

# Aptos man remembered as noted instrumentalist, instrument builder

B10-C  
By **NANCY REDWINE**  
Sentinel staff writer

APTOS — Services will be announced later for noted musician and instrument builder William "Bill" Colvig, 82, who died in Capitola March 2.

Colvig was internationally known for the gamelan percussion instruments he developed with his partner and collaborator of 33 years, Lou Harrison.

Colvig was born March 13, 1917, in Medford, Ore., and grew up in Weed, as the son of the town's bandmaster. He played piano, trombone, baritone horn and tuba. While studying at the College of the Pacific and UC Berkeley, he played in concert bands and majored in electrical engineering.

During World War II, Colvig worked on radio installations for the U.S. Army. After the war, he returned to San Francisco, where he worked as an electrician.

According to Fred Lieberman, co-author with Leta Miller of "Lou Harrison: Composing a World," Colvig and Harrison met in 1967 after one of Harrison's concerts at the Spaghetti Company in San Francisco.

Shortly afterward, Colvig moved into Harrison's house in Aptos.

"Bill like to say that he always

wanted to live in the woods," Lieberman said. "It was his idea of heaven."

In collaboration with Harrison, Colvig developed electronic devices to precisely tune the instruments he and Harrison were building together.

"Bill brought to the table the ability to add the beauty of pure tuning," Lieberman said.

Using scavenged and non-traditional materials like oxygen tanks, aluminum and tin cans, and electrical conduit, they created a number of percussion instruments including "Old Granddad," a percussion orchestra they dubbed "an American gamelan" for its similarity to traditional Indonesian ensembles.

They were commissioned by Mills College and San Jose State University to build two more full gamelans.

"Bill Colvig was a really quiet man in social situations. Sometimes he'd fall asleep during dinner parties," said Robin Brooks, who met Colvig in 1970, when both became national outing leaders for the Sierra Club. "But in the mountains he came alive."

Colvig's immersion in mountaineering began as early as his musical career. Growing up in Weed, he ran up and down Mount Shasta in all kinds of weather.

Before joining the Army in World War II, Colvig hitchhiked from San

3-22-2000  
Francisco to Patagonia. Along the way, he climbed mountains in Mexico, Peru and Chile.

Colvig was known by many as the most daring backcountry leader in the Sierra Club. Shunning modern developments in hiking equipment, his backpack was an old backboard with a burlap sack tied to it. His tent was a rope and a piece of plastic.

His unorthodox style of living was not limited to the mountains. According to Brooks, Colvig was proud to have a full set of healthy teeth despite his refusal to brush them for more than 40 years.

Colvig, along with Harrison, was politically active in the struggle for gay rights. Both were members of San Francisco's Society for Individual Rights, which was founded in 1964 to promote gay liberation. In 1978, they worked to counter the Briggs Initiative, an anti-gay ballot measure ultimately defeated by California voters. They were both active in the local gay and lesbian community.

Colvig is survived by Harrison; sisters Donna Straight of Auburn and Claire Oberon of Paso Robles; and brothers David Colvig of San Francisco, Richard Colvig of Oakland and Ray Colvig of Berkeley.