

# Jack Nebergall

by Alexandra Perdew with Wenonah Govea

The introduction of the Nebergall Award will be presented in June 2004 as part of the AHS Foundation Awards. It is fitting and proper to pay homage to a sly and improper imp, who brightened the lives of all with whom he came in contact, the self-same Jack Nebergall. This extraordinary musician was born, in Oregon, to Doris and Donald Olin Nebergall, in 1924, four years after his brother, Donald, was born. Jack's grandfather had moved the family from Cuba, Illinois, to Albany, Oregon, where he founded the D.E. Nebergall Meat Packing Company which became a lucrative investment of his and his son "Olin's" time and energy. To this day, many people in Albany remember the green and white D.E. Nebergall truck delivering processed meat to local grocery stores. The company eventually was sold to a large conglomerate.



Gail Laughton and Jack Nebergall probably in the late 1940s

The family interest in music was evident in Grandfather D.E. Nebergall who was an old-time fiddler in and around Albany, and both Jack and his brother Donald began playing music at a young age. Donald, Jack's elder brother, played the piano, and Jack took up the violin at the age of four. Despite his growing proficiency at the violin, the films of the Marx brothers piqued his interest in another instrument, the harp, which intensified when Jack became involved with helping move a Lindeman harp on and off stage for a visiting performer. Eventually Jack's family bought that harp for \$400.00 and he began studying with Doris Calkins in Eugene.

His instruction was in the classical tradition, but Jack's natural instincts in music and inner ear harmony sometimes made him a rather difficult student. It was almost impossible to determine whether he had actually learned a piece of music or was playing by ear. One story Ms. Calkins told was that when Jack was about sixteen years of age, he came for a lesson, and instead of his assignment, he played the Mendelssohn violin concerto, incorporating the orchestral arrangement into his solo on the harp. In spite of his free spirit and natural talent and her insistence upon classical/technical education, they had a wonderful relationship and remained close life-long friends.

After high school, Jack attended Oregon State College, now Oregon State University, in Corvallis; and true to his enjoyment of trying something new, and/or challenging, he became Drum Major for the school's marching band. No doubt the band was energized, for Jack was never one to avoid the opportunity for unexpected antics. From studies in Corvallis, at the recommendation of Doris Calkins, in 1944, he moved to San Francisco to study with her former teacher, Kajatan Attl, principal harpist of the San Francisco Symphony. During this same period, DeWayne Fulton and Stanley Chaloupka were Mr. Attl's students as well.





Jack and some of his friends. Center: Jack and Dale Barco in Australia. Clockwise: Lunch in Copenhagen with Wenonah Govea, Jack, David Ice, Felice Pomeranz, Mario Falcao; Jack with Eleanor Fell; Jack's mother Doris and her dog, Benny; Duo with John Escosa; Jack and teacher and friend Doris Calkins; with Stella Castellucci; interviewed by Danish radio/TV in Copenhagen; Penny Beavers, Jack and Natalie Billick.

Soon Jack became popular as a free-lance harpist and built a good reputation as a soloist as well as an ensemble player. His first in-house job was with the ten-piece band of Dick Foy at the up-scale Claremont Hotel in the Berkeley hills where he soloed during dance breaks. This was the ideal setting for the creation of his own particular style. At breaks, the musical focus was not only relaxed from a dance beat, but was the time when customers could listen without any distractions, a laid back time for the enjoyment of the music alone. This was the perfect opportunity for him to develop not only his style, but also his incredible pedal technique. Just as a pianist gains the tactile knowledge of the keyboard so that his hands respond in reflex, without thought, to any chord in any key, so did Jack develop a response to pedaling in any chord in any key, even to the extent of moving both feet to the same side of the board, without conscious thought. This talent coupled with the music and harmonies in his inner ear made Jack the formidable artist he became. Eleanor Fell, a great friend of Jack's, has given the harp world a real gift, an idea of Jack's talent, by re-publishing some of his

arrangements in a collection, *Remembering Jack Nebergall* (Vanderbilt Music Company). These arrangements first appeared individually as part of Faith Carman's "Popcycle" series (F.C. Publishing Company) after Jack had worked with Tony Kaye who notated them.

It is interesting to note that although he had formal training, Jack preferred to improvise with any group with which he played rather than follow a formal arrangement. He was in his element particularly with a small group of friends who would challenge him to play little known or obscure tunes, and usually he could not be bested. His performance would be concluded with a gap-toothed grin of satisfaction. His years of performing in the San Francisco area included performances at Romanoff's on Nob Hill, Paoli's, La Strada, and the Hyatt Regency-San Francisco to name a few. Jack was staff harpist for CBS Radio from 1953-1956, when the staff orchestra was dissolved. Ray Hackett, who had been the musical director for CBS Radio, used him often with his dance band, and Jack also worked with Nat Cole, Ethel Merman and Tony Bennett. Jack played for many years with Danny Yale & the Regency Strings, who featured



him at the harp at the Hyatt Regency-San Francisco. He also played with other groups for special occasions like the New Year's elegant Black and White Ball in San Francisco. Everyone knew Jack and his harp.

Concern for the harp and its attendant support groups is obvious when one examines Jack's activity in any area that promoted the instrument. He served on the Board of Directors for both the American Harp Society and the World Harp Congress and for many years hosted the AHS Executive Committee meetings at his home. He was a founding board member of the American Harp Society Foundation, and his gift was the first received to open the Foundation accounts and established the "Nebergall Award," honoring his mother, Doris. He attended and/or participated in nearly all AHS and WHC conferences and "Harpfests." Many times, he was asked to play or to give a workshop in which he played and encouraged students. Several times, he brought his favorite group, the Regency Strings to perform with him. These gatherings of harps and harpists always inspired impromptu "jam sessions" which Jack loved, with professionals such as Eleanor Fell, Penny Beavers, Carrol McLaughlin, and John Escosa, along with many non-professionals and students. Jack was vocal in support of the American Harp Society Archives established at Brigham Young University and happily gave music and related materials for the Harold B. Lee Library there. Because of Jack's great activity in the AHS and the WHC, along with his many donations and support, he was a well-known and respected figure. His efforts made a great impact on the harp community, as evidenced by the great appreciation Isabelle Moretti showed when she gave a tribute to Jack for his encouragement by dedicating an encore to him at the opening concert of the AHS Conference in Baton Rouge, LA, in 1998.

Jack's loyalty to friends is legend. Penny Beavers, Dale Barco, Sally Maxwell, and Eleanor Fell recount numberless acts of generosity, thoughtfulness, or kindness. Countless times he took his friends on trips to Hawaii, to London, to wherever he fancied. He cared for his companion of many years, Les Quesenberry, a retired American Airlines executive, when Les became incapacitated from a series of strokes. He continued as a caregiver until Les' death. He took responsibility for the care of his mother, Doris, who lived in an apartment he built in the lower story of his beautiful home in the San Francisco hills. He redecorated his home at the drop of a hat, or the hint of a new idea. The displays of his cut glass rivaled that of museums. His other collections were legion, and they fluctuated as readily as he redecorated except for one category, harps. He never tired of collecting harps. He loved to find harps in all states of repair or

disrepair, fix them up, "clean them up," and find new homes for them. Sometimes he would sell them, or he would often give them to needy students or to colleges or universities. In his collection of special harps, there was always a fascinating newly acquired model in evidence, like the lavender and gold harp that had belonged to Annie Louise David, or his famous Blue Harp which he played at the banquet aboard the Queen Mary for the 1986 AHS Conference, and one of the first four original, massive yet elegant, Louis XIV with its matching stool.

One of his most endearing foibles was a neatness that bordered on an obsessive-compulsive streak. His friends loved to move items around on his coffee table when he was out of the room. Automatically, when he returned, he would rearrange the items to their original positions on the table without being noticeably aware of what had transpired. It was never mentioned, never acknowledged, and became one of the favorite games of visiting friends.

Hawaii was a very special place to Jack and he visited there often. He sometimes subbed for his friend De Wayne Fulton at the Captain's Galley in the Surf Rider



Jack Nebergall plays his blue harp at the AHS banquet on the Queen Mary, in 1986.



Hotel. Anywhere he was, he would enjoy himself. At the WHC in Copenhagen, he would sprint to the roller coaster in Tivoli Gardens for a ride during concert intermissions. He loved old movie musicals and TV productions, traveling, and eating out. Dale Barco, a near and dear friend of Jack's reminisces that, "Jack was non-preentious, neat and well organized, and these were qualities that his mother possessed. One of his favorite trips was to Australia where he and I regulated harps. He wanted to retire in Oregon and have a condo in Hawaii (he loved the beach) and a house in San Francisco."

Jack's generosity, in the form of time, encouragement or financial aid, often anonymously given, touched many people. He befriended Michelle Sell when she moved to San Francisco, and she remembers, "The first time that I met Jack was when I auditioned for him as a possible substitute at the Hyatt Regency... I had just moved to California from Iowa and had started studying with Marcella DeCray at the San Francisco Conservatory. I was a very timid little Midwestern country girl. I started playing for Jack and he said, 'It's very pretty, Michelle, but play out. Let yourself be heard!'" The last time Michelle saw Jack, she said, "Honey, remember twenty years ago, when you told me to play out? Now look where it got me. I have an entirely different personality than that youngster from Iowa. Now no one can get me to shut up." He smiled and said, "I know." She adds, "So many times and so many performances I have carried those first words of Jack's with me. I couldn't have asked for a more loving and supportive mentor."

Jack was a truly special person who inspired and gave without a second thought. He was a person who encouraged one to do better and be better in every aspect of life, without saying a word. A person who has this ability does not come around every day, but when we meet one of them, we never forget them. To those who knew Jack, it seems silly to talk about his generosity because it "was" Jack. Jack was a rare individual both musically and spiritually and should never be forgotten.


*Jack was more than a harpist.*

*His warmth, his kindness, his generosity and his  
outrageous sense of humor*

*Endeared him to all those who took the  
trouble to know the man.*

*Jack was a gentle man and he was a  
gentleman in the highest sense of the word.*

*Claudette Lambert*

Special thanks to all who contributed numerous hours of interviews, pictures, editing, and laughter: Dale Barco, Penny Beavers, Eleanor Fell, Sally Maxwell, and David Nebergall. 

THE AMERICAN HARP JOURNAL