

Sam Rizzetta

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Sam Rizzetta

Sam Rizzetta is a dulcimer designer, builder, and musician who moved to West Virginia in the early 1970s. He was a member of the string band Trapezoid and founded the hammer dulcimer playing classes at the Augusta Heritage Center at Davis & Elkins College. He has built dulcimers for musicians including John McCutcheon, Guy Carawan, and Sam Herrmann (read our Field Notes with her). Rizzetta now collaborates with the Dusty Strings Company who build hammer dulcimers based on his designs. He lives with his wife Carrie Rizzetta in Berkeley County, WV.

Sam Rizzetta: SR
Emily Hilliard: EH

00:00

EH: Okay. I'll just hold this here.

SR: Or we could get a stand for you if you prefer.

EH: I usually just hold it.

SR: You're used to that.

EH: So that's okay. Working on my arm strength.

SR: (laughs) That'll do it.

EH: So could you introduce yourself and tell me when and where you were born?

SR: Sure. My name is Sam Rizzetta, I was born in Oak Park, Illinois, west of Chicago a ways, and spent my early years there. I went to school in Wisconsin, Ripon, and then later to Kalamazoo, Michigan and my wife and I came out east with the Army during the Vietnam War, stationed in Washington, and after that, we, we wound up working in Washington for a while. My wife at the Library of Congress, and me at the Smithsonian. But having roots in old-time music and experience growing up making musical instruments, we fell in love with West Virginia.

EH: Could you tell me a little bit about those roots in music?

SR: Um well there are some online source for that, um, I think Mel Bay published one, but my father played violin and accordion, and I had an uncle Earl Knott from Montana who was a fiddle and guitar player, but a wonderful banjo player. Played every possible kind of banjo—5-string, plectrum, Dixieland, um all of that. So when he would come to visit, I would sit on the floor and listen to a banjo on his knee (laughs) and look up at that banjo and, you know, knew that that's what I wanted to do—play string music.

EH: And your dad, um, was he Italian—Rizzetta?

SR: Rizzetta. Italian. My mother too—DeMichelis.

EH: Ah! And so did he play Italian music?

SR: He played the popular music of his era, but I never got to hear him play very much. He, he played for dances and he once told me that he got really jealous of all the other guys who got to

dance with the girls while he was playing music so he decided to put the accordion away and not let anyone know he played it.

EH: (laughs)

SR: So he could just go to the dances and dance.

EH: I've been there!

SR: And apparently it worked!

EH: Yeah, right? That's funny.

SR: So actually, I'm not much influenced by him musically—more by my uncle for sure.

EH: Mhm. Yeah. And what brought you to West Virginia um, from—so you moved from D.C. to West Virginia?

SR: Yes. After grad school and getting married, I was drafted into the Army and my wife and I lived in San Antonio for a few months where I was an artist for the Army, worked as an artist.

EH: Ah! What sort of things did you do?

SR: I was a medical illustrator for one thing. Um, but wound up being sent to the Pentagon to work with the defense intelligence agency, and um, quickly met a lot of musicians here. So my wife had a strong background in library science and got hired on at the Library of Congress, and as soon as I got out of the service, I was able to get on with the Smithsonian Institution. But we liked to get out of the city and I traveled with bands playing music and we just fell in love with West Virginia and with Elkins especially. In fact, when Augusta started, the Augusta Heritage Arts Program, it was around 1974 or '73 and it was all crafts and arts, no music at all.

EH: Hmm!

SR: And I think it was about the 2nd year of Augusta um, a friend of mine, Paul um, Paul Reisler was brought on to teach a musical instrument building class. He asked me to join him and we just naturally drew other musicians in and started having dances and so on and it wasn't long after that we were able to press our case for having music classes as well.

EH: Okay. Sam and Joe [Herrmann] mentioned him yesterday.

5:56

SR: Yeah.

EH: Um, so could you talk a little bit about your start in building and repairing instruments?

SR: Oh gosh, well that came about as a child out of necessity—we couldn't afford musical instruments or music lessons and I was fascinated with guitars at that time. Um, so as a child, I would try to cobble together banjos out of old pots and pans and guitars out of boxes and so on and I'm sure they weren't any good but you know, it was fascinating to me and I was able to get a little bit of music out of them. So as I grew older I learned more and by the time I was an early teenager, I was building guitars and other stringed instruments—fiddles and banjos and mandolins.

EH: And is that mostly just self-teaching?

SR: Yes. My father had a little shop in the basement and woodworking tools and so on and he had no idea how to use them. He was not very skilled at handicrafts. So it became very rewarding to start learning to do wood working because I could quickly do better work than my father. For some... for some strange reason that seemed very encouraging. (laughs)

EH: Uh-huh. And then how did you come to specialize in dulcimers?

SR: Well I fell in love with dulcimers! Probably in the late teenage years, I saw Jean Ritchie, and just by seeing her instrument, I was able to figure out what the scale pattern was and started making mountain dulcimers. And then saw a few... saw a few hammer dulcimers as well, but they were mostly uh, in poor repair and not being played or not being tuned and played very well. Until I encountered Chet Parker from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and also um... Russel Fluharty of Mannington, West Virginia and it was like hearing the pied piper, you know, walking through... walking through the woods somewhere and hearing this magical sound getting closer and closer and coming into a clearing and there was Russell playing the dulcimer. At that time, he just appeared to be a very, very, very old man playing the dulcimer. Turned out, he was about 50. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SR: So from that perspective, from the perspective of being 74 now, you know, I realized that was a little short sighted on my part, thinking of him as a very old man.

EH: (laughs) Was that at a festival?

SR: I don't really remember.

EH: Mmhm.

SR: And also after we moved to Washington, I met Howie Mitchell who was making mountain and hammer dulcimers in the Washington area and playing with groups there and he had done some experiments with hammer dulcimers that were intriguing to me so I used some of that as a springboard to do more with them. Ultimately, tuning the sound box is better and expanding the range to have more bass range adding more chromatic capabilities because they were limited to more simple diatonic scales at that time.

EH: And when you saw Jean Ritchie, you saw her in person play?

SR: Ah, yes. I think I may have met Jean Ritchie for the first time maybe around 1967 or so and that might have been at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival or it might have been at uh the old Fox Hollow Festival in upstate New York, which was a very formative festival that drew a lot of really dedicated old-time musicians.

EH: And at that time, at least what it sort of seemed like from what Sam and Joe [Herrmann] were saying, dulcimers weren't really that known or that popular?

SR: Uh, correct. Neither the mountain dulcimer now the hammer dulcimer, but mountain dulcimers you could find because there was a little bit of a revival in the 1950s especially in and around Virginia and you could find a few new ones made at that time. The hammer dulcimer was more obscure, Chet Parker did play at Newport sometime in the 60s—he's on one of those Newport Folk Festival recordings and I probably encountered him and some of the old lumberjack dulcimers when I lived in Kalamazoo.

EH: Ah yeah—that's speaking to my childhood heritage.

SR: Mmhm.

EH: And what about like in Kentucky—Hindman I know has a big dulcimer school. Was that happening at that moment?

SR: It was, but that didn't involve hammer dulcimers until a little later—like in the 1970s, uh.. who was it... uh... um... oh... the folklorist who worked there from California—his name is escaping me. Oh, Carawan. Guy Carawan. Guy and Candie Carawan and his son Evan became a really good hammer dulcimer player, but in the early 70s sometime, Guy Carawan started playing dulcimer—hammer dulcimer and got me to build one for him. So it was kind of starting to catch on because it was an exciting instrument. It had more volume than the mountain dulcimer, so it could be heard and used at square dances. It was percussive and rhythmic and you know, the old timers had used them at barn dances as well as parlor instruments, and they were also used to accompany hymns in small country churches. So there were a few around, they were just not as well-known at the time. There were, there were some presence of the hammer dulcimer in West Virginia, going back at least around 1844 because I found records of it in central West Virginia at that time and we found a number made in West Virginia. Russell Fluharty's dulcimer has been in his family since the late 19th century sometime, then Worley Gardner and his brother in the Morgantown area started playing and building them. There had been builders in or near Morgantown. We found some old dulcimers built there. So Worley was a dance caller and fiddle player as well, so he used the dulcimer a little bit in that context.

EH: Okay.

SR: So he spread interest in the Morgantown area. Russell Fluharty lived in Mannington, but he traveled all over playing the dulcimer. And he was a very special person. He... well you can read some of the articles about him in Goldenseal probably and his experiences with finding a dulcimer and getting his first dulcimer, so I won't recount all of that for you.

EH: Okay, okay.

15:34

SR: You should be able to find that. But one amusing thing was that when he got his first dulcimer, there was no one left who knew how to play it. So he had to figure out how to tune it, how to play it, and what the intervals should be. And, so he would travel around the country playing it, and he would offer \$100 to anyone who could come up and play his dulcimer. And he told me he figured if he ever found anybody who knew how to play it, that it would be worth it because then they could show him how it was supposed to be played. But he never had to pay up on that. Until later in life when of course, there were lots of dulcimer players.

EH: Yeah. And I just realized I don't know much about the origins. So is it a Scotts-Irish instrument? It seems like it might have some Eastern European or Middle Eastern influence?

SR: The hammer dulcimer?

EH: Yeah.

SR: Oh, there's been a lot of conjecture about the history and more and more things being learned all the time. But it appears now that it developed somewhere along the trade routes between ancient Persia through Turkey, Eastern European countries, up into Germany. And some of the most ancient traditions come out of ancient Persia. But it apparently spread from Eastern Europe everywhere. Spread to India, especially the Kashmir region, Southeast Asia, we get some good immigrant players from there. China has several hundred years of history and pedagogy with the dulcimer, so they produce some fabulous, fabulously skilled players. (coughs) Excuse me. Japan is one of the more recent places that it went, so there was not an old history there. But it spread to Eastern Europe and England certainly by Renaissance times. The crusaders brought versions back with them from the crusades. So for a while it was a courtly instrument, then out of fashion, became a street instrument and was very well-known by the time colonists came to America so somewhere brought over at that time. We've found lists of ships inventories of fiddles and dulcimers coming maybe to Virginia and to Boston area.

EH: Yeah, it seems like there are a lot of analogues in many different cultures.

SR: Right. So it's spread somewhat worldwide. We don't find them in Africa except in parts of Northern Africa, but you know, on most of the other continents. So in America they spread both among English communities, as well as Scotts-Irish.

EH: Okay.

SR: And you know, they had those traditions. In fact, in recent times, uh... like in the 50s or 60s it had declined in Ireland to the point that we could only pinpoint maybe 3 players at that time.

EH: Wow.

SR: Whereas in Scotland it was pretty popular. In England and in Wales, so on. So the ones that came into the Appalachians may have come from more than one source. Some of them were rectangular like some of the New England instruments were. And... Russell Fluharty's instrument was like that. Rectangular. It only had one bridge like the one you're talking about having.

EH: Uh-huh.

SR: So that was not unusual. Worley Gardener's dulcimer—I'm trying to remember. I believe his was trapezoidal shaped. And we found more of the old trapezoidal shaped ones maybe in North Carolina, but you know, the history is unclear.

EH: Okay.

SR: Paul Gifford at the University Library in Ann Arbor wrote an excellent book on the history of the hammer dulcimer in America.

EH: Oh cool. Nice.

SR: And that's kind of the definitive source for...

EH: History?

SR: History here in the states.

EH: Okay. So you had said that you had met a lot of artists around Elkins when you moved there. Well, musicians. Could you talk a little bit about them?

21:16

SR: Sure. Probably the ones who were most influential to me—the older ones—would have been Woody Simmons who lived in Mill Creek, West Virginia with his wife Laverne. And Laverne had a little café there across from the high school for many, any years. And Woody was a fiddler who won lots of fiddle contests and champion fiddler, had played with bands. He also played banjo as well. And when we lived in Valley Head, I met Blackie Cool who lived in Monterville, West Virginia, who was an amazing guitar player. He played some fiddle and banjo and some other instruments but mainly he was mainly a guitarist. And he grew up down in that area around southern Randolph County. Ran off with the circus when he was a young teenager and toured around the country and learned um guitar from all different cultures. Learned Spanish guitar on

the streets of Mexico, learned blues from the black coal miners when he worked in the mines, learned polka music when he worked in the steel mills and shipyards in Pennsylvania, so Blackie was just a fount of guitar styles and a great guy.

EH: Cool.

SR: And I remember you know, being at a... playing for a square dance at a ski resort... down in southern Randolph County and Blackie showed up and Gerry Milnes... Gerry Milnes and I played for the square dance, and Blackie came along and we got him to play guitar and when we were packing up, he wouldn't stop playing. So we discovered that he and I lived close together, so I wound up learning a lot from Blackie and spending a lot of time with him and he was one of the most fascinating characters one would want to meet. So I interviewed him for *Goldenseal* and you might want to take a look at that article because he's a fascinating character.

EH: Nice. Yeah, I will. Do you know about what year it would have been?

SR: Probably... it's in... there was a reissue of some of the *Goldenseal* articles on musicians, Music from the Mountains or something like that.

EH: Mm. Okay. We have all of them too.

SR: I'm sure you've got that—just take a look at that.

EH: Yeah, the series index.

SR: It shouldn't be hard to run down a name like Blackie Cool.

EH: Yeah! (laughs)

SR: There shouldn't be too many of those.

EH: Is that a nickname?

SR: Yes, his name was William, but everyone called him Blackie. And he said he got that nickname in younger days because whenever they played cowboys and Indians, he had to be the Indian. He looked... I think he had some Indian blood a little bit. Because the Blackfoot Indian tribe was sort of in the news, he got tagged with being Blackie.

EH: I see. Uh-huh. Got it.

25:34

SR: That's his story.

EH: Right. And what are some of the groups that you have played in?

SR: Well, one of the groups that I played in a lot around the Washington, D.C. area don't laugh now, was a band called The Greasy Run Toad Trompers.

EH: (laughs)

SR: Ah, you laughed!

EH: I laughed!

SR: (laughs) but it was a very popular band in the late 60s and early 70s for dances and we had some—there were some great musicians in that group. Um, Judy Huff on fiddle, Mike Rivers on guitar, David McElway on fiddle and guitar and Bob Clayton on banjo and later when he left, Reed Martin played banjo with us.

EH: Okay.

SR: And Reed Martin still to this day, a fabulous banjo player.

EH: Yeah!

SR: So that was, in a way, a seminal group of sorts. And I was you know, moderately new on the hammer dulcimer at that time. So they were kind enough to drag me along. But people were interested in dulcimers at that time it was young and fascinating so that was fun to be a part of. Then around 1974, 1975, I formed the group Trapezoid and then moved to near the Elkins area, to Valley Head. Paul Reisler, who had been living in Virginia and joined me in the band, Paul moved with his wife to Montrose, north of... just north of Elkins, and he took on an apprentice from New Hampshire, Paul Yeaton who moved in with him. So Paul Reisler was a wonderful guitarist, Paul Yeaton played mandolin and could clog, and Pete Vigour who had worked with me around Charlottesville joined us to play banjo, but he also played concertina and was becoming a fiddle player—he's a wonderful fiddle player now. I played hammer dulcimer, mountain dulcimer, some concertina and so we traveled around full-time as a band in that era. It was... probably the only full-time touring old-time band at that time were the Red Clay Ramblers and Trapezoid.

EH: Wow.

SR: It was an era when—there's enough interest that one could earn a living doing that, and it was great fun. We'd do dances as well as concerts and we, Trapezoid... one of the rationales for Trapezoid was to... behind Trapezoid, was that I wanted to put together a group that could play hammer dulcimer quartets.

EH: Wow.

SR: So Paul Reisler was playing hammer dulcimer and I was, Pete Vigour had just started, we got Paul Yeaton to start playing a little bit and one of the things we could feature in our programs

was the playing of 4 dulcimers at once, so I designed a series of them from bass to soprano and we became partly known for the hammer dulcimer quartets.

EH: Sounds fun.

SR: It was.

EH: I see some of the records around.

SR: They're still around!

EH: Yeah. And so at that point, were you doing music and building full-time? So how did that evolve?

SR: Yes, when my wife Carrie and I left Washington, D.C. I was already building instruments and doing music full-time and we went to Charlottesville where she worked for the university for a while, but she quit that when we decided to move to West Virginia, so we moved to south of Valley Head, built our own house on the ridge top and the two of us built instruments and I would tour with the band. Then later on in the late 70s, I left the band to focus more on the instruments and touring solo because it was easier to earn a living solo than with a group. It was hard to get in enough work time and travel together because we were kind of scattered around at that time. I continued... I occasionally played on some of their late records, but mainly worked solo after that.

EH: So how has your building evolved in dulcimer making? You were talking about some new innovations and materials.

SR: Oh, well it's a constant evolution. As a player as well as a builder, I could see ways to improve the instrument and to make more kinds of technique and more kinds of music accessible through the dulcimer, so I added more chromatic capabilities, I invented totally chromatic versions and started designing instruments for Dusty Strings Company in Seattle, Washington in the early 1980s and there—they're probably the largest manufacturer of both hammer dulcimers and harps. So that's been a wonderful association in fact, some of the dulcimers behind you are brand new models that Dusty Strings has just released that include some of my latest innovations. They include new innovations for tone and also extended range by adding more bridges to the dulcimer.

32:57

One of the fascinating things about the dulcimer early on is that it has strings stretched across a box but by adding bridges to those strings, you can get more notes out of each string. And long ago, several hundred years ago, someone added the single bridge and then a second bridge to carry bass notes, and I've added two more bridges so that you'll see some of the instruments here have 4 bridges across and without increasing the size of the dulcimer, we're able to have a much, much wider range. So we still have an instrument that's very portable, you know, compact and lightweight, and yet we can have 3 or 4 more octave range out of it and increase the capabilities

of the instrument. So today there are a number of terrific players and performers and they're pretty much all using, you know, much more sophisticated dulcimers now than the historical early American ones. It's still basically a simple idea—a box with strings, but it's you know, it's had an interesting evolution in the last 40 years or so. And that wouldn't have happened without increasing interest, you know. I got interest and a few other builders did. We wanted to play more sophisticated music. And... but there was also enough interest in the instruments to buy the ones that were manufactured and without that we wouldn't have had the resources to kind of keep going and keep expanding.

EH: Yeah. Who are some of the musicians that you've built instruments for?

SR: Oh gosh. Well uh, early on I built the hammer dulcimers for John McCutcheon, and he's been one of the great spokespeople and proponents for the hammer dulcimer, so that spread the interest there. And I've built the dulcimers for many other performers or provided the designs to the builders and manufacturers who built them from those. Madeleine McNeil who's a wonderful singer and player—lives in Virginia near here, has done... has, you know, played my dulcimers for a long time. I built her first hammer dulcimer and a number of them since and she still plays my dulcimers. She owned and published *The Dulcimer Players News* for a long, long time, you know, since the 1970s. And so that has kept the community in communication and done a lot for dulcimers of both kinds.

EH: Nice. And where do you source your... the wood from?

SR: Well the wood comes from all over. Some of the wood comes from our own wood lot here or when we lived in Valley Head there. We used to cut hickory to make the hammers and maple to make some of the frame and bracing parts and sound boards of some of the instruments were red spruce that came off the mountains in West Virginia. But today we're concerned about renewable resources—the sound boards of many of my dulcimers today are made from mahogany and often today sapele, which is... in good supply so we're not diminishing the supplies of that wood. And the frame woods can be a variety of hardwoods-- the frame woods and bridge woods-- and much of that is walnut, which can come from the central of West Virginia. I still have a stock of walnut that I bought in the mid-1970s around Webster Springs in West Virginia.

EH: Okay. And you were saying that you go to this, the jam at O'Hurley's, so could you talk a little bit about the traditional music community here in...

SR: Sure, I can do that. Oh, one... before I do that, just one little backtrack about the materials—today I'm actually building a lot of the instruments with carbon fiber composite so we're not even using wood entirely in them any longer. And that comes out of also having designed and fabricated parts for airplanes and I designed and built canoes and kayaks and written on that. So over the years, that technology has crept into my instruments to the point that some of the mountain dulcimers and hammer dulcimers are almost entirely carbon fiber.

EH: Wow. Um so...

SR: But then you asked...

EH: Yeah, yeah, so it's not just the hammers it's also... I'm looking at one right there.

SR: You can see the mountain dulcimer hanging on the wall which is entirely carbon fiber and one next to it has some pearl and abalone inlay, which is kind of an outgrowth of my background as an artist long ago. So I kind of like to keep a hand in some of the decorative aspects of the building.

39:51

EH: And then the dulcimer can double as a canoe—a tiny canoe if you need it.

SR: Or a canoe paddle!

EH: There you go.

SR: Right—it's totally waterproof! But the local dulcimer community, or the local music community.

EH: Yeah—it could be broader.

SR: It's much different here than it was living in Valley Head, where the only musicians were old timers who stayed on or came back to the area like Blackie Cool or a few young folks that wanted to absorb that music like you know, people like Gerry Milnes who moved to Elkins from Charlottesville or folks like that. Here in the Eastern Panhandle, there was a banjo player that lived here when I first moved—he's gone now. So most of the players are people who didn't play in West Virginia communities, didn't learn their music that way. We're close to Washington, D.C., we're in the Shenandoah Valley, so people from Virginia and further north have influenced the music community here. But we have a good supply of fine musicians who you'll probably meet tomorrow night if you come to O'Hurley's. You'll find people playing fiddle—a number of fiddle players, harp, mandolin, banjo, guitar and so on.

EH: Great. Yeah, I'm looking forward to that.

SR: And a few hammer dulcimer players. The reason this jam session at O'Hurley's General Store is going, though, is because the owner of O'Hurley's General Store, Jay Hurley, who is a blacksmith, also became interested in hammer dulcimers long ago in the 1970s and he came up to Augusta and took a class with me long ago, probably in the late 70s or early 80s and started a weekly jam session here, and so it's been going every Thursday except for Thanksgiving or a holiday, ever since. So it's a real boon to the community and a meeting place for the community. Jay has generously not only opened up his store to host musicians to play, but he makes it open for people to come and listen at no charge and you know, some years ago, maybe 20 years ago, he put... built a great hall onto the side of his store. Supposedly to use as furniture show room, but every Thursday we clear out all the furniture, set up folding chairs, and have a jam session

that's open free to the community. So it's a great thing for Shepherdstown and those of us who like to get together and play. Any musician is welcome, so people who are just traveling through that we've never seen before and will never see again, come and sit in the circle and help to make it different each time and a lot of fun.

EH: Cool. Well is there anything you'd like to add?

SR: I don't have an agenda.

EH: (laughs)

SR: (laughs)

EH: I'm trying to think if I skipped anything crucial.

SR: Probably not.

EH: Probably.

SR: You can always reach me. You know where I live.

EH: It's true. Well thank you very much.

SR: You're welcome!

EH: Do you mind...

44:30

END OF TAPE