



Repair and Restoration of Harmony Folksinger Guitar

Background

Harmony Musical Instrument Company was started around 1890 in Chicago. It has gone through several owners and the name has been tossed around by Asian and American companies. I heard recently that a Chicago company got the name and is preparing to release new versions of the Sovereign, a solid body electric, and some inexpensive Stella guitars. They will more than likely be built in Korea, Taiwan, or China.

In the early part of the 20th Century, Harmony became the largest producer and OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) of guitars and other stringed instruments. They were marketed under many names, including their own Harmony and Stella, catalog-house names like Concertone (Ward's) and Silvertone (Sear's), and after WWII, they distributed Dobro-built guitars.

Harmony Folk models were a step up from Stella and a step down from Sovereigns. They are designed with ladder bracings and are lighter in weight than most flat tops. The wood is pretty thin, as is the wood on the Sovereigns, and is very susceptible to punctures if mishandled. They do fret well and many sound very good. Some models came in both steel reinforced neck or with a truss rod, depending on the year made.

Valuation

The thin woods made for a good sounding guitar, but these inexpensive instruments didn't hold up over time. Even though perhaps thousands of Harmony Folksingers were made, not that many have survived.

The Folk models came in two basic styles: mahogany with spruce top, and all mahogany. They came with natural finishes, and I don't think there were any sunburst models like there were in the Sovereign models.

Most Harmony acoustic guitars are not considered collectable. Even though Sovereigns, especially the Jumbos, are great sounding instruments, and the Folksinger is a “period” piece of the 1960’s folk boom, no one is seeking them out... yet.

To me, the Harmony Folksinger is currently worth no more than \$200, in mint condition. Instruments showing wear and tear (scratches, dings, and exposed wood) would bring no more than \$100.

So, if someone was looking for a very good sounding, and easy playing guitar to start practicing on and came across a decent Harmony Folksinger for \$100 to \$200, they wouldn’t regret the purchase.

The Restoration

This Harmony Folksinger was given to me by a friend who works for the local sanitation department. He often drives those trucks that lift and empty commercial dumpsters. On one of his trips, he noticed a guitar neck sticking out of the trash. Being a musician himself, he pulled the guitar out to see how damaged it was. It had a couple of gouges in the top and on the side, a few bent gear posts, and a very bad, botched start to a refinishing job. It looked like someone had covered the whole guitar in paint remover, decided it wasn’t worth the work, and threw it away. My friend gave it to me to see if it could be saved. It could.

This was a fairly easy repair/restoration job. No wood was lost from the few gouges, and it was easy to force the wood back into place, glue it, and clamp overnight.

I applied a little more varnish remover and scraped and sanded all the rest of the finish off. The face of the head, which normally has a black enameled surface, was nearly gone, with only part of the painted Harmony name left on it.

After getting all the finish removed and fine sanding everything to around 600 grit, I started restoring the head. I first re-painted the Harmony name, since there was a little left and some outlines of the remainder. The existing part was off-white and sort of slightly yellowed. I matched the color, traced the remaining name over the outline, and painted in the letters. After that dried, I painted the whole face of the head around the letters with several coats of a black varnish. The result, I feel, was as good as a new instrument.

The rest was very easy. I applied several coats of a glossy tung oil varnish over the entire instrument, which took nearly a week, then polished it up. I put new tuning machines on it, inexpensive and very similar to the originals, and strung it up. It sounds very good.

Below is a picture of the finished product. I sold it not long after the repair.

