

# The Register-Guard

## SECTION C

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## Overlooking the sea, an inspired sound

**C**HARLESTON — Years ago, I wrote a book while pretty much listening to one CD, “Ambiance,” continuously. It was harp music, composed and played by a woman named Carol Anne Smith.

I imagined her in Vienna or New York or Big Sur.

But, instead, last Thursday I found her hidden away in the trees overlooking Coos Bay’s South Slough.

It was like finding an unbroken sand dollar on your “home” beach.

While glancing at the inside of the CD cover weeks ago, I had seen a “Coos Bay” reference. I made a few calls, connected with Smith and ultimately invited myself over for a visit. (Columnists are good at that.) I was curious what life is like for a professional harpist, particularly one who lives in my own backyard.

“There aren’t a lot of harpists around, period,” she says.

Smith, 49, and her husband, Hans, 55, met me at a rendezvous spot — “you’ll never find us otherwise” — and, in a car, I followed them for a solid mile through a sort of Ewok Forest. At the end, perched on a bluff, sits “Dove Cottage,” so-named because of the wild doves that flutter around the trees.

No wonder the woman plays inspired music: She lives in a sort of Hansel and Gretel house, accented by hexagonal rooms full of either to-die-for views, harps or both.

“I’ve wanted to live here since I was 15,” she says — even though “here” didn’t exist until Hans, a retired engineer, built the house 23 years ago.

“The quietude here is very important,” she says. “I like the pristine, natural setting. I love the ocean. Water. It’s very important to me.”

Harpists can use a word such as “quietude” — “a state of peace and quiet” — because they live in another time and dimension than the rest of us.

Don’t believe me? Sit and listen as Smith plays “Island Rain” from her “Paradisum” CD. She uses no music. Just gets this look on her face like she is — as she says — “one with the harp.” And gets lost in a song that, as you close your eyes, makes you almost feel that rain on your face.

To watch a harpist is, for a musical klutz like me, to see the impossible. I can hardly pat my head and rub my stomach at the same time. And yet here she is, one hand plucking south, the other hand plucking north, on strings tightened to 60 pounds of pressure.

It makes pole vaulting look easy.

And therein lies the beauty: As with ice skaters, those who succeed do so because they make a very arduous process look so graceful.

**I** overstated things earlier: The music is more than this location. It is who she is: the little girl who grew up in Charleston, where her grandfather built boats and her father built boats and she, after hearing her first Beethoven, played it on the piano.

Nobody sent her off to Juilliard. “It’s just this gift I have,” she says.

After graduating from Marshfield High, she studied at the University of Oregon and a handful of other places. And now, her harps — she has 13 of them, each named, by the way — are a huge part of her life.

“The harp is emotional and spiritual — that’s what attracts me.”

She performs, describing her music as “eclectic.” Composes, writing songs down in a sort of harpist’s shorthand. Records (three CDs thus far). Teaches. Even does “harp therapy” for the sick or dying.

After the Thurston shootings, for example, McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center asked her to play in the intensive care unit.

“People tell me their pain is reduced when they listen to the music,” she says.

She is no braggart but does believe in an almost mystical relationship with the harp. She tells of a Russian couple in a hospital, the woman dying of cancer. Smith played a Russian composition for them.

“Never played it before, never played it afterward. It was intuition. I just knew what to play.”

And so it goes at Dove Cottage, where you’ve been given the rare chance to tie together music and musician. And where you leave wondering how many other artists are tucked away in Oregon’s trees, inspiring us from their obscurity.