

“U. S. Highball (A Musical Account of a Transcontinental Hobo Trip)”--Harry Partch; Gate 5 Ensemble (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by S. Andrew Granade (guest post)*



Harry Partch

Browsing the amazing collection of recorded music and speech listed on the National Recording Registry is to confront the variety, scope, and depth of American music and art. But even in the vastness of that list, you are unlikely to encounter a more idiosyncratic artist than that of Harry Partch. Partch focused his art on two ideas: a scale of 43 tones to the octave and an all-encompassing approach to composition and performance centered on music’s physical and communal qualities that he termed “corporeality.” Since traditional instruments would not function in his tuning system or his aesthetic, he built his own instruments and then trained performers on them, creating massive theatrical works informed by traditions from around the world.

“U.S. Highball” grew in the fertile soil of Partch’s aesthetic and tuning system and was nourished by his experiences as a hobo during the Great Depression. In the summer of 1941, while working as a proofreader and typist in Carmel, California, Partch received an invitation to come to Chicago and share his musical ideas. Lonely and weary of life in California, he took the ferry to San Francisco and jumped a train on September 17, 1941 with \$3.29 in his pocket. Also in his pocket was a small notepad that he used to transcribe “fragments of conversations, remarks, writings on the sides of boxcars, signs in havens for derelicts, hitchhikers’ inscriptions, names of stations, thoughts.” These bits of text became the basis for “U.S. Highball.”

Leaving San Francisco, Partch wanted to hitchhike. After 12 years of hoboing, he was leery of the soot and filth that came with riding the rails and the unwelcome police attention that grime attracted. But no one would stop for his outstretched thumb, so he turned to the train yard. He made it to Green River, Wyoming, where the oil tank car he was riding stranded him, dirty and broke. He walked to nearby Little America where he spent a week washing dishes and cleaning

up. With a bit of money in his pocket and fresh clothes, he found success on the highway and bummed rides through Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, and Illinois. He arrived in Chicago early in the morning of October 1, 1941.

After spending the winter in Chicago, Partch moved to New York City in the summer of 1942 to drum up support for a Guggenheim grant. Although he hadn't put pen to paper yet, in his grant application Partch described a cycle of compositions "which is wholly American" that had as its centerpiece "U.S. Highball." His application was evidently convincing because he received the grant in the spring of 1943, only a few months after he started on the first draft of "U.S. Highball." That year, Partch produced two drafts of the piece for his voice and the instruments he had built at that point: the Adapted Guitar (a guitar with new stainless-steel frets for his tuning system); the Chromelodeon (a foot-pump harmonium retuned to his 43 tone system); and the Kithara (a recreation of the ancient Greek kithara with 72 strings grouped in 12 series of six strings). It was a motley assortment of instruments that mirrored the pick-up ensembles Partch surely saw as he rested in the hobo jungles.

In "Genesis of a Music," the book where the composer laid out his compositional and aesthetic philosophy, Partch wrote of "U.S. Highball":

I have called "U.S. Highball" the most creative piece of work I have ever done, and in the sense that it is less influenced by the forms and attitudes that I had grown up with as a child and experienced in adult life, there can be no doubt of it. The intensity of the experiences preceding it and the intensity of my feelings at the time forced me into a different welter of thought—one that I had to mold in a new way, and for this one work alone.

He is not exaggerating the work's originality. "U.S. Highball" is this transcontinental trip given musical life. Partch took the remarks and conversations recorded in his little notebook, turned them into melodies, and built the entire work around them. During this period, Partch was fascinated with the musicality of speech and firmly believed that an American music would only come when melodies matched the inflection and declamation of American English. That's why his use of 43 pitches to the octave was not a musical gimmick; he was not seeking a hook to define his career. Partch wanted his music to capture, as though in an aural snapshot, how hoboes spoke. The use of those 43 tones is foundational to "U.S. Highball's" impact. If he had simply shoehorned those hobo voices into the standard 12 tone scale, he would have sacrificed those voices and merely imitated instead of embodying them. As it stands, when you listen to the work, you are literally hearing the voices of hobos from the 1940s brought to life.

As you might imagine, as someone working so far outside the traditions of American music, whether the concert halls of New York City or the recording studios of Los Angeles, Partch had trouble finding steady financial support. So when the pianist Gunnar Johansen, who taught at the University of Wisconsin, heard "U.S. Highball" at a Columbia University performance, he offered Partch a lifeline in the form of a position in Madison. Partch then packed up and moved to the Midwest. There, he made the first recording of "U.S. Highball" with the assistance of a group of university students (Lee Hoiby, Christine Charnstrom, William Wendlandt, and Hulda

Gieschen) and in the home of Warren Gilson, an associate in medical electronics at the local General Hospital. Gilson was fascinated by recording technology and ran a small label named GME that ultimately released 100 copies of “U.S. Highball” on 12-inch Vinylite 78 rpm records.

The position in Madison, however, only lasted a few years and by 1953, a dozen years after initially leaving San Francisco on a train, Partch found himself back in the area and homeless again, living out of his Studebaker. Gordon Onslow Ford, an artist sympathetic to Partch’s aesthetic approach, helped the composer secure a shed in the abandoned shipyards in Sausalito, across the bay from San Francisco. When Partch went to the 200-foot-long shed that served as his studio, he entered the shipyards through the fifth gate and so christened his new studio “Gate 5.” With the further help of a “Harry Partch Trust Fund,” established by local friends, Partch set out to record some of his music and distribute it by mail, selling them for the sum of \$7.50 each. With a group of musicians drawn from San Francisco that he dubbed the “lost musicians,” Partch issued roughly one album a year under the “Gate 5 Records” label, finally returning to “U.S. Highball” in 1958, by which time he had relocated to Chicago. There, he had begun to work with the filmmaker Madeline Tourtelot who wanted to create a film based on Partch’s hobo magnum opus. Gathering musicians from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, brought up by his assistant Danlee Mitchell, and a master’s student from Northwestern named Elizabeth Gentry and her husband, Thomas Coleman (a corporate executive who sang the role of “Mac”), and a few other musicians from the Chicago area, Partch recorded a new version of “U.S. Highball.”

This rewritten version compressed some of the events of earlier drafts to streamline the composition and added the new instruments Partch had created over the previous decade: a set of marimba-based instruments (Diamond Marimba, Bass Marimba, and Bamboo Marimba); a smaller version of the 72 string Kithara (Surrogate Kithara), a pair of Greek κανόν or canons (nicknamed Castor and Pollux), and a collection of tuned artillery shells and Pyrex carboys (the Spoils of War). This more percussive version of “U.S. Highball” became Partch’s preferred version, and he issued the new recording of it on a ten-inch record as the sixth Gate 5 recording in September 1958.

Partch was ill with a bleeding ulcer while making the Gate 5 recording of “U.S. Highball,” and so was never fully pleased with the way it turned out, but the recording stands as an amazing document of a uniquely American work. Although in practically every essay he composed about the work, Partch maintained that it was not intended as a statement on American life, it invariably is. “U.S. Highball” owes its considerable power to simultaneously enthrall and amuse to a mythic view of the hobo, to the work’s sense of freedom in movement, to the awkward poetry of its vernacular, to the transience of its characters and their voices, and to its love of vast, open spaces. The ideas and sounds contained within its structure are embedded in American culture and history. Whether by intention or happenstance, Partch’s use of a subject matter with deep personal import, combined with a musical language culled from hobo culture, enabled him to accomplish a unique synthesis of music and Americana.

Andrew Granade is Professor of Musicology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City

Conservatory of Music and Dance. Although he writes about a variety of American music, most of his writing focuses on the American Experimental Tradition, particularly composer and instrument builder Harry Partch. He is the author of "Harry Partch, Hobo Composer" as well as articles about Partch appearing in the "Journal of the Society for American Music," "American Music," "Music and the Moving Image," and the "New Grove Dictionary of American Music."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.