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ARNO HAGENAARS



Arno Hagenaaars

JBM: When did you first develop your interest in music?

AH: When I was 11 or 12 my hobby was to play soccer. I was a goal keeper and one of my friends played the trombone and he had records of a popular jazz band here in the Netherlands. My friend had taken trombone lessons and decided to start a little band. There was no rhythm instrument and they needed a banjo. My mother took me to another town to purchase a banjo. The owner, Joop Hendriks, was a famous saxophone player and he sold me a tenor banjo. It was fortunate that he played traditional jazz music and knew what type of banjo I would need. The instrument was a "Maya" banjo from Japan.

JBM: What influenced you to take an interest in music? It couldn't have been just your soccer friends.

AH: It was mostly the music in the community. There was always some type of music being played. I didn't come from a musical family. I only had one uncle that played music and he played rock on a guitar.

JBM: When your soccer team band folded, after one rehearsal, what kept you going? Were you committed to the banjo because your mother had purchased it for you?

AH: That's exactly right. I had a lot of records to listen to and there was also a famous banjo player by the name of Arie Ligthart that I listened to as well. He was a member of the Dutch Swing College Band which was a popular band at the time. He was a very good solo player and played a few of the Pete Mandell solos.

When I decided that I liked the music and wanted to play the banjo it wasn't a big step to contact the local banjo player and take lessons. I learned my chords by playing in Dixieland bands and the next step in my learning was to learn how to improvise.

JBM: How did you learn to improvise?

AH: I started with a record by the "Banjo Kings." They played both chords and single string lines so I tried to imitate what I heard. I was learning to copy what they were playing and then add my own improvisations. At the same time I discovered the music of Pete Mandell. I obtain the printed music of *Take your Pick* and *Get Going* and those were the first solos I mastered on the banjo.



Arno with Zjarretel - 1987

The first person that helped me the most with my playing was Tom Stuip. He was the only professional banjo player in the Netherlands at the time. It was quite a revelation the first time I saw all of his U.S. banjos in his home. He also was the one that introduced me to all of the great banjo players from the 1920s as well as to contemporary players like Buck Kelly and Buddy Wachter.

JBM: Didn't you also correspond with Bill Triggs?

AH: I have books full of correspondence from



Arno with Tom Stuip

him as well as numerous cassettes of Harry Reser recordings. I would read through the Reser discography and just mark off the recordings that I wanted.

JBM: Did he also send you some of his transcriptions as well?

AH: Yes he did, I have all of them.

JBM: Bill Triggs was working with Mel Bay, before he died, to publish a book of Harry Reser's solos from his 78rpm recordings.

AH: That's correct.

JBM: Your biography shows several jazz groups that you played with in the 1980s such as *Zjarretel*.

AH: That is a French word that means suspenders. The group played in the style of Fletcher Henderson so most of the music was arranged.

JBM: At that time were you playing mostly rhythm or were you playing some solos?

AH: I was playing rhythm but there was also room for solos as well.

JBM: How did you work out your solos?

AH: The arranger would write down the chords and I had the freedom to make my own improvisation. Initially when I started to improvise I would use mostly chord notes or notes that form the melodic line of a song. Later I learned how to play scales over chord progressions. It is the combination of chord alterations and scales that determines how modern an improvisation sounds. For instance playing an Ab melodic minor scale over an altered G chord or a C harmonic minor scale over an altered F major chord sounds really hip.

JBM: One would wonder how that works since

there is a Bb in the F major scale and there is a B natural in the C harmonic minor scale.

AH: The B natural is the raised eleventh in an altered F chord. It is also part of the F Lydian scale.

AH: I have listened to a lot of Harry Reser's licks and I have copied many of these licks from him. We all borrow from the best.

JBM: Harry Reser published several books on how to play the tenor banjo. Did you ever work with the book called "Breaks for the Tenor Banjo, by Harry F. Reser from Paul Whiteman's Orchestra"?

AH: I have that book but I never used it very much. In his 20 home lessons (Harry Reser's New Instruction Course For Tenor Banjo) he explains what he is doing in all of his solos and breaks. He explains how he uses pentatonic scales and the use of double stops. That's the book that Jüergen Kulus has reproduced.

JBM: It says in your biography that in the 1990's you joined a group called the *Beau Hunks*.

AH: That group is a documentary orchestra that works on projects. The first project they did in the early 1990s was 2 CDs by Marvin Hatley and Leroy Shield. They were the composers of the background music for the *Laurel and Hardy* films. The CDs sold very well in the USA but I did not play on those particular CDs. The group also released another CD, of the same composers, that was the background music for the *Little Rascals* films.

JBM: Is there a banjo on those recordings?

AH: Yes, there is a four string banjo player that plays guitar tuning.

JBM: Its interesting how different tunings are used for the banjo but the general public can't usually distinguish the difference. Sean Moyses tunes his plectrum banjo to the same 4 open strings of the 5-string banjo (DGBD). He says that he can play the more modern jazz chords easier with this tuning. Ken Harvey was another early banjo player that elected to use this tuning.

AH: Dick Roberts of the "Banjo Kings" also had a different tuning. He would raise the low C on the fourth string of his tenor banjo an octave higher. It gave the instrument a different sound.

JBM: How long were you a member of the *Beau Hunks*?

AH: Officially I am still a member. The orchestra works on projects and right now the orchestra is sleeping. The last project I did was the works of Ferde Grofe. He was the arranger for the "Paul Whiteman's Orchestra." He also composed some large pieces such as the *Grand Canyon Suite*. Other compositions include the *Mississippi Suite*, *Death Valley Suite* and *Niagara Falls Suite*. Grofe was also the arranger for Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. We recorded many of his arrangements and we used the original scores. The charts came from the Paul Whiteman Archives in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It was really nice to use the original arrangements because you could read the remarks that the banjo player Mike Pingitore had written in.



Arno – Malta

JBM: Are you currently playing with a jazz band?

AH: I play with the "Miss Lulu White's Hot Creole Jazz Band".

JBM: What type of jazz are you playing with that group?

AH: Its the music of Louis Armstrong and his Hot 5 and Hot 7 as well as King Oliver.

JBM: When you play the music of the Hot 7 and Hot 5 how do you handle the low notes that Johnny St. Cyr played on his six-string banjo?

AH: I can't play those low notes so I play them an octave higher. That way you get a lot of sound out of the banjo. I also play with a few other groups but most of my playing is with my piano player Erwin Leijs in addition to the solo work that I do.

JBM: I really like the Latin music you play on your CD. It sounds like you really like that genre of music?

AH: Yes, it sounds absolutely great on the banjo. I was in Brazil last year and there you see more and more orchestras with a banjo. It is a little four string banjo and it is gradually replacing the little four string guitar that they are using called the "Cavaquinho."

JBM: How is it tuned?

AH: It is tuned D G B D. Other tunings you also see with that little guitar are G G B D and sometimes A A C# E.

JBM: Why do you think the banjo is replacing the guitar?

AH: I think it is because it has a little more penetrating power. I was really surprised to see them and when you go to music shops you see quite a few of them for sale. It is becoming quite popular over there. Another Latin instrument that I like is the "Tres" guitar. It has three double strings and it is tuned G C E. What is unique about this tuning is that the G strings are tuned an octave apart. It is usually played as an electric guitar and it has a very "Cuban" sound.



Brazilian
4-string banjo

JBM: I think its going to take something like the banjo in Latin music to bring the four string banjo back as a popular instrument in contemporary music.

AH: I listen to a lot of contemporary music and modern composers. I use my electric banjo to make different sounds and so I experiment with different tunings.

JBM: What were you trying to achieve with the different Bagatelles?

AH: A Bagatelle is a short instrumental piece of no specified musical form. There are quite a few well known composers that composed Bagatelles. A famous one is Beethoven's Für Elise.

JBM: On your CD you have two songs by Harry Reser - *Crackerjack* and *Oh! Boy, What a Girl*. Is there some way that you could make those songs sound more modern.

AH: Yes you can when you play the double stops that Harry Reser wrote. You get a more modern sound if you use intervals like the 2nd or 7th instead of the 3rd or 5th.

JBM: So that is the connection on your CD and why you start off with those two songs.

AH: Yes. When I play more modern jazz I sometimes improvise with a Reser's pentatonic lick. Because I am backed by a bass and keyboard player, playing modern chords, it sounds more modern. Listen to *Jazz Scherzo for Banjo in D-flat* on my CD.

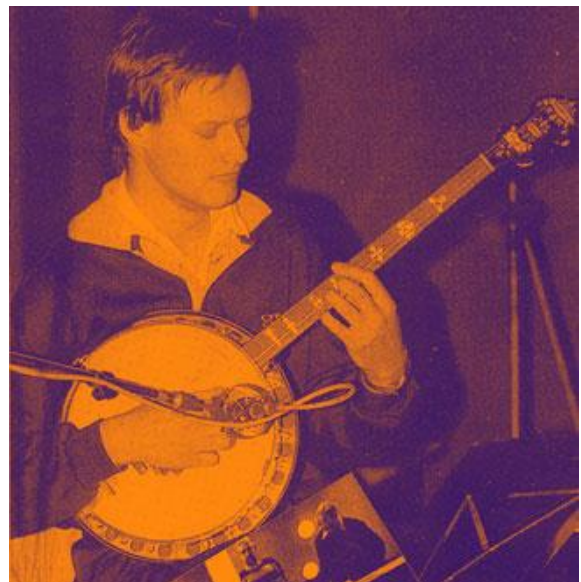
JBM: I am glad I asked the question because now I can see how all of your songs connect together.

AH: Absolutely, they connect. You can play the same run with conventional chords and it will sound ragtime. With a modern backup it will sound like Miles Davis. Sometimes when I play modern jazz I will use a mute.

JBM: Are you doing that to emulate the sound of more sustain?

AH: Yes. The mute is behind the bridge and I can adjust where it is to produce more sustain or less sustain. Sometimes banjos are fitted with a mute that can be operated with the knee. It is also possible to mute strings with the fingers of the right hand, which gives a different effect

JBM: So what you are doing is placing your little finger between the string and the head?



Arno in the studio 1987

AH: Yes. You can also experiment with harmonics and create different sounds. By fretting anywhere on the neck and then placing your finger over the fret 12 frets away you can play any harmonic. You fret with your left hand and place your right hand finger over the fret 12 away and pick with your thumb. Initially it looks very difficult but with practice it becomes easy. Steve Vai, the guitar player for Frank Zappa, uses harmonics to get great effects. Chet Atkins was another guitar player that used this technique.

JBM: Some guitar players try to emulate the breathing that goes along with playing a saxophone. They will use hammer-ons, slides and pull-offs. It gives it a different type of phrasing. Do you do anything like that on the banjo?

AH: I try and work on that but the biggest problem with the banjo is the sustain. When a saxophone holds a low note and you want to get the same effect then a tremolo is not the way to go. It sounds a little artificial.

JBM: How do you get sustain without using a tremolo?

AH: It's all in how you set up your banjo.

JBM: Do you have a new project that you are working on now?

AH: Everything that I had ready for the last CD was not used. We had to choose what to put on the new album. We had to decide whether to have a CD that had a topic or one that was more general. We decided that a general CD would be better so we still have a lot of compositions that have not been released.

JBM: You mentioned that you use an electric banjo. What kind of electric banjo do you have?

AH: It's a Deering tenor that was made as a special order.



JBM: Do you know if they have made other electric tenor banjos before?

AH: Yes there are a few. There is a well known musician in Las Vegas that plays tenor banjo that has one and a banjo player in Scotland, Kevin MacLeod, that plays traditional folk music. When you play the banjo amplified you can get a lot of power out of it but if you play it acoustically it sounds really soft and not exactly like a banjo. It's a great instrument to play. Deering recommends that you use a keyboard amp rather than a guitar amp. The guitar amp is limited in picking up the banjo higher tones.

JBM: Did you use your electric banjo on your last CD (Stung!)?

AH: Yes on the last two compositions. *H Arno H Banjo* is entirely played on the electric banjo and *Thinking of Finland* is partially on the electric banjo. The translation of *H Arno H Banjo* would be Hi! Arno Hi! Banjo.

I am also working on some technical pieces that can be played on the banjo that will use left hand picking techniques, artificial harmonics, different instrument tunings and pieces that use modified finger picks.

JBM: Since you work in Chemistry, one would assume that you have an analytical mind. Is that a requirement to play the kind of music that you play?

AH: That is a very good question. I think it can be either an advantage or a disadvantage. One of my heroes, Django Reinhardt, was a gypsy, he could not read music but played the most wonderful music. He must have had the perfect musical mind if such a thing as this exists,

JBM: Do you play based upon theory or do you play what you hear in your head?

AH: Most of the improvisation that I do comes naturally. Sometimes I have a lick or solo on my mind before I play and I will decide at the time which one to play. The result of this ad-hoc decision can only be judged afterwards which is the fun part.

