

# BITTER MUSIC

- Harry Partch -

## Disc A (70:06)

1	Preface	(7:27)
2	June 11, 1935 - Santa Rosa, California	(14:41)
3	June 15 - Harrington Ranch, San Joaquin Delta	(9:46)
4	June 24 - Today is my birthday...	(6:06)
5	London, October 1934	(3:35)
6	"By The Rivers of Babylon"	(3:25)
7	I draw my last bow, and there is silence...	(11:58)
8	Wimbledon, London, March 1935	(13:06)

## Disc B (61:55)

1	Harrington Ranch, June 24, 1935	(13:38)
2	July 20 - Heading north, between Sacramento and Redding	(7:42)
3	July 25 - Blue Ox Lodge, Seattle, Washington	(11:42)
4	August 5 - Toledo	(8:48)
5	August 11 - SERA Camp, Ingot	(7:01)
6	September 1 - Cisco	(13:03)

## Disc C (64:35)

1	October 22 - Nearing Monterey	(8:16)
2	"Letter from Hobo Pablo"	(3:29)
3	Near Lodi I cut the huge Tokays...	(6:09)
4	October 24 - Leaving Big Sur	(9:45)
5	October 30 - Big Creek	(10:31)
6	November 15 - Leaving Santa Barbara	(9:46)
7	December 2, 1935 - Night. Four black walls -	(8:07)
8	February 1, 1936 - San Bernadino	(4:37)
9	Postlude - Harry Partch on <i>Bitter Music</i> - Encinitas, 1969	(1:00:30)

John Schneider  
Garry Elster  
Richard Valitutto  
Paul West

Bitter Music  
Notes

It is an astonishing gift of fate when a creative artist, known to the world for a particular achievement, is suddenly shown in a quite different light thanks to the existence of a single document that has somehow escaped the ruthless culling mechanisms of time. Harry Partch's *Bitter Music* is such a document, a "diary of eight months spent in transient shelters and camps, hobo jungles, basement rooms, and on the open road". The light it casts exposes its author's vulnerability: he talks to us in the first person, jokes with us, tells us stories, gets drunk, boasts, complains, confesses, all the while showing us as intimate a side of his personality as we will ever experience. Partch's more public achievement was, of course, the creation of forty years' worth of astonishing music as well as the construction of some twenty-five new musical instruments to play that music: almost none of his compositions can be satisfactorily performed without them. All the various facets of his legacy – the compositions, instruments, and his theoretical writings – powerfully question the whole operating basis of western classical music and suggest vigorous new ways of redirecting and refreshing that tradition. *Bitter Music* shows us, as no other Partch work does, the human cost of that achievement: the struggles (both inner and outer), the small joys and triumphs, and above all the desolate aloneness of the pioneer artist, misunderstood and ridiculed both by the powers-that-be and by the wider "sea of chaotic humanity".

That we have *Bitter Music* at all is little short of a miracle. The diary was written in 1935-36, and chronicles eight months of hobo existence at the beginning of what would be, for Partch, a very long "personal Great Depression". In the autumn of 1940, still living a vagabond existence and roaming the western states, he put up temporarily at Anderson Creek, near Big Sur, and readied the manuscript for publication. However, because of the United States's subsequent entry into the war and attendant paper shortages, the

publication contract was cancelled. Partch thereafter began to lose belief in the diary, which seems to have outlived its usefulness to him – especially after the creation in the early 1940s of his great "Americana" compositions, *Barstow*, *US Highball*, *The Letter*, *San Francisco* and others, works that fully exemplified his artistic ideals. He destroyed the manuscript of *Bitter Music* around 1950, saving only the two-dozen pages of elegant, characterful ink drawings he had made in the hobo camps and on the road. It is not clear if he realised that his friend Lauriston Marshall had, a short time previously, made a microfilm copy of the journal along with a collection of music manuscripts Partch had loaned him for the purpose. Thanks to Marshall's microfilm, the text of the journal, minus the drawings but with all its passages of music notation, was finally published in 1991 by the University of Illinois Press. (The present release is the first time the book and the drawings have been brought together again since their divorce.) In any case, for the last quarter-century of his life Partch himself never again set eyes on the journal, and struck it from the list of his works – while occasionally speaking highly of it, as is made clear by remarks in interviews with Jean Cutler from 1969, included here.

*Bitter Music* in fact forms a bridge between the first two periods of Partch's output, the works for intoning voice and Adapted Viola of 1930-33 (settings of Li Po, the Psalms, and Shakespeare) and the Americana works of 1941-44 mentioned above. Chronologically it is closer to the former, but in terms of subject-matter closer to the latter. As befits the diary medium it is loose in form, with vivid depictions of the present laced with recollections of earlier (and not always happier) times. Begun in Santa Rosa on Tuesday June 11 1935, and with its final entry dated San Bernardino, February 1 1936, the diary comprises some seventy-seven separate entries. But it is not quite continuous: there are two long gaps, a five-week period from September 18th to October 22nd, and the whole month of January 1936, with no new entries. The former period is covered by a series of detailed flashbacks written down near Monterey on October 22nd, so we are able to reconstruct Partch's itinerary

during those weeks; but the latter period remains blank. In the Preface Partch tells us that during January 1936 he stayed with various friends in Los Angeles County (in Glendale, La Crescenta, and Covina), using their “homes and pianos” to notate the most idiosyncratic feature of the diary: the frequent passages of music notation in which he records the spoken inflections of voices – his own, those of his fellow hobos and various people he met on the road. These notations – an attempt to create an aural documentation of American vernacular speech in an era before the advent of easily portable recording equipment – transform the nature of *Bitter Music*: it becomes no longer a diary to be read, but to a story to be listened to, with the intoned speech passages and their piano accompaniments “designed to heighten and to reconstruct the original impression or emotion”.

In the Preface to the journal Partch casually suggests that if the reader happens to the play the piano, s/he might like to prop the book up on the music rack and read it there, intoning aloud the musical passages as they occur and deftly performing the piano accompaniments at the same time. I do wonder how often, in the twenty years since publication, this rather utopian suggestion has been attempted – not least because several of the passages require a pianist of considerable ability. But it does point up the rather unusual status of *Bitter Music*, part literary work and part performance piece. One viable solution is to realise it as John Schneider has done here, as a kind of audio book or radio broadcast. In this recording Schneider has also drawn upon his detailed knowledge of Partch’s later work; for the past fifteen years he has built up his own collection of copies of the Partch instruments, and given regular performances on them. Several of the instruments make a guest appearance here – admittedly anachronistically, as most of the originals had not yet been built, but this was simply too good a chance to resist. We hear the voices of the Kithara, the Chromelodeon (“You call this a musical instrument?”) as well as strummed chords on Adapted Guitar I when Partch recalls playing for the Italian sailors he met en route to Malta. There is also an actual performance of *By the Rivers of Babylon* as Partch would have performed it for W.B. Yeats (in the passage where he recalls his visit to Ireland in

1934) and a new recording of *Letter From Hobo Pablo*, Partch’s 1943 setting of the letter he reproduces in the entry for October 22nd. Another innovation is Schneider’s use of “Objective” and “Subjective” voices, similarly to Partch’s practice in the revised version of his *US Highball*. (Partch’s monologue, the “Subjective Voice”, was recorded in mono on a 1935-style ribbon microphone, very close miked and intimate, whilst the “Objective Voices” with piano were done in modern stereo using condenser microphones.) All of the innovations in this performance have the aim of bringing *Bitter Music* off the page and into the sphere of live performance. Partch himself may well have approved of this attempt, which increases the “Corporeality” of the work. Indeed, had the composer already lived through his 1950s experiences with the musical stage and with film at the time he conceived *Bitter Music*, the diary might well have assumed a quite different form.

Part of the richness of Partch’s hobo journal is that it is strong enough to withstand different interpretations, different readings. For some it is a classic American road movie, well ahead of its time. For others, it is a kind of precursor to Beat literature – indeed, a comparison with the unedited version of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (written in 1951) throws up all manner of intriguing parallels and differences. Thomas McGeary, editor of the University of Illinois publication of *Bitter Music*, made a useful connection to other contemporary autobiographical accounts of hobo lives, such as those by Tom Kromer (*Waiting for Nothing*) or Nelson Algren (*Somebody in Boots*), both from 1935. For his biographer, Partch’s journal is both a God-send and an enigma; perhaps a deliberately stylized enigma. The self-portrait that emerges is not an especially attractive one: he is much of the time aloof and disdainful of his fellow hobos (“my company is barely tolerable”, he writes in disgust on June 14, and a week later “the ignorance hereabouts is of two kinds—hopeless and irremediable”); and we are left wondering why, after a fruitful year spent on a grant in Europe pursuing his musical work, did the thirty-four-year-old Partch succumb so rapidly to the bitterness of which the title speaks, antagonizing most of his

former supporters and patrons in California, and adopting the life of a vagrant, a decision which, once taken, is hard to escape from – as he surely knew. While acknowledging the reasons for his “descent into hobo jungles” were “psychologically confused”, the diary offers at best partial explanations but no clear answers.

Despite the sometimes exasperating attitudes and bursts of inflated self-importance of its protagonist, despite his occasional descents into ranting and his moments of near-madness, two qualities above all lift *Bitter Music* well above the level of much self-revelatory writing by artists whose inner lives we might finally have preferred not to know about. The first is the beauty of Partch's music and his prose, with its heart-stopping moments (“When a friend who has lived with me has suddenly gone, he is still present in my mind – he is in the feeling of the rug underfoot and between the leaves of my manuscripts, and I cannot shake him out overnight”). The second is the relentless honesty of his account of himself – an honesty that may not win him many friends, but that shines a laser beam into his innermost self, confronting the darkness as well as the light. The diary ends memorably in the pouring rain as Partch stands by the roadside attempting to hitch a lift towards Los Angeles, saying to the anonymous drivers who flash past him, “Do you passers-by know what is in my soul? Rain, rain, rain – my swift darlings – and bitter music”. *Bitter Music* chronicles a slice of a life lived with utmost intensity, in the conviction that even the unbearable things of life – the rain, the bitterness – may eventually pass, and the pursuit of artistic truth sustain us again in its brilliance and vigour.

Bob Gilmore, Amsterdam, December 2010

Author - *Harry Partch: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 1998)



It is a unique ensemble that specializes in the music & instruments of the iconoclastic American Maverick composer Harry Partch who, between 1930 and 1972, created one of the most amazing bodies of sensually alluring and emotionally powerful music of the 20th century. Partch wrote music drama, dance theater, multi-media extravaganzas, vocal music and chamber music—all to be performed on the extraordinary orchestra of instruments that he designed and built himself.

Since their formation as Just Strings in 1991 to perform the music of Lou Harrison and Harry Partch, the group has gone on to commission and premiere works by James Tenney, Larry Polansky, Mamoru Fujieda, John Luther Adams and others. In 1995 they toured Japan under the auspices of the American Embassy's prestigious Interlink Festival, giving three weeks of concerts and lectures on new music. In 2005, with the completion of their twelfth Partch instrument, the group began performing under the name Partch (they now have sixteen). They first performed excerpts of *Bitter Music* in 2001 for Partch Centennial Celebrations at UCLA, Claremont, San Jose & Mills College, and in 2002 for a 6-city tour of Holland. In 2004, Partch made their Disney Hall/redeat debut with the multi-media premiere of the complete *Bitter Music*, and have returned every year since.



**John Schneider** (Subjective Voice, Adapted Viola & Adapted Guitar) is a twice Latin Grammy™ nominated guitarist, composer, author & broadcaster whose weekly television and radio programs have brought the sound of the guitar into millions of homes for the past four decades. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics & Music from the University of Wales, music degrees from the University of California and the Royal College of Music [London], and is past President of the Guitar Foundation of America. A specialist in contemporary music, Schneider's *The Contemporary Guitar* (University of California Press) has become the standard text in the field. John Schneider is music Professor at Pierce College in Los Angeles, guitarist for Grammy winning Southwest Chamber Music, music

director for Just Strings, Partch, and is the founding artistic director of MicroFest, an annual festival of microtonal music [[www.MicroFest.org](http://www.MicroFest.org)]. He can be heard on over a dozen recordings, while his radio show *Global Village* is heard weekly on Pacifica Radio's KPFK at 90.7-fm in Los Angeles & worldwide at [www.kpffk.org](http://www.kpffk.org).



**Garry Eister** (Objective Voice & piano) has concertized with Daniel Lentz, Steve Reich and PARTCH. Eister also composes, and his music has been performed and/or recorded by Kent Nagano, the Emerson String Quartet, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and many others. Eister's compositions have been heard in numerous venues around the world, including Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center and London's Wigmore Hall. His work has been broadcast on NPR, PRI, many European national radios, German TV and CBS television. His recorded works, both as a performer and as a composer, are available on Sony Classical, Archer Records, Cold Blue, Soliton, Eister Music, and the San Francisco Guitar Quartet label.



**Richard Valitutto** (piano) is active as a piano soloist, chamber musician, accompanist, improviser, experimental musician, teacher, and performance artist. He holds degrees in piano performance from the California Institute of the Arts and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. He has performed in the Bang on a Can, Brevard, and Eastern Music Festivals, and premiered numerous works for solo piano and ensemble, most recently Chinary Ung's "After Rising Light", which was dedicated to Richard Valitutto and the composer's daughter, soprano Kalean Ung. He performed in the West Coast premiere of Iannis Xenakis's only opera *Oresteia* and was soloist in Sofia Gubaidulina's piano concerto, *Introitus*, at Disney Hall/redcat with the composer present. More information at [www.richardvalitutto.com](http://www.richardvalitutto.com).



**Paul West** (kithara) Paul West began his journey into the world of Harry Partch at Montclair State University. While studying microtonal theory under Dean Drummond, West had the unique opportunity to tune, repair and perform on Partch's original instruments housed in MSU's Harry Partch Institute. West then completed his MFA in composition from the California Institute of the Arts, studying under composers Michael Pisaro, Wolfgang von Schweinitz and composer/performer Amy Knoles. He has performed nationally and internationally with Newband, Partch and the Dog Star Orchestra. As a composer, West's music focuses on combining traditional Western instrumentation with microtonal instruments such as re-fretted guitars and various glass and metal percussion. His music has been premiered in the United States and Europe.

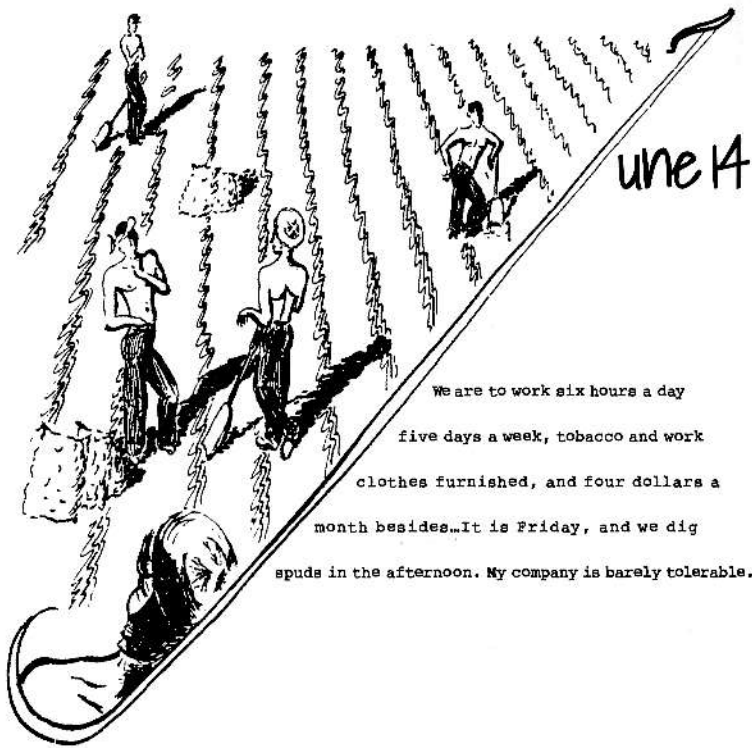
JUNE 11, 1935 - Santa Rosa, California

HAND ME DOWN MY WALKING CANE, I'M A-  
DOWN MY WALKING CANE  
HAND ME DOWN MY WALKING CANE, I'M A-  
GOIN' T'LEAVE ON TUESDAY MORNING FROM HERE  
ALL MY SINS ARE TAKEN

AND THE SKIES  
ARE NOT CLOUDY  
ALL DAY

LINE 13

One dreary  
November night, in  
1934, I walked down the  
main street of Portsmouth,  
England. It was Saturday, and the  
many people overflowed the sidewalk  
onto the bicycle-ridden pavement. A thick,  
cold Channel fog seemed determined to steal  
under my upturned windbreaker and into my  
marrow. From a pub came a clear baritone - -



une 14

We are to work six hours a day  
 five days a week, tobacco and work  
 clothes furnished, and four dollars a  
 month besides...It is Friday, and we dig  
 spuds in the afternoon. My company is barely tolerable.

JUNE 15

My days as a proofreader made the following  
 inscription on a toilet wall highly amusing -

only — ONLY A TRAMP THE NIGHT  
 yes — YAS STANDING THERE SPURNING A BDDY FOUND DEAD  
 only — THE ONLY A TRAMP THE RABBLE REPLIED  
 coroner — CORNER SEAD FROM STARVATION HE DIED  
 Learn to spell before you attempt to ~~the~~ a pact  
 Body said  
 said  
 become





Pablo talks to me from his mandolin face most of the afternoon.

How many women have played upon those tooth-fretted lips?



Today is my birthday.

I am thirty-four...some of the days  
of this year gone for good I see as  
clearly as I see this morning.

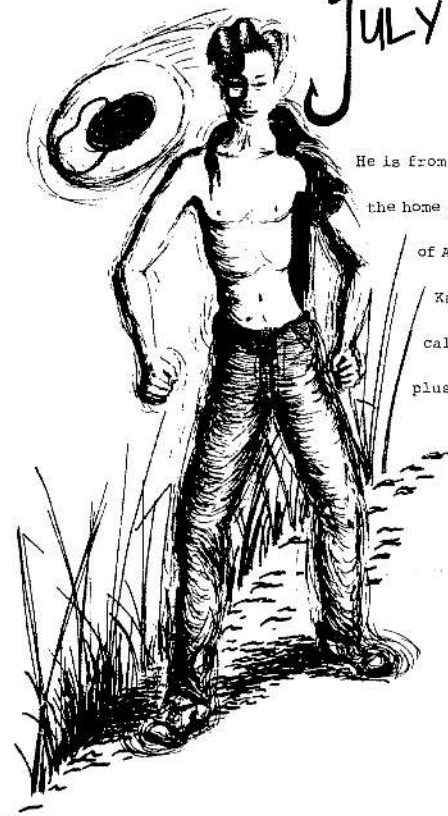
I never had time to talk about them,  
or write about them, even in letters, before.

I was too busy with my work.

Today I have all the time there is in the world.



JULY 4



He is from  
the home state  
of Abe Lincoln.  
Kain-tuck, the fellows  
call him. He is six feet  
plus, angular, and  
uncontrollably playful.



JULY 5

Mandolin face of the tooth-fretted lips left today.  
Last night he was sick drunk. One of the directors happened to see  
him lying in a stupor on the levee. Foxtails decked his denims and wildly  
his hair. Had the director gone farther, he would have seen more.



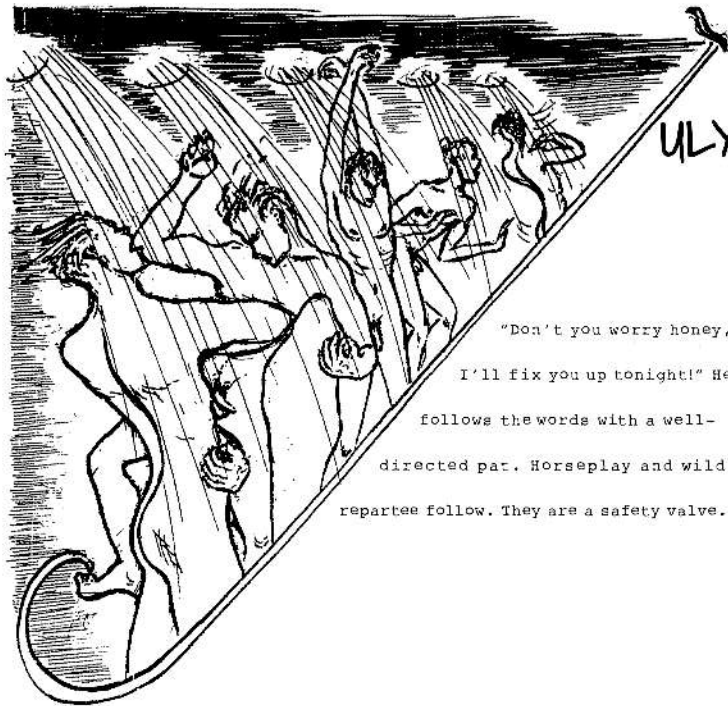
ULY 14

Kaintuck and  
another young stiff  
inveigle some catfish  
out of the slough, stab,  
and clean them.

I build a fire  
and help to spit  
and broil them  
over the coals.

We joke unceasingly.  
We are ribald.  
We lack a boat.  
We lack women.  
And we laugh coarsely  
over each facet of suggestion.

The night is still dark.  
Do they know what is  
in my soul?



ULY 16

"Don't you worry honey,  
I'll fix you up tonight!" He  
follows the words with a well-  
directed pat. Horseplay and wild  
repartee follow. They are a safety valve.



Hand me down  
my bottle of corn.



Oh, hand me down  
my bottle of corn.



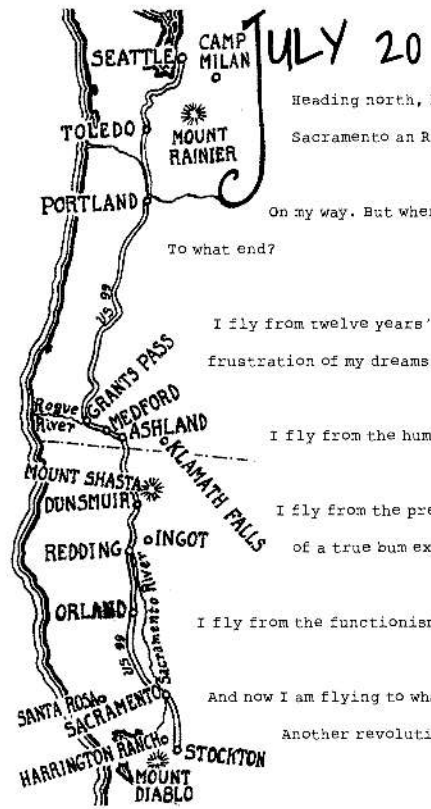
Oh hand me down  
my bottle of corn,



I'm a goin' to get drunk as  
sure as you're born.



I am taking the broad highway running  
along the east levee of the Sacramento  
River, heading toward the capital  
city. Behind is Mount Diablo, the lone  
sentinel of these perception, sinking  
beneath the horizon.



Heading north, between  
Sacramento an Redding

On my way. But where am I going?  
To what end?

I fly from twelve years'  
frustration of my dreams.

I fly from the humiliation of begging.

I fly from the present-day insecurity  
of a true bum existence.

I fly from the functionism of aimless security when I do find it.

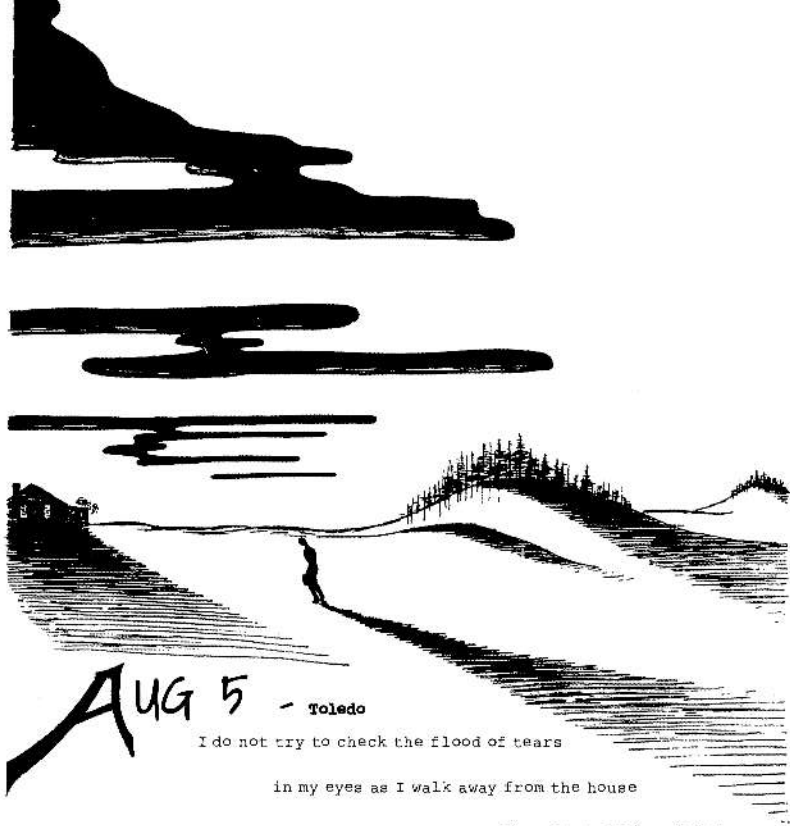
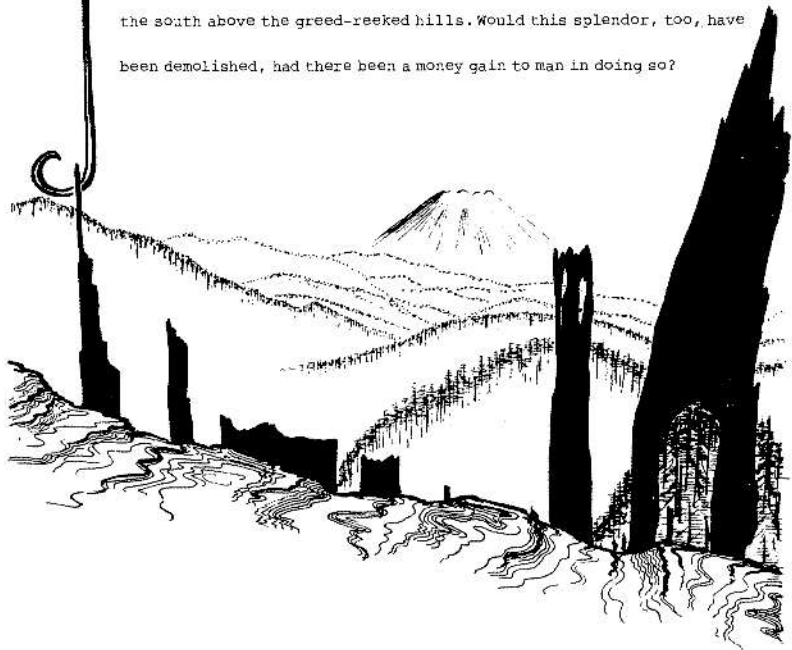
And now I am flying to what?

Another revolution of the cycle?

JULY 26

- Camp Milan, Cascade Mountains

I walk out among the huge blackened stumps all around us. Rainier rises to the south above the greed-reeked hills. Would this splendor, too, have been demolished, had there been a money gain to man in doing so?



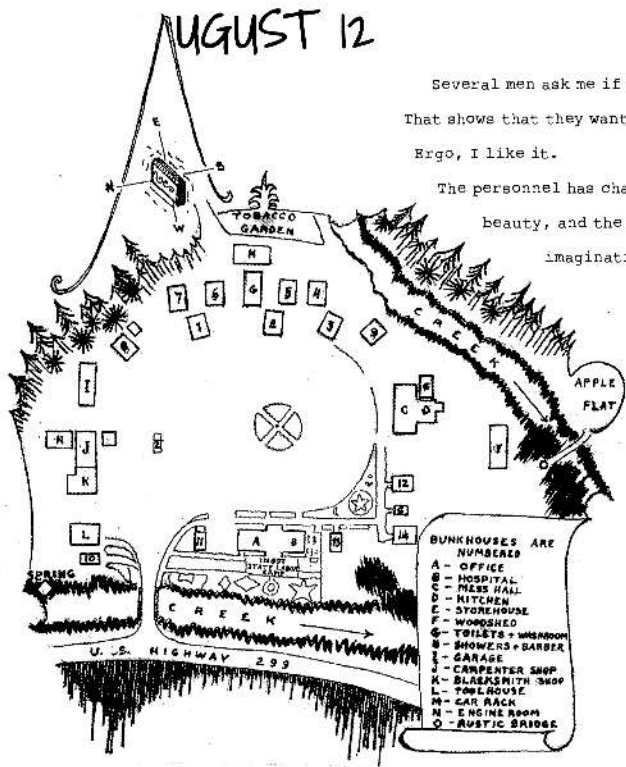
AUG 5 - Toledo

I do not try to check the flood of tears

in my eyes as I walk away from the house

of a woman who has fed me.

AUGUST 12



Several men ask me if I like the camp.  
That shows that they want me to like it.

Ergo, I like it.

The personnel has charm, the spot has  
beauty, and the cook  
Imagination.

AUGUST 28



This evening I walk  
past Tobacco Garden into the narrow  
tree-gorged canyon.

Thoughts,  
thoughts.  
Thoughts recharging, tormenting,  
consuming.

Time passes.

How much,

I have no vague idea.

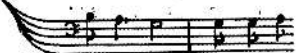


# SEPTEMBER 1

Cisco



throws



himself out



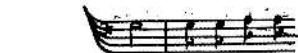
of his husky



throat with



all the fervor



of a Negro Baptist

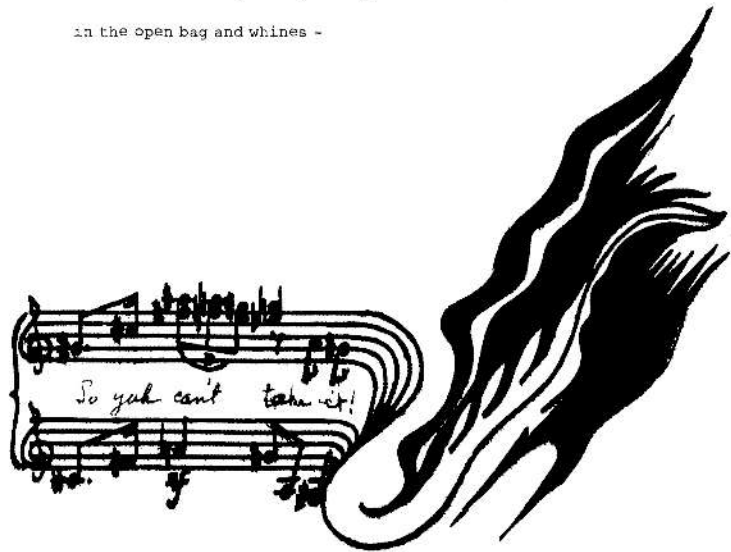


Sacramento Jungle  
 - I think of the  
 hobo song I wrote  
 in 1929,  
 just previous  
 to my great  
 zealously in the  
 preservation  
 of spoken  
 inflections in  
 song. Still, this  
 tune is no great  
 violation of the  
 words -

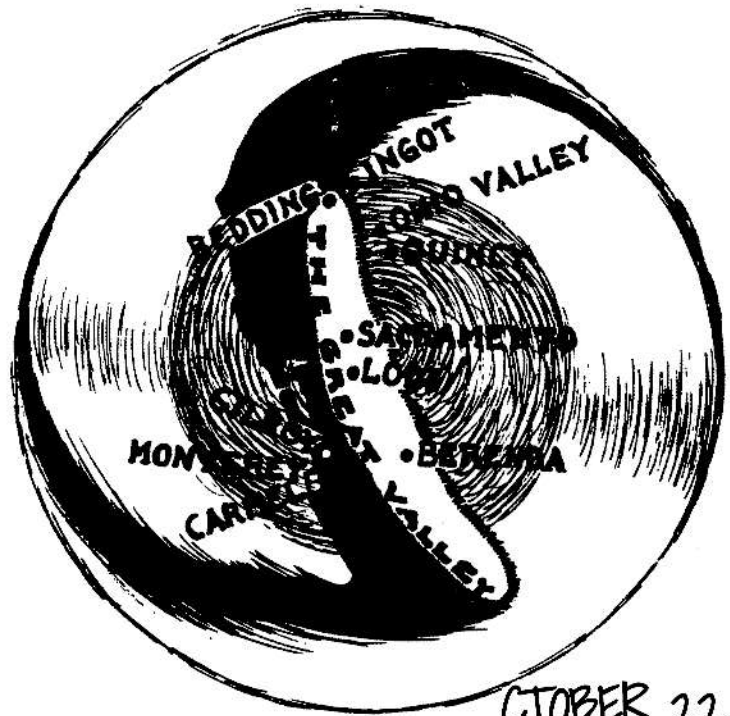


From a warm sleeping bag, in the willowed sands of the American River,  
I gaze up at the enthillion stars, and they seem to say -

And even while they are speaking, a cold wind stabs  
in the open bag and whines -



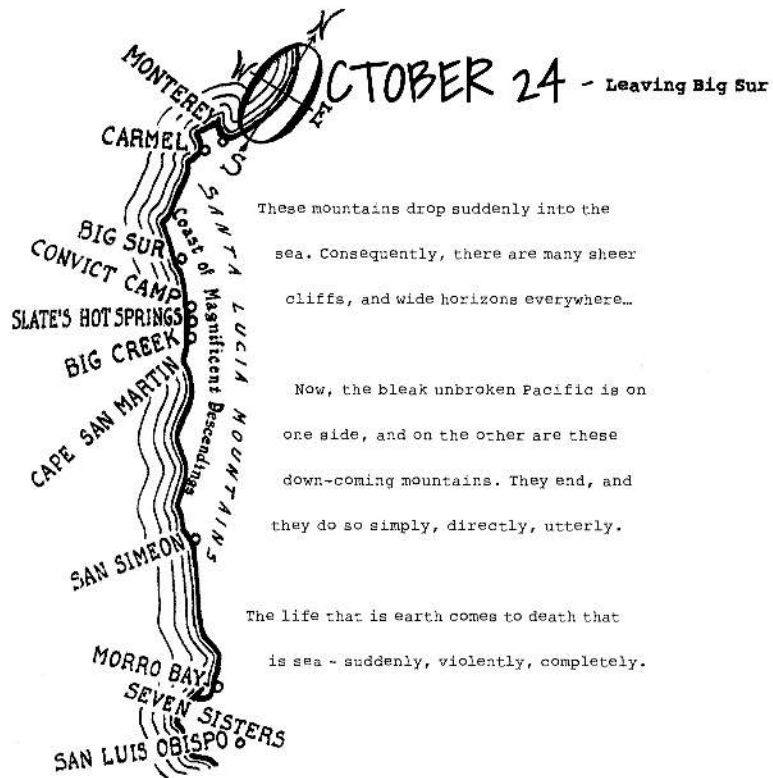




Now I am wandering in Madera County in the Great Valley. At night I trudge along until I find a row of fig trees and then lay my bag nearby in clumps of wild oat straw.

The trees are aching heavy, for it is late September. I put my hands into the black tresses of the boughs, feeling for the figs. Sweet oozing drops drip from them.

Near Lodi I cut huge Tokays one day at thirty cents an hour for ten hours. I suppose it is a necessary performance, but I detest the manner...I stumble away and cleanse the prostitution from my soul in the jungle of the the gentle Mokelumne.



These mountains drop suddenly into the sea. Consequently, there are many sheer cliffs, and wide horizons everywhere...

Now, the bleak unbroken Pacific is on one side, and on the other are these down-coming mountains. They end, and they do so simply, directly, utterly.

The life that is earth comes to death that is sea - suddenly, violently, completely.

OCTOBER 25

Near Slate's Hot Springs



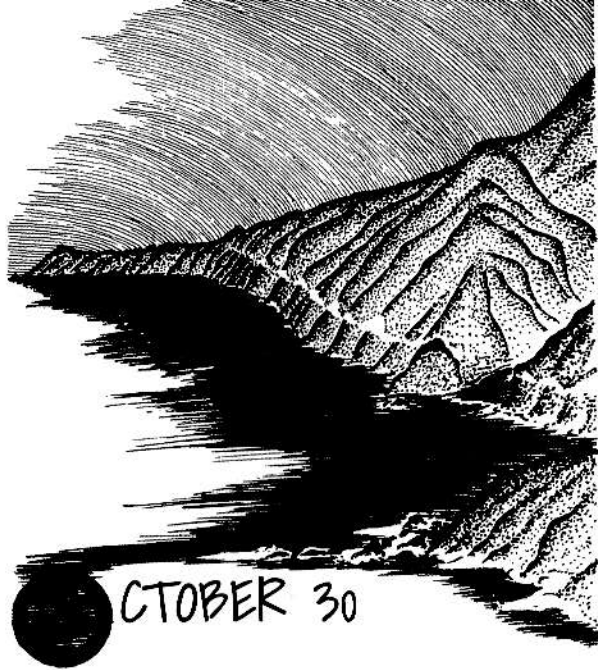
Twin bathtubs stand on a little platform

fully exposed to the great sun and Pacific...

OCTOBER 26



These San and Sanred hills - these  
swerving piles of earth, rock,  
and redwood behind me,  
they are called  
Saint Lucy!



CTOBER 30

This Chopin hems my brain all day - It pounds. I accent it savagely. I care not how Chopin felt it. It is mine now. I explode it like the last act of my life. It parries eternity as these mountains parry the sea, and I, knowing well the mortality of everything I love, am defiant.



A hobo may be on the saucer edge of life, but a fire brings him back to the center.



SANTA  
BARBARA  
VENTURA

NOVEMBER 16 -ojai

Tonight I am camping under a live oak tree with  
a heavy roof of leaves... I am very happy this November

night looking up into the inky O-high oak.



NOVEMBER 29

Banana Center, Central Park, El-Lay

Some have been heard to say that no  
respectable person would allow himself to be  
seen in the park after dark. Huh! I walk about  
under the thousand shadows of the bamboo and banana  
trees with utter unconcern. Here, Saint Francis tempt  
birds by day. Here, Saint Pauls tempt God by night.

# DECEMBER 1935



Night. Four black walls - I don't like them after all the lacy heavens that I have slept under so much before this. Four black walls surround a month that is marked by turmoil. When a friend who has lived with me has suddenly gone, he is still present in my mind - he is in the feeling of the rug under foot and between the leaves of my manuscripts, and I cannot shake him out overnight. And so with this December.

**Producer:** John Schneider

**Recording Engineers:** John Schneider - Second Story Studio (Venice, CA): July-Aug 2010

Scott Fraser - Architecture (LA): July 2010

Jean Cutler - Interview in Encinitas (1969), supplied by Innova Records.

**Editing & Mastering:** Scott Fraser Architecture

**Liner Notes:** Bob Gilmore

**Photographs:** Cover - Anderson Creek, 1941. Harry Partch Estate Archive

**Booklet:** Front - 1938 - Unsigned, Harry Partch Estate Archive

Back - 1941 - Studio at Anderson Creek. Harry Partch Estate Archive

**Graphic Design:** Douglas Holly

**Executive Producers:** David & Becky Starobin

#### **Instruments**

Adapted Viola "Jabberwocky" (2003) by Robert Portillo

Adapted Guitar I (1991), adapted by Greg Brandt

Chromelodeon I - Weaver Reed Organ (1904), rebuilt by Kent Arnold & tuned by John Schneider

Kithara I (2004), Scott Hackleman

Bitter Music was read from the edition prepared by Thomas McGeary in Harry Partch, *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (University of Illinois Press, 1991), copyright Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, used by permission.

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• Danlee Mitchell & Jon Szanto (Harry Partch Foundation), photographs

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