Bill Youhass

30 years with Fall Creek Marimbas and still going strong

BY LAUREN VOGEL WEISS

What do a former student of Buster Bailey, a professional percussionist, a steel drum player, and an avid sushi lover have in common? They are all different aspects of Bill Youhass, the mallet keyboard tuner behind Fall Creek Marimbas, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

After three decades of tuning percussion keyboards, how many bars has he brought back to life? "I had never really thought about it," Youhass says with a laugh, "until someone recently brought me several instruments to tune and refinish. She noticed this long line of boxes in my shop and asked me that very question. I did some quick figuring and came up with around 320,000 bars!" That translates to well over 7,000 complete keyboards. So how did this former college professor make tuning his life's work?

A native of Teaneck, New Jersey, Youhass first became interested in percussion when some friends of his joined a local drum and bugle corps. "They played bugle and needed someone to keep time for them," he remembers. "I played on the radiator with a pair of drumsticks while they marched around the bedroom playing bugles." He began to study percussion during grade school and soon started taking snare drum lessons at the local music store.

As luck would have it, his teacher was New York Philharmonic percussionist Buster Bailey. "I didn't know who he was when I started taking lessons from him in the late '50s," Youhass confesses. "But I studied with him all though high school and during the summers in college."

Youhass received a Bachelor of Music degree in performance from Ithaca College, where he studied with Warren Benson. He continued his education with Jack MacKenzie at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, where he received a master's degree. "It was a real hotbed of avant-garde music at the time," he remembers. "It seems like every composer in the world came through, from Cage to Xenakis. There were also some wonderful percussionists at Illinois—Al O'Connor, Michael Ranta, Michael Rosen, Bill Parson, and I could go on. It was an amazing experience."

In the fall of 1967, Youhass took a job teaching percussion at what was then Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis) and played with the symphony and opera. Thanks to his exposure and newfound interest in contemporary music from his years in Illinois, he started a "new music" program at MSU. "As conservative a town as it was," recalls Youhass, "there was a very strong underground movement in avant-garde art, whether it was painters or poets, dancers or puppeteers. We all found each other, so it was a very alive, creative time there, which was very lucky for me."

Three years later, Youhass left Memphis to study woodworking. He apprenticed with craftsmen in upstate New York. After a year of this new endeavour, Youhass decided to try his hand at creating a marimba. "I had a Musser Canterbury," he recalls, "and I decided to use that as the model for the sound I wanted. Nothing like starting at the top! At the time, I didn't even know what kind of wood the bars were made of. It's a little bit embarrassing," Youhass sheepishly admits, "but I actually thought it was Honduras mahogany! Well, I quickly corrected that mistake.

Bill Youhass and Saito Osamu at the Korogi Factory in Sabae, Japan, 1982.

"I made my early prototypes all out of wood," he con-

tinues. "The resonators were square and made out of mahogany, similar to the Mexican instruments. The rails were teak; even the bar-support posts were made out of rosewood. I used common joinery techniques, such as mortise and tenon, to connect the support rail to the end pieces. Even though I finally discovered the wood to use was Honduras *rosewood*, I didn't know how to dry it or select it. My first instruments looked better than they sounded!"

The following year, he built his first bass marimba, a four-octave instrument extending down to C2, again with straight (and individually adjustable) resonators, making the marimba almost six feet tall. "I was strongly influenced by Harry Partch," Youhass explains. "I had spoken with him and we also exchanged letters. In addition, I had contact with Lou Harrison—who forever endeared me to what he called the 'pooper' organ!—Clair Musser, Del Roper, and other innovative instrument builders. I found some information on tuning by Vida Chenoweth, Jim Moore, and others. But there were important pieces of the process missing, as well as a lot of wrong information, so I mainly worked on my own. I talked with and listened to many orchestral wind and string players, as well as piano tuners, to try to come to a better understanding of tuning in general and octave stretching in particular."

That same year, 1971, Youhass accepted the position of Percussion Instructor at his alma mater in Ithaca, not far from where he was living. He moved to Ithaca, near the Fall Creek Gorge, which feeds into Ithaca Falls, and continued to build marimbas. The first one he sold was to his former teacher, Warren Benson. "I continued to learn by doing it," Youhass explains. "Soon, students were bringing me their keyboards to tune for them."

His part-time avocation began to grow and, in 1973, he needed to name his fledgling business. While water gurgled in the creek bed outside the shop's windows, Fall Creek Marimbas was born. More students and percussionists in the upstate New York area brought him keyboards to tune, and soon word of his new venture began to spread throughout the percussion community. After a few small ads in PAS publications, Youhass was receiving keyboards from all over the country. "I received many instruments, each with common tuning problems, but also with many individual idiosyncrasies," he says. "It was a great learning process."

Following nine years in Ithaca, Youhass was about to move again. "Al Otte called me in 1979," recalls Youhass. "Garry Kvistad and Stacey Bowers had just left the Blackearth Percussion Group and Al wanted to start a new ensemble at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. It was a difficult choice to leave Ithaca, but this would give me a chance to do more playing." So, along with Jim Culley, Bill Youhass joined Al Otte on the faculty at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music in Ohio and as a member of The Percussion Group Cincinnati, Artists-In-Residence at the school. For the next six years, Youhass and the ensemble taught as well as toured throughout the United Sates and Europe. And, following its first exhibition booth at PASIC '81 in Indianapolis, Fall Creek Marimbas continued to grow.

In 1982, Youhass received a call from the Custom Music Company, which imports Korogi marimbas and xylophones into the U.S. and sells them as Kori. "They asked me to go to Japan as a consultant for Korogi, design some new instruments, and 'make improvements' on others," Youhass remembers. "I had no expectation of improving their magnificent instruments but the opportunity to travel to Japan and spend time at Korogi was too good to turn down."

Youhass spent about a week with Saito Osamu, owner of Korogi, and his family in Sabae, Japan. "We had a wonderful time together," he says. "Mr. Saito [no relation to the Saito instrument company] has the ultimate integrity and cares deeply about the instruments he makes. It was a fantastic experience to share ideas with him. And while in Japan, I completed my journey, begun in 1972 with Robin Engelman in a tiny Japanese restaurant in Toronto, to becoming a sushi addict!"

After six years in Cincinnati, Youhass returned to upstate New York in 1985 to focus his efforts on Fall Creek Marimbas full-time, concentrating on tuning, refinishing, and repairing keyboards. Around this time he also began making his K-100 series of glockenspiels.

Is there a difference between creating a new instrument and retuning one? "Yes," Youhass replies. "While the concepts are the same, there are decisions to be made when retuning existing bars that don't occur when making new bars. Without getting too technical, the biggest issue is whether or not to correct out-of-tune harmonics or to try to put harmonics on instruments that were originally made without them, such as the pre-1926 Deagans, Leedys, etc. While there are general principles that apply to tuning all mallet instruments, there are countless exceptions for the many different models out there. It takes a good deal of experience *retuning* instruments to know what to do, or not do, with these harmonics, which is a different experience from making new bars.

"For instance, on most post-1926 marimbas—the

Bill Youhass with a carving of a Chinese monk done by a Taiwanese temple carver on a tuning/consulting trip to Taichung and Ping Dong, Taiwan 1999

year Deagan started tuning harmonics—there is a fundamental, one harmonic that is two octaves higher, and a second harmonic that is an octave-and-a-third above that. On older instruments, it's a minor third, whereas most of the instruments made since the late 1970s use a major third as the second harmonic.

"Many people have told me that the older Deagan instruments were the best ever made," Youhass continues. "I don't necessarily agree with that. Granted, many of these old instruments have an absolutely gorgeous sound. Several of the 'old' Deagan tuners and designers, most notably Henry Schluter and Clair Musser, were extremely innovative people whose instruments are beautiful creations, and Musser continued this tradition when he started his own company. But I also feel that a few companies making instruments today are of at least equal quality. There have been changes and, dare I say, even advances in tuning, frame design, and resonator design. For instance, more than one company is putting at least one additional harmonic on their marimbas, and the Dutch company vanderPlas Percussion is the first vibraphone maker, as far as I know, to tune thirds as a second harmonic. I believe it really comes down to personal preference."

Despite recent innovations, one thing that many older instruments have in their favor is the wood. "One difficulty today is obtaining quality rosewood, or steel or aluminum alloy," explains Youhass. "For example, the wood in the old Deagan, Leedy, and Musser marimbas and xylophones came from much older trees in Belize and Honduras. This was especially advantageous for xylophones, as the older trees provided much harder lumber. Much of today's rosewood comes from Guatemala and from much younger trees. The big, old rosewood trees are just gone. I'm still able to get very high-quality lumber, but it is more difficult. An important issue is how much longer will rosewood be available." Fortunately for his customers, he purchased "tons" of the high-quality wood when he started Fall Creek and has an ample supply that has been aging for three decades.

The tools of Youhass' trade include the usual wood-and-metal-working machinery, as well as two belt sanders and several Strobotuners. While there are many similarities, each keyboard he works on provides new challenges. "Each keyboard has its own character, but it always comes down to tuning harmonics," he explains. "A marimba bar or vibe bar doesn't know it's a marimba or vibe bar! It vibrates vertically, sideways, and it twists, so there are extra harmonics, such as transverse and torsional harmonics, that can interfere with the sound if not treated properly. There are exact places to tune each intentional and naturally occurring harmonic. For instance, on *most* normal-sized marimbas, if you feel under the bars near G4, you can feel a V-shaped arch. This is to tune a transverse harmonic, often called edge tone, which, if not tuned properly, can interfere with the first harmonic. The same problem occurs on xylophones and vibraphones. Another example can often be found near the F7 or C8 on a xylophone where there can be an interfering transverse harmonic. One solution is to cut slits along one or both edges of the bar or even an 'X' under the bar."

Is there a difference between tuning a marimba bar and a xylophone bar? "Yes," answers Youhass. "One major difference on xylophone bars is that instead of tuning the first harmonic two octaves above the fundamental, it is tuned an octave and a perfect fifth higher."

As his business grew, Youhass quit playing for seven years. That changed a decade ago when he went to a steel drum workshop in California being run by Eugene Novotney, a former student. "I met two wonderful people from Trinidad and Tobago—Ray Holman, one of Trinidad's finest composer/arrangers, and Cliff Alexis, also a Trini and maker of absolutely magical sounding pans—and I found my new instrument, which allowed me to begin playing again." Over the years, he and Alexis have become close friends, finding a strong bond between tuning pans and tuning marimbas. Youhass now leads his own 15-piece steel band, frequently playing at parties and concerts.

Over the years, Youhass has had a few people apprentice with him to learn more about tuning, including a then-budding marimba maker from Australia. He has also travelled the world, including Europe, Japan, Taiwan, China, Singapore, and New Zealand. "I've been fortunate that my work as a tuner has given me the opportunity to travel," he states. "And I think it's great if someone wants to learn about the tuning process, but I don't have the time or the special interest to guide someone in that way right now, although that may change. For anyone who wants to learn, I suggest finding someone who is willing to teach them, and then tune thousands of bars!

"Sometimes when I open a box, it will be a totally destroyed xylophone, maybe even in splinters. It's so sad that someone could care so little and be so lacking in respect for a musical instrument. Where does that attitude come from? There is absolutely no reason to break, or even dent, a bar. But the *best* part of my job," says Youhass, "is when I open a box, unpack the first bar, and discover that it's a King George or a Canterbury. I know it's a well-made instrument and it's going to be fun to tune.

"Cliff [Alexis] once told me that I am a 'master tuner'." He shakes his head back and forth before continuing, "I don't really feel comfortable with that word; it's too overused these days. But I will admit to being a good tuner." PN