



One String per Month for a Year

The appearance of Leadbelly, "King of the 12-string guitar", in the crossword puzzle solution (below) reminds me that I've written only a little about the 12-string here in Whither Zither. I have played one or another of these monster egg slicers ever since buying my first one from a high school classmate in 1964 for \$100 (adjusted for inflation, \$890,000.00). Made by Harmony, I still own the beat-up old thang. My then girlfriend's phone number to this day is legible, written into the finish with a ball point pen. I played that ax for about ten years (and boy was I tired). In some ways, it is still my favorite of all the 12-strings I have owned, but too worn out to take anywhere, much like me.

Note the naming convention: as do others, I refer to the guitar as a "12-string" and do away with the word "guitar." This goes along with such other noun-reduced shorthands like "cell", "remote", and "dental" (as in Northside Dental). I hyphenate it because without the hyphen, certain sentences would sound odd ("...my favorite instrument of all the twelve strings I have owned"). A 12-string is taken to mean a 12-string guitar, like the term "5-string" most often refers to a 5-string banjo.

Anyway. Here's a quick primer about the 12-string. These instruments are built generally the same as a regular 6-string guitar but often sturdier, to handle the force of twelve metal strings (actually, wires) tugging for dear life with a force of at least 250 pounds. 12-strings are available in multiple sizes comparable to six-string guitars, and in a similar variety of other construction details. For example, my old Harmony has a "tailpiece" into which the butt-end of strings are fastened. This bit of hardware is bent around the bottom of the guitar, so the pull of the strings is anchored down there instead of on the guitar's face. My more recent Guild guitars, as with most 6-strings, feature

a "pin-bridge", mounted right on the instrument's face, and the strings are fastened there. And that's just one of the infinite 12-string variables you might see on Craigslist.

A 12-string is, in a way, little more than a 6-string with twelve strings. It is usually tuned to be played like a 6-string. I say this because the strings are paired, so that one finger mashes down on two strings as though they were one string. Sometimes these pairs are called "courses," as in: "*Laud: a flat back lute from Spain, with 12 metal strings in 6 courses...*" A 12-string guitar also has "12 metal strings in 6 courses."

The 12-string's three higher pairs are usually tuned in unison. In other words, the strings are the same gauge and tuned to exactly the same note as their paired partner. With the lower three string pairs however, one string of any given pair -- a lighter, thinner string -- is tuned exactly an octave higher than its companion string. This creates the jingly sound that folks either love or hate about the 12-string.

As to string configuration, usually guitar strings are installed so that when you strum DOWN, the pick hits the LOWER-pitched strings FIRST. This is true of a 12-string too, overall, but actually, moving downward, the pick hits the higher "octave" string of each pair before it hits the lower-pitched of the two. If you know what I mean.

If you're confused, my work here is finished. Now, why would anyone want to play such an instrument? Like accordions, either because they like of the sound of it, or they lost a bet. There is also the consideration that usually it is louder than a 6-string of the same size. Since I play the 12-string in a duo with an accordionist, it's interesting to me that there is debate whether the 12-string originated in Italy or Mexico, two countries where the accordion is also popular. Accordions are loud too, believe me.

So. Main 12-string advantages: The unique sound quality -- to me, like a harpsichord but more expressive -- and the volume. Main disadvantages: The

weight and the wretched problem of keeping 12 strings in tune.

By the way, Guild recommends that due to the great pull of all these strings, the guitar be tuned down (the strings loosened) a whole step. In other words, instead of the highest string pair being an E, it's a D. If I finger an E chord, the pitch is actually that of a D chord. If I want to finger an E chord and have it SOUND like an E chord, pitchwise, I have to put a capo on the guitar, up two frets. (Since it is tuned DOWN two half-steps, I capo UP two half-steps to have it behave at the pitch of a regular guitar.) They say Leadbelly tuned his down to a C which is two whole steps (four half-steps) down. If my musical partner Lou plays in the key of C on her accordion, I can play along, without a capo, using fingering for the key of D. OR, put a capo on the guitar, move it up two frets, and play in the regular C fingering. If you know what I mean.

Meanwhile, I'm spending my days in the shop inventing an accordion capo.

Solution to last month's puzzle called:

STAGE NAMES

NOTE: Alert readers noted two numbering mistakes in last month's clues:

The clue numbered **26 ACROSS** should have been **28 ACROSS**.

The clue numbered **47 ACROSS** should have been **49 ACROSS**. Oops!

