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Billy Bennington

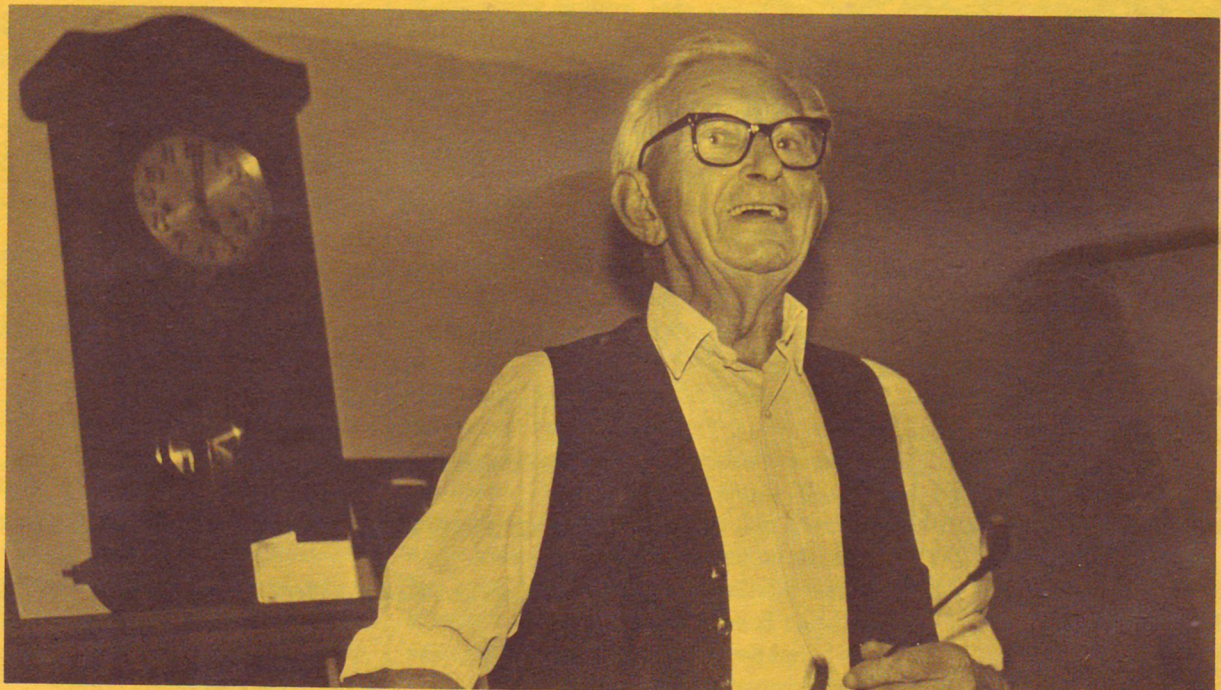
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Billy Bennington

An Interview With...

# Billy Bennington

by Mitzie Collins  
Rochester, NY

Billy Bennington, of Barford, (near Norwich in East Anglia), has been playing the dulcimer since he was about eleven years old. Now an energetic 84, Bennington plays polkas, marches, hymns, church anthems, music-hall choruses, carols, and a wide variety of twentieth-century popular tunes. With the guidance of folklorists John and Kate Howson of Stowmarket, Suffolk, I was able to meet and visit with Billy Bennington on a sunny August afternoon in 1983. Bennington is small and slightly stooped. His white hair frames a face that is happily animated when he is talking, but very impassive when he is playing. His eyes have a twinkle, and his voice has a soft Norfolk accent. Our conversation about his life as a dulcimer player was spiced with laughter, and liberally seasoned with stories and dulcimer tunes. As I listen to my tapes of that meeting, I am wrapped again in the warmth of my congenial host and his wife, Iris. I hear the sounds of tea cups and offers, and my ready acceptance, of "one more cake"; I hear Bennington's delight in playing the dulcimer for a visitor from far away. I hear in his stories, which span nearly three-quarters of a century of playing, the dulcimer as the center of recurring themes of friendship, recognition within his community and creative satisfaction.

Bennington's father played the penny whistle, and his mother was an accordion player, but Billy remembers that his father "always had a mind for a dulcimer, because in his days the dulcimer was all around. Norwich was full of them, in those days it was."

Billy took lessons, at sixpence apiece, from Billy Cooper's father, the organist of Hingham Church and bandmaster of Hinham and Watton's Band. He remembers Old Cooper having him

*play all the scales... play them all properly up and down. And when I could play*

*the scales he said, 'Then I'll teach you some tunes and not until.' Well, I played those blooming scales and played and runned them all down and that was satisfactory...now he say, 'Now you go home and start learning them all over again...when you come next time I'll learn you a tune.' Well, then, he learnt me On The Green, a polka. That was one he used to play in the band. Everyone used to play it, almost everywhere you went - to harvest suppers or dances.*

After Bennington had learned to play *On The Green* and *The Dulcie Belle*, a waltz composed by Billy Cooper, he recounts

*...the old man (Cooper), he said, "Now, I've got a treat for you. Wednesday night I've got a garden party", he say, "Woodward Rectory. I want you to come play." I don't know, I say. "It's all right," he say, "I'm gonna play with you." So any rate, I was playing On The Green and he was there and I was playing best I could. I was pleased with myself, and the old boy stopped. I was still playing. I began a song. I notice the old man struck up again. Well then, they want another one. Course we played the same one again. This time I was playing. All at once I see the old man going past with somebody; dancing with someone...me playin' alone! I hadn't missed him, and I played it right through...then the old man paused, he said, "Now, my boy, from now on, you're on your own." That's how he brought me out."*

Billy bought the instrument he now plays for £2 in 1922 from an 85 year-old man, who told him that *his* father had the instrument before him. A specially-made, canvas carrying case enabled Billy to carry it strapped on his back as he motorcycled across the countryside. The wing-like shape of the dulcimer gave him the nick-

name of *The Barford Angel* and he remembers the difficulty of cycling into the wind. But with the wind behind him, it was like having "a sail to lift you up."

One of Billy Bennington's favorite stories is about the talent contest, "Opportunity Knocks", that he entered in 1950. After winning the local and regional contests, he went to Cambridge to compete in the grand area finals. He was "the only man in 1,500 contestants to play the dulcimer" and was representing East Anglia and the East Midlands. Each contestant had only five minutes to play. Billy vividly described the moment when the wool of his hammer caught on one of the pins of his dulcimer and the hammer flipped right into the judge's papers. As Billy reminisced, he chuckled, "...by the time I got my stick back, one thing and another, I was gone. I finished up the same as I began. I was like the old song. 'We came in this world with nothing, and we take nothing out.' That's what I had."

While employed as a gardener at various estates in the Norwich area, Bennington kept up a full schedule of playing at pubs, Christmas day Socials, whist drives, church festivals, festivals, village-hall concerts, dances and even tried his hammers at busking a number of times as a very young man. In recent years, he has appeared fairly frequently on local radio and T.V. programs, such as "Bygones", and has enjoyed taking part in revival folk activities such as the 1983 Sidmouth Festival and The 1983 Farnham Folk Day. He still learns new tunes and says "sometimes I get up in the middle of the night to work on a tune I'm thinking of." Billy Bennington estimates that he has practiced about thirty minutes most days since he first learned to play the dulcimer. The large repertoire which he plays with rhythmic vitality and remarkable accuracy testifies

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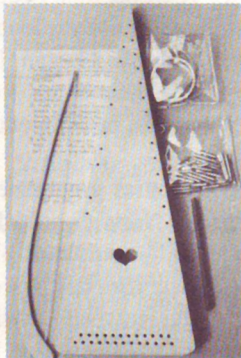
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far better than any teacher's reminders to the benefits of regular practicing. Even more important than the technical ease and musical gracefulness with which Billy Bennington plays is the obvious joy that he feels in his music and shares with his listeners.

For additional reading and listening

Couza, Jim. "An Introduction to the Chromatic Dulcimer as Played in East Anglia", *Dulcimer Players News*, Vol 10, No 1. (A discussion of East Anglican dulcimers and tuning patterns)

Howson, John. "An Interview with Billy Bennington, (Barford Norfolk 22/2/82)" *English Dance and Song* Vol 43, No 1, 1984. (An in-depth interview, with references to playing in pubs and busking)

Kettlewell, David. *All the Tunes that Ever There Were* book and cassette: Front Hall Enterprises, Inc. 1982. (Introduces the dulcimer and gives many examples from English players. Bennington on tape playing "Amazing Grace")

Kettlewell, David. "That's What I Calls a Striking Sound - The Dulcimer in East Anglia" Part One. *English Dance and Song* Vol 36, No 2. 1974. (A brief background on the dulcimer players.)

Kettlewell, David. "That's What I Calls a Striking Sound- The Dulcimer in East Anglia" Part two- *English Dance and Song* Vol 36, No 3. 1974. (transcription of "Turn Your Face Toward the Sun..." by Bennington, plus other information on English dulcimer players)

*English Country Music from East Anglia* Topic 12t S229 (featuring a number of East Anglican musicians, including Billy Bennington playing "On the Green," "Dulcie Belle")

*English Country Music* Topic 12t 296 (featuring the playing of Billy Cooper, son of Bennington's teacher, and a contemporary of Bennington)

