



It was a balmy Saturday in late summer at the entrance to the Maryland Renaissance Festival: Madrigal singers were strolling here and there; a jester was entertaining (or annoying) a customer by aping his every move; and in the distance you could just hear a cast member making a proclamation relating to the Festival's storyline. Most people were there to hear music, shop, eat, and mingle with a crowd of interesting, and interestingly dressed, people. One of those people, Maggie Sansone, was about to take the stage.

Sansone, a leading hammered-dulcimer player in Maryland Celtic music, has been a regular at this festival for over 20 years. Her engaging stage show near the festival's entrance, in which she was joined by a fiddler, a bodhrán player, and a dancer, attracted a lot of people as they entered the fairground. The inviting, easygoing performance was a perfect enticement to a day at the faire. Sansone then disappeared for a while and re-emerged as a busker ("playing in the path," they call it at the festival) with a cute puppet show she calls "RoverDance." In this performance, her dulcimer rested next to a puppet stage; while she played, she operated a hidden foot pedal. The pedal caused the puppet stage to move up and down while a string of eight limberjack puppets jumped around to the beat of the music.

A final aspect of Sansone's presence at the festival was the brightly painted yellow cart out of which she was selling her merchandise. The CDs and information they had available about the Maggie's Music label proved that she's a Renaissance woman, both literally and figuratively. On the literal level, the CDs demonstrated Sansone's interest in Renaissance music as well as folk music: The label's holiday releases, albums by the early music groups Ensemble Galilei and Hesperus, and her own records all feature Medieval and Renaissance music. On the figurative level, the cart showed that she's an artist, musician, and businesswoman; she has made a successful career out of her own music, and at the same time founded and run a well-managed independent record label with a clear identity and focus.

It's not surprising that Sansone should choose a career that blends artistry with business. She grew up in a household that straddled the boundary between art and commerce: Her father was a cartoonist and her mother, an advertising writer. To this day, when she does marketing and advertising tasks for her label, she feels she is following in her mother's footsteps. It's also not surprising that music should be her chosen field; her parents were amateur musicians, and she has always been musical. As a child in her hometown of Miami, Florida, she played piano with her father: "At age eight

I would join him for improvised duets before bedtime. With feet dangling, I'd play the left-hand boogie part and listen to his wonderful improvisations. At age 14, I fell in love with early music when my mom took me to hear the New York Pro Musica."

Soon, Sansone was asking for a different musical instrument each Christmas, but was most interested in recorder and guitar. "I took classical guitar and recorder lessons with Arnold Grayson in Miami, Florida, at the Recorder Workshop—a mecca for early music instruments and music and one of the best of its kind in the U.S.A. I took up the bassoon at 16 years old, and managed to get into the high school orchestra and received a scholarship the summer before college to the Easton School of Music. I went on to art school at Kent State University and had to give up the bassoon, but continued with guitar and recorder." She soon branched out to the banjo and mandolin and played folk, bluegrass, and classical music in high school groups.

Sansone's introduction to Irish music occurred in the mid-1970s, when she moved to Baltimore and began attending Irish sessions at local pubs. Irish music (and the other styles that fall under the "Celtic" rubric) captivated her then, and still does today. "I was at the jam sessions with guitar and mandolin in hand," she remembered. "I think that Celtic music speaks

directly to the soul. The airs have a kind of mystical moodiness which speaks to the heart in this era of technological overload. And those dance rhythms — reel, jig, strathspey — people respond to them whether they dance or not.” An early influence was the classic trio the Irish Tradition, made up of Billy McComiskey, Brendan Mulvihill, and Andy O’Brien. To this day, she considers it “a treat” to feature McComiskey in her concerts or on her recordings. Another friend from this era is her current labelmate, the hammered-dulcimer player Ken Kolodner; the two worked together in a 1970s Irish band called Kids on the Mountain, before either of them took up the dulcimer.

It was not long after joining Kids on the Mountain that Sansone discovered her current instrument. She was on a visit to Key West, Florida, and came across a hammered dulcimer player busking on the street. “I was completely mesmerized,” she remembered. “I sat on the curb for a long time just listening to the sound. I was obsessed with finding one and learning how to play it.” Before she bought a dulcimer, she made a note chart on paper, picked up a pair of chopsticks, and began learning tunes. By the time she bought her first dulcimer from the player and builder Sam Rizzetta, she could play “Soldier’s Joy.” She soon got the hang of other tunes.

In the early 1980s, Sansone left the east coast briefly and settled in Berkeley, California. It was there that she got her start as a recording artist, recording the LP *Hammered Dulcimer and Guitar* (which later appeared as part of her *Traditions* CD) on a shoestring budget, direct to two-track in the engineer’s living room. A month later, she moved back to Maryland, this time to Annapolis, driving across the country in an old Dodge Dart. Along the way, she stopped at record stores and new-age gift shops, and convinced them to stock her album. “I found I had a knack for promotion and selling my album,” she said.

She continued with this approach for several more albums. “I worked on my own. I produced these early recordings and marketed them without any release concerts locally. I was getting a huge national following at the time from this effort, and people were wondering, ‘Who is this Maggie Sansone?’ as I had not performed much onstage at that time.” She kept making the rounds of what she calls “crafts-and-crystals shops,” however, and by 1987 they paid off. Shop owners had been asking the distributors they worked with about her, and as a result she was able to get a national distribution deal.

By then, she had begun performing in the Washington, D.C.,



and Baltimore areas. (She also began her long association with the Maryland Renaissance Festival about this time.) As she continued performing, she listened to her fans and determined that what they really wanted from her and her dulcimer was a Christmas album. She soon obliged, with 1988’s *Sounds of the Season*. “At that point,” she said, “I had to decide whether to take a chance and pay for production of a risky new format called the compact disc! I took the chance, and that was a great thing to do. The CD received national acclaim with a feature story in *Billboard* magazine and national distribution.”



Maggie Sansone and friends - (left to right) Sansone, Lisa Moscattello, Rosie Shipley, Fred Lieder, and Sue Richards

Sansone’s label, Maggie’s Music, had so far existed only as a vehicle for her own recordings. But in the early 1990s, that began to change. She found that fans were asking for more of “her kind” of music and felt she had an opportunity both to provide a genuine service and to expand her business. The first artist she signed was Celtic harpist Sue Richards, who had already played on some of Sansone’s own recordings. Likewise, guitar and cittern player Robin Bullock had contributed to Sansone’s work and was signed early. Richards’ group Ceoltoiri, an all-woman Celtic band, was soon on the label as well, which brought band member Karen Ashbrook in as a solo artist.

Sansone admits that the label can feel more like a family than a business. “We get to know each other by the ‘trench method,’ ” she explained. “When we’re in the trenches together — under hot stage lights or in the studio with the clock ticking — we learn about each other as artists and as people. All the artists on Maggie’s Music play together a lot, which is probably why the label feels like a family.” Other members of this folk music family include the duo of Al Petteway and Amy White, who between them have won 50 Washington Area Music Awards; Bonnie Rideout, a three-time national champion on Scottish fiddle; Ken Kolodner, hammered-dulcimer player and former member of Helicon; and Jody Marshall, an innovative player on both hammered dulcimer and piano.

“We’ve always had a distinctive sound,” she said of the label. “As an artist and as a label I have developed a new sound which has become known as ‘chamber folk’: a blend of Celtic and early-music instruments, a new-age spacious quality, and the kind of sophisticated harmonies and variations you might hear in a string quartet.” In keeping with the chamber-folk orientation of the label, two early-music ensembles with folk-music leanings were part of the Maggie’s Music family: Hesperus, featuring Tina Chancey and the late Scott Reiss, who performed colonial American and early Irish music on their Maggie’s Music albums, and Ensemble Galilei, which specialized in Celtic/early music crossover material. In all, Maggie’s Music represents 11 artists and has over 50 titles in print, making it a small but healthy independent label.

Running a record label does have its challenges. “Early on, we were one of just a few labels to get national distribution for Celtic music through the independent network,” she said. “Today, because of the popularity of all things Celtic,

and especially *Riverdance*, the major labels have leapt in with their various-artists collections and big promotion dollars. And that's the challenge for us smaller independent labels, as there is only so much shelf space in a retail store, and if a major label is giving the store advertising dollars, the store will now tend to buy their CDs. So we have double work now: to stay in the game by reaching that bigger market, and to keep our artistic values intact, too."

While she built the label, she was also learning more about playing music and especially about making recordings. At first, her unconventional approach to recording helped her learn the ropes, but also limited her creativity. "I self-produced my first five recordings with help and advice from the musicians who joined me in the recording session," she explained. "When I got my first producers — first Charlie Pilzer [for *Ancient Noels* and *Dance Upon the Shore*] and then Bobby Read [for *A Traveler's Dream* and *Mystic Dance*] — it was a revelation and did free up my creative energies in the studio and allowed me to explore more and be more creative."

Sansone used this creativity to think up successful ideas for recordings, and eventually concerts. One interesting case was the project "A Scottish Christmas," which was a recording, a concert series, and a DVD, and has been one of the label's most successful enterprises to date. Originally a joint effort of Sansone and Bonnie Rideout, the project began in 1996, when Sansone began to feel



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that the label was overdue for a new Christmas album; the three previous ones, *Sounds of the Season*, *Sounds of the Season II*, and *Ancient Noels* were among the label's top sellers. 1996 was also Hollywood's year of the Scot; both *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* were released. Sansone realized that with Rideout, America's top Scottish-fiddle champion, the label had a hot commodity. In her experience, the hammered dulcimer's shimmering sound made a lot of people think of Christmas music, so her own participation was natural. One of the label's top instrumentalists, Al Petteway, plays an open-tuned fingerstyle guitar that also lends itself to seasonal sounds. As Sansone remembers it, Rideout further developed the idea: "She pulled out a postcard that she had been saving for 15 years," Sansone remembered, "a

picture of a Scottish castle with a Christmas tree in front. She researched the music and co-produced the album as well. [Rideout] also knew Eric Rigler and asked him to join us on the album — he had played all the pipe parts on the *Braveheart* soundtrack. So we found that we had come full circle, back to *Braveheart*."

After the album was released, and release concerts were planned, an avalanche of attention began. First, National Public Radio featured the album on both *Thistle and Shamrock* and *Performance Today*. Then, CBS TV's *Sunday Morning* did a feature story on *A Scottish Christmas* and praised it as "ancient and infectious...one of

the best selling CDs of the season and so compelling no matter what the listener's ancestry." Finally, *The New York Times* chimed in, making the CD one of its "Top 10 Holiday Picks." Suddenly, the album was a #1 national bestseller in the holiday music category, the concerts were sold out, and a nationally touring show seemed possible for future holiday seasons.

Thus, Sansone and Rideout embarked on fine-tuning the *Scottish Christmas* concept for the concert hall. New musicians were brought in. In particular, Petteway was replaced by Tony Cuffe, who, in addition to being a superb guitarist, was one of the foremost singers in Scottish music; this allowed the production to feature songs, including the immensely popular "Auld Lang Syne." Rigler was eventually replaced by Irish-American piper Jerry

## Discography

***Mystic Dance - a Celtic Celebration***  
Maggie's Music MM111

***Merrily Greet the Time***  
Maggie's Music MM228

***Celtic Meditations: Into the Light***  
Maggie's Music MM302

***A Scottish Christmas***  
**(with Bonnie Rideout and others)**  
Sony/BMG/Maggie's Music Scottish DVD

***A Traveler's Dream***  
Maggie's Music MM110

***A Scottish Christmas***  
**(with Bonnie Rideout & Al Petteway)**  
Maggie's Music MM215

***Dance Upon the Shore***  
Maggie's Music MM109



***Ancient Noels (with Ensemble Galilei)***  
Maggie's Music MM108

***Music in the Great Hall***  
**(with Ensemble Galilei)**  
Maggie's Music MM107

***Mist and Stone***  
Maggie's Music MM106

***Sounds of the Season II***  
Maggie's Music MM105

***Traditions***  
Maggie's Music MM104

***Sounds of the Season***  
Maggie's Music MM103

Maggie Sansone also appears on many recordings by other Maggie's Music artists.  
[www.maggiesmusic.com](http://www.maggiesmusic.com)

O'Sullivan. The City of Washington Pipe Band got into the act on some occasions. The visual appeal of the show, meanwhile, was spiced up with costumed Highland dancers. The final result was so good that when BMG, one of the largest music and entertainment enterprises in the world, was looking to release a Christmas music DVD, Sansone and Rideout were able to convince the company that "A Scottish Christmas" was its ideal product. In 2000, BMG and Maggie's Music jointly produced and filmed a concert, which was released on DVD as *A Scottish Christmas*.

Since the DVD release, Sansone has left the touring company of "A Scottish Christmas" (which under Rideout's direction is already booked through the 2008 season). Rideout has recorded a sequel album for her new Tulloch Music label, which does not feature Sansone. But Sansone learned a lot from the whole experience, and performs a good many themed concerts during the year, such as "Samhain — A Celtic New Year" for Halloween; "Celtic Christmas Celebration Concert" for Christmas; "Mystic Dance" (based on music from her newest CD) year-round; and others. In 2005, Sansone also produced a special concert called "The Celtic-Americana Hammered Dulcimer Extravaganza." "It was so unique that it received a lot of media attention," she said, "and we were called 'the monsters of the hammered dulcimer.'" It included all four hammered-dulcimer players on the Maggie's Music label (Kolodner, Marshall, Ashbrook, and Sansone), along with many other folk musicians.

Sansone has also continued to record her own music, and to head up the label. Of her solo albums, the most successful artistically are also her two latest works. On *A Traveler's Dream*, she began to experiment with new techniques specific to the hammered dulcimer. "Producer Bobby Read and I set out to expand the instrument's musical palette by using pedal dampers, different kinds of hammers and striking surfaces, and techniques like bending and plucking strings with picks and fingers and layering multiple parts," she explained. In addition, she experimented with ostinato patterns underlying several tunes, played on the dulcimer, marimba, and xylophone.

*Mystic Dance* is Sansone's latest solo recording. It includes improvisations on the hammered dulcimer, and also music played on the Persian santur, a precursor to the Western hammered dulcimer. "I love the improvisations because they were done live in the studio without any pre-planning," she recalled. "I sat between my two loves (the Persian santur and the American-made hammered dulcimer) and



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created a musical dialogue that was a spontaneous and creative experience." The CD is subtitled "A Celtic Celebration," and also features Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Northumbrian tunes, and, for her medievalist fans, a medley of courtly love songs from German and Provençal sources.

In addition to these solo projects, Sansone was excited to tell me about her label's most recent seasonal release, *Merrily Greet the Time*, which was the first recording that came out of the XM Radio studios in Washington, D.C. It was a collaboration between NPR's early-music radio host, Robert Aubrey Davis (who also does folk programming in the D.C. area and by satellite) and Maggie's Music, and was recorded live at the XM studio. "It started

as a live recording intended for broadcast, with me and Sue Richards and members of Ceoltoiri plus guest cello player Ralph Gordon," she explained. "The recording was so good that we decided to release it as a CD, and Robert wrote the extensive liner notes." The theme of the album is "Seasonal Music from Autumn Equinox to New Year," and it includes seasonally appropriate Celtic tunes for the period from harvest time to the winter solstice.

Sansone is still an active performer, and has recently put together a lineup of musicians from the Washington/Baltimore area to play her local concerts. They include singer Lisa Moscatiello, fiddler Rosie Shipley, flute player Laura Byrne, and cellist Fred Lieder. Whenever she can, she invites various labelmates such as Sue Richards and friends such as Billy McComiskey, and rounds out the show with some Irish step dancers. She is also in demand as a purely solo artist and as a teacher. "As a soloist, I perform and teach throughout the U.S.A.," she added. "This summer I'll be one of the featured teachers at the Swannanoa Gathering in Asheville, North Carolina."

What does the future hold for Maggie Sansone and her label? Personally, she has never stopped being fascinated by musical instruments, and she likes to learn new ones. Her recent new instruments are clarinet and the Scottish small pipes, a small bellows-blown bagpipe. She acquired a set from Colin Ross, a piper and pipe maker in Northumberland, England, who has spearheaded a revival of smallpipes in such groups as the High Level Ranters. She plans to keep mastering new instruments whenever she can. She also plans to continue composing and improvising, recording her own albums, and keeping up with current trends. As for the label, "We are getting on the digital download-wagon," she explained. "We are high-tech folkies, and you can find our music on Apple iTunes and various Internet sites, as well as in small ma-and-pa gift shops.

"Here's the real story," she finished. "We are happy about what we do, no matter what the trends are. Everyone at Maggie's Music, from the shipper on up, knows and loves this music. That's what keeps us afloat."

