Arno's case, the result is a most interesting musician who is as at home speaking of the compositions of banjo greats of the past as he is reflecting on his admiration of classical composers such as Chopin, Shostakovitch, Debussy, Strawinsky and Bach.



Tyler Jackson, pianist Erwin Lejus, Arno, and Buddy Wachter enjoy a happy musical meeting at the GLIB convention in 2005.

Given his unusual (if not unique) musical background and interests, Arno Hagenaaers thinks of himself as much as a composer who plays the banjo as he is a banjo technician. Nowhere were the results of this mindset more present than in the recent release of his solo recording, *Stung*. Arno relates, "Recording a solo album is exciting and frightening at the same time. I had many ideas for compositions that had 'ghosted' around in my head that had to be materialized. However, no matter how they sounded in my head, once in the recording studio things always turn out a little different than initially anticipated."

"The repertoire of *Stung* is very broad and ranges from early jazz to contemporary music. It is a good representation of my belief that the musical possibilities for the four-string banjo are virtually unlimited."

As for the future of the banjo - and his role in it,

Hagenaaers has some very specific ideas. "Clearly, the guitar dominates the music world and far outshines the banjo as a stringed instrument. But, the four-string banjo has enormous potential. The challenge is to 'exploit' its unique sound qualities. Imagine if today's guitar and violin players were exposed to the four-string banjo and began adopting it as their primary instrument. This would have an enormous effect on the development of the instrument, the level of playing and the accepted repertoire... ..perhaps there we would see works such as Paganini's 24 caprices for violin, the ultimate challenge for violinists, but written for four-string banjo...the musical potential is without limits."



"Buddy Wachter is the most influential of the modern generation of banjoists who has brought the four-string banjo to the next level. It is also very encouraging to see that, especially in the U.S., there are some excellent young players around. Tyler Jackson, for example, is already an outstanding banjo player and musician - and his career has only just started. While also strong in Europe, the four-string banjo has surprisingly gained popularity in Japan as well. Ken Aoki is just one example of many talented four-string banjo players originating from that country."

"With my first solo CD a finished project, I already have many new ideas 'ghosting' around in my head for the future. I love to play Latin music and plan to compose a banjo solo piece which will be backed up by a salsa orchestra. I'm also working on a series of compositions for tenor banjo utilizing new and different playing techniques. For this purpose I am experimenting with funny things like modified picks, left hand picking and changing the tuning of the instrument. Although not always of practical use, I believe that that challenges associated with pushing the banjo into new musical frontiers represent the instrument's best hope for regaining its former stature in today's musical world."

