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5 questions for a hammered-dulcimer player

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By **ANDRE SALLES** asalles@scn1.com

Ted Yoder knows he'll have some explaining to do.

Any time someone asks him about his music, he knows he'll have to start with the basics. Yoder, 37, plays a hammered dulcimer, an uncommon instrument that's part harp, part piano, that one plays by striking the strings with metal hammers. Its sound is unlike any other instrument he can name, so it's difficult to describe. But once he starts playing, the mystery drops away.

Yoder has been playing the hammered dulcimer for more than 10 years. (You may have seen him as one of the featured acts on the Aurora ArtWalk in March.) He's just released his first CD, called "Hymns" -- it's a collection of spiritual songs in which Yoder's dulcimer is backed by kinetic electronic beats and soundscapes.

Yoder is his own cottage industry -- he and his wife Donna have released the album themselves, and they're managing Yoder's music career from their Aurora home. Here are five questions with Yoder about his instrument, and how he does what he does:

1. How did you get into playing the hammered dulcimer? "I had first heard it on an album back in 1988. It was an artist named Rich Mullins. I was easily drawn to the sound of it, but I couldn't find anyone that made one or sold one. So it wasn't until (my wife) Donna and I got married in 1997. Her parents gave us money for a wedding gift to buy our first hammered dulcimer. So it was a long time coming, but we finally picked one up. It's just magical. It's probably like the first time you hear a really, really good classical guitar player. After you hear it, and you watch someone play it, you're just like, 'What in the world is that?' I don't know, it made you just feel alive. I don't know if that sounds hokey, but ... "

2. Is it a difficult instrument to play?

"It's real easy to sound like you know what you're doing, because of the way it's set up. You could almost play around with four or five different strings, and it would really sound cool. It's pretty easy to sound like you know what you're doing, but it takes a long time (to master). A lot longer than what I thought. I've been playing for almost 12 years now. A lot of those years I just played one or two songs, because that's all I knew how to play. "

3. How do you describe the hammered dulcimer to people who want to book you?

"I'm still working on that. (Laughs.) On one of my bios now, I describe it as an instrument with almost 100 strings, that can sound peaceful and very melodic, or percussive and very energetic. That's about the best I've come up with right now. People say it sounds like a harp, and you can hear that in certain ways, but then when you play a faster, more energetic piece, they don't know what to say it sounds like, because I don't know any instrument that sounds like that."

4. Your CD sounds very different from your live performance. You played a lot of synthesizer and programmed drums. Why did you choose to go that route?

"A lot of the hammered dulcimer CDs I've heard and that are out there are your basic, either solo hammered dulcimer, or they have acoustic guitar or solo violin, stuff like that. Those to me are typically very boring albums, just for me personally. For years I've done sequencing and programming on my own. I grew up playing keyboards, so I've always enjoyed that aspect of it. Any time I would sit down and play keyboards in the past five years, I'd hear the dulcimer in there. Honestly, I wanted to catch younger kids, whether that's teenager, mid-'20s or even younger, I wanted them to go, 'Wow, that's cool.'"

5. Where can people see you play, and how can people get your music?

"I'm playing at River's Edge Café in downtown Aurora. I'm a regular now at Prisco's Next Door (also in Aurora). People can buy the album at www.91strings.com. They also can download it digitally from the Web site. We don't have any plans to sell it in stores, but we're going to be selling it live and doing a lot of advertising."

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