

PARTCH: Uncertain Place in History

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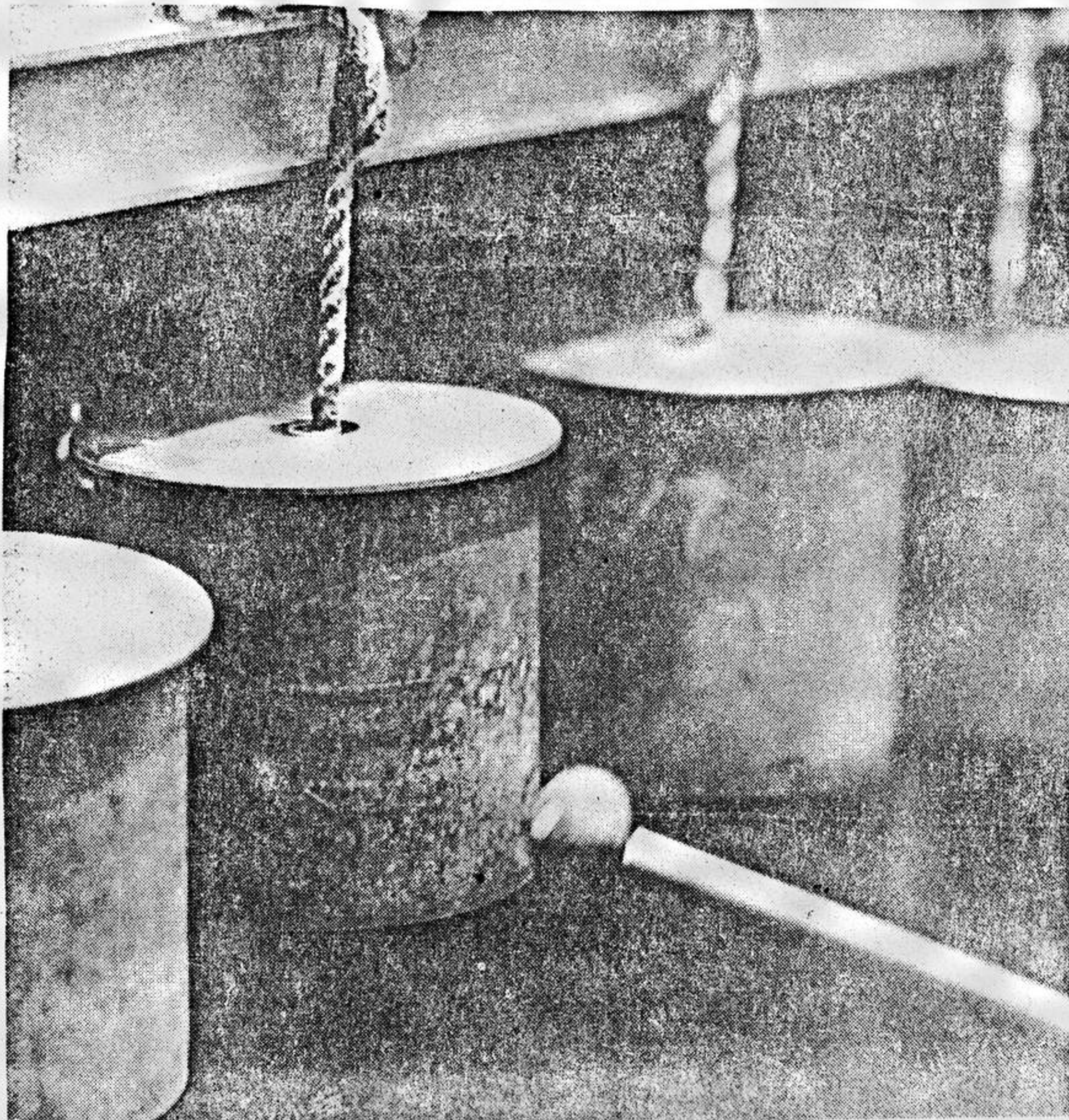
Danlee Mitchell, who was Partch's friend and protege for nearly 20 years, concedes that Partch's music may become a "historical musical curiosity." But Mitchell is hopeful that at least some of Partch's concepts will survive, and he is committed to keeping Partch's music alive as long as possible.

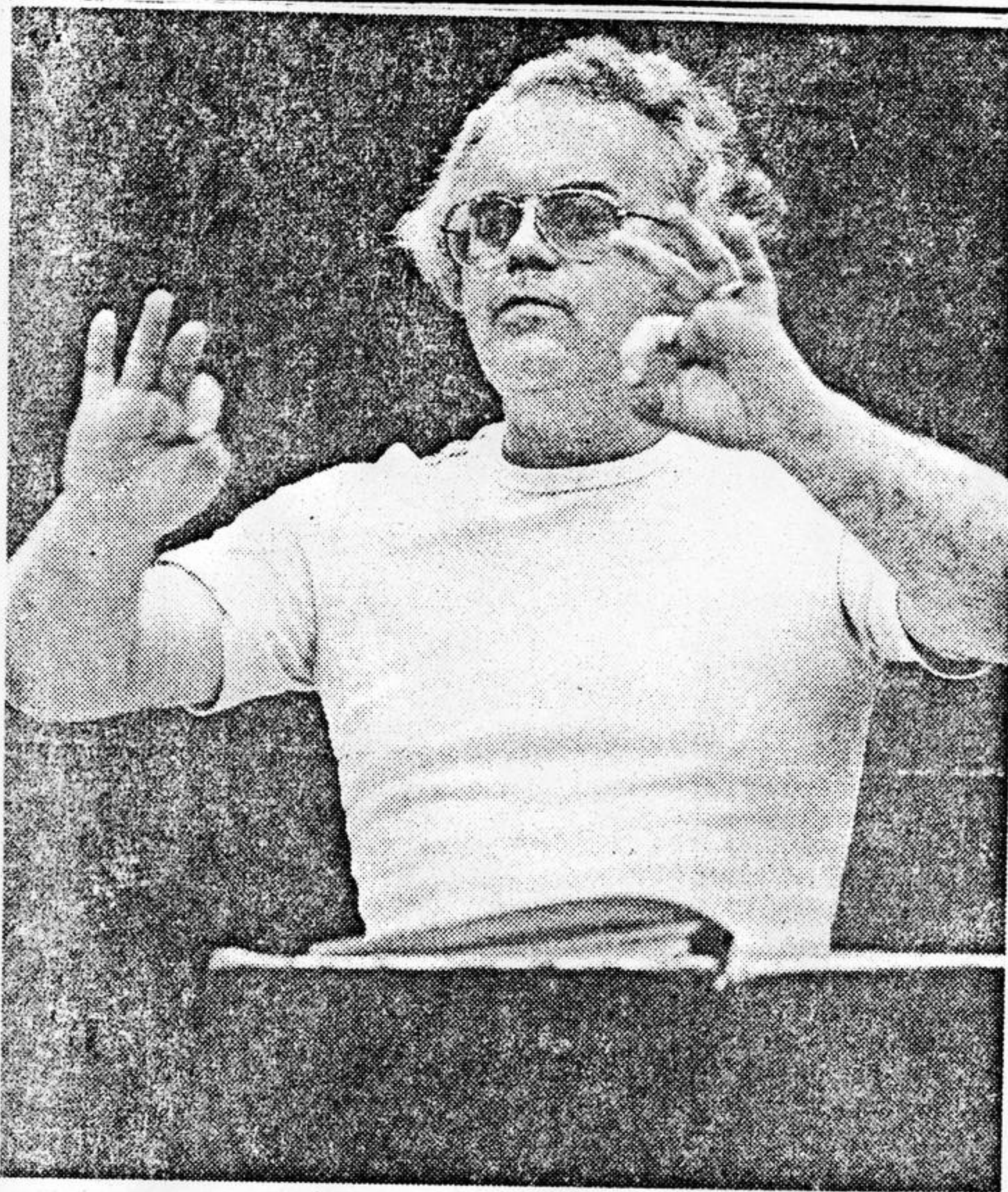
By all accounts, Partch was a complex man. Born in 1901 in Oakland to a pair of missionaries, he was exposed at an early age to a broad range of Eastern and Western cultures and music. He studied the history of music intonation on a Carnegie Foundation grant in England, and he served as a professor at such schools as the University of Illinois, Northwestern University and UCSD. But he also traveled the country as a hobo during the Depression. He was a recluse, a bisexual and an alcoholic.

"Almost everyone had some trouble with him," said Logan, now an SDSU music professor, remembering his days as a student under Partch. "When he was not drinking, he was one of the nicest people you could imagine, generous to a fault. But when he was drinking, he was cantankerous and ill-tempered. He would get out of hand at rehearsals, and sometimes it was better if he wasn't there."

At age 28, Partch burned all the musical works he had composed—works based on what he called "the tyranny of the piano"—and set out on a new course. In place of the piano's 12-tone scale, which is the foundation of Western music, he built his music on a concept known as "just intonation," a system that divides the scale into 43 tones.

His music is a melodically and harmonically intricate mix of percussion and string sounds and rhythms. In "Genesis of a Music," the book he wrote to explain his musical universe, he said his musical influences were "Christian hymns, Chinese lullabies, Yaqui Indian ritual, Congo puberty ritual, Cantonese music hall and Okies in





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His music and his instruments are so precious and fragile, I don't know whether they can survive.
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Photos by
 PATRICK DOWNS
 Los Angeles Times

California vineyards, among others.”

One of his admirers, Anais Nin, once wrote that to hear his music “was as if one had drunk the music instead of accepting it through the ears.”

Jazz magazine *Down Beat*, in a review of a recording of one of his pieces, said, “The particular timbres and microtonal pitches, obtained on these instruments, coupled with Partch’s discontinuous structures, create a surrealistic world in which everything seems slightly out of whack.”

The sight of Partch’s instruments on stage confirms the presence of a surreal world. They are an imposing collection of forms made of wood and found objects, some like sculpture, some like furniture and some like nothing ever seen.

There is the *quadrangularis reversum*, a sort of sprawling marimba with five keyboard sections made of African padouk wood and bamboo in a framework constructed of eucalyptus branches.

There are harmonic canons I, II and III, which are variations on a zitherlike instrument with two sets of 44-string playing areas.

There are the cloud chamber bowls, a bell-like arrangement of 14 sections of Pyrex bowls. The original bowls came from the radiation-laboratory glass shop at UC Berkeley, and the name comes from cloud chamber experiments in physics for which the bowls were used.

Whimsical Instrument

There is also the *zymo-xyl*, one of the most whimsical instruments. It is a construction of 17 upside-down liquor bottles, 14 oak blocks, hubcaps from 1952 and '53 Fords and an aluminum kettle top. When played with hard mallets, the instrument sounds something like a xylophone.

The *zymo-xyl* is one of the few instruments with easily replaceable parts. Partch notes in his book that “like the (cloud chamber) bowls, these bottles sometimes break under the excitement of playing, but unlike the bowls, no anguish is involved. It is a curious fact that the tones of the bottles used for any particular brand generally have a very small latitude. Hence, one simply buys another bottle.”

He includes specifications calling for two Old Heaven Hill bourbon bottles, two Gordon’s gin, two Barclay’s whiskey and 11 more individual brands.

Other instruments range from adapted versions of the guitar, viola and organ to massive bass marimbas producing drumlike sounds that must be played from a platform.

Keeping these instruments in working order is the responsibility of Danlee Mitchell, Partch’s longtime friend and now a music professor at SDSU. Mitchell, 46, first met Partch in 1956, when he was a music student at the University of Illinois and Partch came to perform some of his works.



PARTCH: Fragile Musical Legacy Left at SDSU

"I didn't know who he was. I'd never heard of him," Mitchell said. "But when I went to his studio and heard his instruments, my musical sense told me that this was some rather important music, and unique."

Mitchell was recruited to play in Partch's ensemble and soon became Partch's assistant. When Partch died in 1974, Mitchell inherited his instruments, which he keeps in storage space provided by SDSU.

He is grateful for the space and for the support SDSU has given him in preserving Partch's music, but the situation is hardly ideal.

"If I had the resources, I'd surely house them in a place that had space for the instruments and a shop. They do require constant repair."

He'd like about 2,500 square feet of space in an environment that would shield the instruments from the ravages of humidity and other natural elements. But now he must make do with just about 500 square feet of storage space.

"At this time, they're all just sitting, just wasting away," said SDSU colleague Logan. "There has already been damage to some of the most fragile of them."

But there simply isn't any money available to do anything more. "There's always great interest when his music is performed, but that interest is never translated into action with Partch," Logan said.

In the meantime, Mitchell continues to keep the music alive through periodic concerts, although finances for performances are a problem as well.

"This obviously is not an ensemble in the commercial, popular sense," Mitchell said. "So when I give people a bill for what it will cost, they balk."

He must hire at least a semi to transport the

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Mitchell is committed to trying to line up additional concerts, however, because the performance aspect was an important part of Partch's work.

Partch disliked the notion that musicians should merely sit and play their instruments. He wanted to "get musicians out of tight coats and tight shoes," so his works call for ensemble members to sing and dance and wear costumes.

"He wanted to organize situations where the musicians were more than just players," Mitchell said. "But he didn't achieve that to any great deal of success in his lifetime. That's where my interest is—in performing the music and improving on the performance concepts in his music."

Someday, Mitchell acknowledges, he will have to decide what will be the best way to preserve Partch's music and his instruments. "But that's 15 years down the road," he said.

It may take much longer to resolve the question of whether Partch will have any lasting impact in the music world.

Jack Logan fears his music may be lost as his instruments deteriorate or break. "His musical notations cannot be understood without the instruments," Logan said.

But Mitchell takes a longer view. "If we're still here in 200 years, I can't see our tuning system being as large a force as it is now," he said.

The 12-tone scale of the piano has been the standard for just 150 to 300 years, a short period in the history of music, and there's no reason to discount the possibility that a system such as Partch's "just intonation" could eventually replace it, the men said.

"One hundred years from now, the music of the European symphony may be a museum piece," Mitchell said.

And the music of the day could be built from Bristol Cream sherry bottles and eucalyptus boughs.

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instruments, so any concert outside of San Diego gets to be a major undertaking. When the ensemble played at a festival in West Berlin in 1980, the bill for transporting the instruments came to \$62,000. Air fare for the 30 musicians was another \$32,000.

"And the ensemble and myself work for nothing," he said. "It's all volunteer." When the ensemble performs at the Old Globe Theatre on Sept. 24, it will be its first appearance in 19 months. Beyond that performance, Mitchell said, "there's nothing definite on the horizon."