

Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1991 - Alan Mager

This issue of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is dedicated in honor of Alan Mager, who is equally talented in the roles of performer, instructor and music journalist. Alan has always been fascinated with music. At the age of nineteen months, he cut his first record, an a cappella version of *I'm Looking Over a Four-leaf Clover*, in a do-it-yourself recording booth. Shocked by the sound of his own voice, it wasn't until forty-five years later that he was able to stand before a microphone again. This time it was to record his album *The Fairhaired Boy*, which was released last summer. Alan says that he doesn't plan to wait another forty-five years before going back into the studio again.

Alan took piano lessons for several years, as a child. "Fortunately," he says, "I had a teacher who put a lot of emphasis on learning chords. When I finally stumbled onto the autoharp, this gave me an instant understanding of how that instrument worked." Alan first "stumbled" onto the autoharp in 1962. At that time he was a stereotypical early nineteen sixties folk singer, playing guitar and singing in coffeehouses and clubs in his home state of Massachusetts. "I needed another sound," he recalls, "and saw a black, A-model 'harp in the Sears catalog. I'd never seen an autoharp or heard one played, but it was only \$25.00, and it looked interesting, so I ordered it." Alan taught himself to play with a basic pinch-strum style and incorporated the 'harp into his folk singing routine. Later in that decade, practical matters such as marriage, raising a family and building a career caused him to drift away from folk music. He gave away his guitar and autoharp. The piano remained as his only musical outlet.

Then, in 1984, he heard Bryan Bowers perform for the first time. "I just sat there with my mouth open," says Alan. "Until that night, the autoharp, to me, wasn't good for anything more than a simple, pleasant pinch-strum accompaniment for singing. I had no idea it could produce such beautiful music." The next day, Alan bought a new 'harp, and began to explore its previously hidden possibilities. "In time," he says, "I found that virtually any kind of music sounds good on the autoharp."

Indeed, Alan's autoharp repertoire is extremely varied. He plays old time, bluegrass, Irish, classical, and ragtime music as well as blues, show tunes, and soft rock. He likes the versatility of a chromatic autoharp but enjoys the beauty of diatonic instruments, too.

A former school teacher, Alan has discovered that teaching autoharp is one of his strengths. For several years, he has taught group and private lessons in Northern Virginia. He has also led workshops and performed at many music festivals in the eastern United States.

For the past two years, Alan has been on the staff of *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine as editor of the Interaction Lesson feature. He has also had his musical arrangements published in *Autoharp Quarterly* and in *The Autoharpoholic*.

October 2008 Update:

A few months after this article appeared in AC, Alan entered his first autoharp contest at the inaugural Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. He was surprised and delighted to finish in the

top five and was thus bitten by the contest bug. Later that year, he took third place in the International Autoharp Championship and returned to Winfield in 1992 and 1993 where, in succession, he took the second- and first-place trophies. Alan also had continued success in the Mountain Laurel contest taking third twice and second twice before finally winning the contest in 2001.

Alan released his second album, *Hear the Colors*, in 1996, and his playing has been featured on other albums including *Music from Autoharp Quarterly*, Volumes 2 and 3 and *Autoharp Legacy*.

After serving as *Autoharp Quarterly's* interaction lesson editor for several years, Alan later joined with Karla Armstrong to provide that publication with its regular feature, "*Colorfully Chromatic*." Over the years, Alan was a frequent contributor of articles and musical arrangements to *Autoharp Clearinghouse* and *The Autoharpoholic* as well as to *AQ*.

In recent years, Alan has drifted away from the autoharp and now performs only rarely. He and his wife, Janice, are happily retired in a large 55+ community in northern Virginia where they are avid bridge players. To feed his appetite for the creative, Alan has been heavily involved for the past several years in his community's Little Theater group as an actor, director and set designer. Most recently, he played the lead in A. R. Gurney's *Love Letters*. Alan has also renewed his interest in oil painting and will be participating in his first art show in November, where he plans to sit in his booth and play his 'harps to help attract people to look at his paintings.

Alan's recordings are still available directly from him as follows:

The Fairhaired Boy Cassette only \$12

Hear the Colors CD \$17

Hear the Colors Cassette \$12

(all prices include shipping & handling)

Send check or money order to:

Alan Mager
13739 Currant Loop
Gainesville, VA 20155

You can also contact Alan by phone at 703-743-5436 or e-mail at <alanmager@comcast.net.>