

on the lighter side

John Escosa

by Carrol McLaughlin

John Escosa has been touring as a concert harpist for over 25 years. For the past 19 years he has been on the Roster of Columbia Artists Management, performing over 1100 concerts throughout the United States and Canada.

John began playing harp professionally when he was 13, performing as First Harpist with the Fort Wayne Civic Symphony. (He had started piano lessons at age 4, and advanced to the pipe organ at 8 and harp at 10.) Five summers were spent at the Wainwright Band Camp in La Grange, Indiana, and those first harp lessons were with Band Director Jack Wainwright's daughter, Lynne Wainwright (Palmer), who had just graduated from Curtis. He also studied several of those summers with Ruth Dean Clark and Janet Putnam.

John remembers that his "finest training" came very early in his life from Clare Edwards, his organ teacher. At the first lesson, John (age 8) was asked to reharmonize a hymn tune, "Oh God Our Help in Ages Past." He was then asked to improvise a chorale prelude on the piece, putting the tune in the soprano voice. In subsequent lessons the tune was to be played in alto, tenor, and bass voices. John recalls, "I was 8 years old



John Escosa, President of the American Harp Society



A very serious young John, age 13

and didn't know that was considered difficult!"

This concept of freedom to "do stuff" colored his attitude toward all types of music, and he never felt restricted or intimidated by taking what the music said as being "written in stone." As John says, this was "enviable training for any kid," and proved invaluable when he decided to go into the pop harp field.

The foundation served him well when he substituted as harpist at various radio stations in New York. John recalls, "In those days they often gave you a piano chart and you had to fake it—or there were chord charts, which I quickly learned how to read."

John's musical career has included some fascinating ventures not directly involving the harp. In the years 1953–1957, John and a friend, John Neff, bought and operated a ballet school, with Escosa starting as accompanist and John's wife (at the time) Dorothy also working as pianist and secretary. The two "Johns" quickly developed a ballet company. In 1957 the company and school were growing too rapidly, and the partners gave it to the city; it became what is now the Fort Wayne Ballet Company.

John had earlier toured as assistant director and harpist with the first road company of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and was musical director for several summer musicals until he was drafted into the service.

Once again his musical talents paid off. On Palm



Publicity photo of John Escosa with his first Salzedo model harp, 1960

Sunday, 1951, John had attended the Post Chapel service at Camp Gordon, Georgia. When the congregation was asked, "Can anyone play the organ?," John responded, and his performance was heard by the post Chaplain. Later, as he was packing his dufflebag for Korea, he was told he had been transferred to the Chaplain Corps as a Chaplain's Assistant. Within a short while John helped to organize a 40-voice Army choir which performed throughout the southern United States. The choir also had a half-hour show, broadcast nationally each Sunday on CBS.

John has entertained as both pianist and harpist in many fine hotels and restaurants, including the Nocturne Room and Carriage Inn in Fort Wayne, and the Gibson Girl Lounge in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was in 1963, when John was performing at the Gibson Girl, that he first met Joe Longstreth, a well-known radio and television personage in Cincinnati. John honored an invitation to visit Joe at the WLW Radio Station and happened to walk in during the first five minutes of a half-hour live radio broadcast. On the air Joe asked John to "Bring your harp over to my farm and we'll see if we can play together." John did so the next weekend and thus began the Longstreth and Escosa duo.

Their first management was the Eastman Boomer Agency in New York. In 1968 they were called by George Blake, the President of Community Concerts, and signed as artists with Columbia Artists Management. They be-

gan touring for Columbia as "artists on salary," performing 122 duo harp concerts the first season but being paid with a weekly salary check, out of which they had to cover their own expenses. A few seasons later this was changed to the "per concert" fee basis. Longstreth and Escosa toured together for fifteen years, ten of those with Columbia. In 1980–1983 John toured in a two-harp duo with James Pinkerton, and from 1983 to the present has toured with fellow harpist Michael Rado.

It was in his fifth season of touring that John began to include popular arrangements in his programs. His solo arrangements of pieces such as "The Man I Love," and "Can't Help Lovin' That Man," are available through the Salvi Pop Series, and FC Publishing has also made available John's arrangements, including "But Not for Me."

John was a teacher at the Salvi Pop & Jazz Harp Festivals held 1978–1980 in Santa Barbara, California, and has also given Pop and Jazz Workshops at The University of Arizona and the 1986 Pop Harp Seminar at Boston University.

He was the featured artist at the final banquet of the American Harp Society Conference in Tempe, Arizona, and was a member of the AHS Board of Directors from 1980 to 1985. In 1988 John was elected President of the American Harp Society.



John as a soldier at Camp Gordon, GA, in 1951