

Autoharp Clearinghouse – August/September 1997 – Alex Usher

Alex Usher has been quoted as comparing the playing of the autoharp with holding a purring cat because one can feel the instrument's vibrations as well as hearing its full, soothing sound. Although the autoharp had passed briefly through her life on a prior occasion, the instrument didn't become a permanent fixture until many years later. Alex has more than made up for lost time, however, by having released a recording called *Harper's Ferry*, taking first prize in 1993 in the National Autoharp Competition held annually at Avoca, Iowa, and placing third in the International Autoharp Championship at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas in 1993 and 1996. She has given workshops at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, the Wisconsin Stringalong, the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in New York and at the Memphis Dulcimer Festival. Her most recent undertaking has been to write a book for Mel Bay Publications (with companion CD) entitled *Basic Melodic Autoharp Solos*. When Alex and her husband, Rich, are not on the road traveling to competitions and festivals, she works as a professional musician. Teaching others to play the autoharp by way of private lessons at a store called Music Folk in Webster Groves, Missouri is still another facet of her musicianship. Alex is also available to play for club meetings, weddings, private parties and at extended-care facilities. Listen now as she gives us a little more insight concerning her earlier days and her musical development. (Editor's note: True to form, Alex wrote the following self-profile on the back of crossword puzzles photocopied from the *New York Times Magazine* while "motoring" down the highway in the couple's camper. ER)

When asked to tell something about myself, I wondered what would be of interest to you nice readers, and then remembered my penchant for reading biographies--autobiographies in particular--and realized that what is commonplace to me might pique others' curiosity. What in my journey to maturity pulled me along a musical path? Why am I me?

First, I give thanks to the good Lord for the gifts he has given me--not just in talent and health, but for seeing that I arrived safely into my parents' care on a crisp New Year's Day. My three-year-old brother must have been less pleased than my mother and father, but he has been kind enough never to have let it show. Our tall Victorian yellow-brick house in St. Louis was a happy place to grow up--full of nooks and crannies for children to hide in and giggle. The third floor, however, was off-limits except by special invitation, for it was there that my father worked in his profession as a portrait painter and my mother, a ballerina, did her barre exercises. We were taught a respect for the pursuit of the arts, and encouraged in every way to be creative. I remember a continuum of classical music on the Victrola, my mother swooping me up, and the swirling feeling of the dips and turns as she waltzed me around the living room. Sometimes, she gave dance lessons and included me. Before she was married at age thirty-eight, she had taught dancing to poor children in the city through a public playgrounds program. Her family was musical--they sang and played the piano--but not professionally--for that was not acceptable to those of "refinement."

With my father's people it was different, however. His father, a bon vivant, on his graduation from West Point in 1881 was posted out to Cheyenne, Wyoming in Indian Territory. It was there that he met and married the sixteen-year-old daughter of a pioneer in the Wild West--much to the horror of the wealthy and "respectable" Richmond, Indiana grandparents who had raised him. These same grandparents saw to it that my father, as a small boy, was sent to eastern boarding schools after the death of his father. This released his mother to pursue a dreamed-of life on the stage in New York City. So, he seldom saw her, although he wistfully told me that she was a sweet person and sang *Sweet Alice Ben Bolt* charmingly.

When I was about ten, my mother's spinster sister, Julia, joined our household. She was a piano teacher, so of course I was targeted to profit from her expertise. I proved to be a recalcitrant pupil with an eye and ear that kept wandering to the sights and sounds of the children playing outside, so the project was abandoned. As an adult, I've always regretted having not taken advantage of that opportunity, for I've never been able to sight-read easily on the piano. As a teen, I sang in the high school chorus and delighted in singing with a neighborhood friend with whom I made up harmony parts. In college, I continued singing not just in the chorus, but started a close-harmony female quartet. My one venture in taking a music theory course was a near disaster. I barely squeaked by with a C-- for putting names on all the familiar notes and chords--parsing the music--was akin to pulling the wings off a living butterfly. I still don't get it?

The college musical experience that **did** move me was hearing a concert by a dynamic and jolly singer and balalaika player the fall of my sophomore year. I went back to the dormitory in great excitement and sent a letter to my parents--who had been asking what I wanted for Christmas. They dutifully got me a Montgomery Ward steel-string guitar and a "how-to-play-it" book. About the only folk musicians around at that time were Susan Read, Burl Ives and Richard Dyer-Bennet. Carl Sandberg's *American Songbag* had just been published. I saturated myself with the joys of making music, and found it to be a fine social attribute. So fine, in fact, that the high-school-wallflower-turned-social-butterfly went on a round of playing and singing around the Wellesley Campus and all the way into Boston at Harvard where my brother was a student. It is no wonder that I flunked out at the end of that school year!

Back home in St. Louis, I clerked in a bookstore and continued performing. I sang on a national radio quiz show broadcast from a local movie emporium--at which time I won a wire recorder, an oil painting set, fifty pairs of nylon stockings and five hundred *Whiz* candy bars. Every week, another hundred of them were delivered by a postman with a quizzical grin on his face. I would run them over to the local orphanage, where they were received by another bemused, yet gracious, person.

The next year I married Rich, who was then getting a Ph.D. in History at Cornell--where we sang in the Sage Chapel Choir. We eventually ended up back in St. Louis and our children, three sons and a daughter, came along. All the while, I was doing programs of traditional folk songs, accompanying myself on the guitar. I performed in the National Folk Festival, for myriad club meetings, church groups, school shows, and at the opening of Busch Stadium--where I got to sit in the pristine Cardinals dugout **before** it was christened with tobacco juice.

I talked Rich into buying a beautiful S.S. Stewart banjo I had spotted in a violin store, and we began performing as a duo. One by one the children, who took violin, piano and cello lessons, taught themselves to play folk instruments and we became a family troupe on stage. When the folk revival era began, we rode the crest--even though we never picked up on the modern folk repertoire. Although we did perform several times at the Fox Hollow Festival in New York State and at the Florida Folk Festival, music was primarily a professional avocation, and we seldom traveled outside the St. Louis area.

It was at Fox Hollow that I acquired my first autoharp--one that was made by Michael Autorino. I'm afraid my initial enthusiasm fizzled after several weeks of strumming, and it was relegated to the closet for a number of years. As time rolled on, I had brief affairs with a variety of other instruments including recorders, concertinas, tin whistles and accordions. The children grew up and headed off to college, and with them went the fiddles, mandolins, mandocello and hammered dulcimer.

Then came the dreadful day in October of 1973 when I picked up the phone and was told that our second son, Scott, had just been killed in an automobile accident while coming home from college for a surprise visit. Just several weeks before, he had stood in our hallway jamming with a fellow fiddler who was an Irish champion. We were devastated.

That was the same year our oldest son, Dave, graduated from college. His younger brother and sister, Chris and Shana, were in the fourth and sixth grades respectively. We decided to take a family trip to Ireland and touch base with all the folks from the Emerald Isle that we had housed during their American tours. In Dundalk, County Louth, those dear people had a reception for us at the local hotel. The bands rollicked forth waves of jigs and reels, and we ended up cradled in loving arms. As they played the Irish and American national anthems, as well as *Auld Lang Syne*, we wept tears of gratitude.

Through those years of grief, I became "The Music Lady" at the St. Louis Children's Hospital where, two days a week, I went from room to room singing to the patients. Somehow, I was protected from dwelling on the sad physical condition of those little people and saw only their bright souls shining through.

Ten years ago at the annual dinner of the American Banjo Fraternity, I sat next to a vivacious lady with sparkling blue eyes. We struck up a conversation, and I asked her what she did? It seems she played the autoharp and was just starting an autoharp magazine. Of course, it was Mary Lou Orthey. I became one of her first subscribers, got my 'harp out of the closet, and taught myself to **really** play it this time around.

In teaching myself to play melody, I was reminded of the technical problems I had encountered in striving to learn other instruments on my own, and resolved to work for efficiency in everything I did on the autoharp. I kept a journal and, every time I had a breakthrough or insight, I wrote it down. These notes became the basis of my book--Mel Bay's *Basic Melodic Autoharp Solos*. It has just been published, and it is my hope that it will enable countless beginning players to learn to play tunes and to enjoy this wonderful instrument to the fullest! **AU**

Review of Above-Mentioned Recording/Book from Same Issue

All Through The Night • Amazing Grace • Battle Hymn Of The Republic • Beautiful Brown Eyes • The Bells Of St. Mary's • Brahms' Lullaby • Darling Nelly Gray • Down In The Valley • Du, Du, Liegst Mir Im Herzen • Go Tell Aunt Rhody • Grandfather's Clock • Home, Sweet Home • Jesus Loves Me • Jingle Bells • Kumbaya • Long, Long Ago • Mango Walk • My Old Kentucky Home • Oh, How Lovely Is The Evening • Oh! Susannah • On Top Of Old Smoky • Plaisir D'Amour • Scotland's Burning • Silent Night • Skip To My Lou • Sweet Hour Of Prayer • What A Friend We Have In Jesus • When The Saints Go Marching In • Wildwood Flower

Basic Melodic Autoharp Solos, as briefly mentioned in this issue's cover story, is an instructional songbook and CD set done by the well-qualified autoharp player and teacher **Alex Usher**. To the project's immediate credit is the fact that every song is arranged for **melody** playing. To quote Alex--"I **only** teach melody playing for I've found that pupils who learn to play tunes can easily work out accompaniment--but the reverse is not true." Amen to that statement. Few undertakings are more futile than trying to "convert" someone who has been playing "boom chukkas" for years on end--and thinks that's all there is to playing the autoharp. (Been there and attempted to do that.)

The songs/tunes incorporated here are largely set in a traditional format, with interesting variations in time and tempo. Where appropriate, lyrics to all the verses are included as a reference for those who might wish to sing. The rhythm chords are underlined, and helpful hints regarding each piece are given as the book progresses. There is **no** commentary on the recording.

Alex has considerably introduced the selections according to their respective level of difficulty. Since this project is aimed at beginning and early intermediate players, the melodies are played very slowly on the CD and then, in most instances, repeated at a more up-to-tempo pace. I found the recording close enough in tuning to my autoharps that I was able to play along. To accomplish this, I wore an earphone in my right ear and listened to **my** 'harp with the left ear. Whatever works. The written arrangements have purposely been kept simple, with pupils being encouraged to "embellish" after mastering the basics. Alex is very adamant in respect to the "crawl before you can walk" theory, with which I wholeheartedly agree.

I would classify the concept of this book as a Technicolor variation of the Nashville Notation System. By that, I mean that Alex refers to the chords as one, four, five-seventh and so forth to better enable her students to transpose the pieces to any other autoharp-friendly or vocally-compatible key. I'm with her so far. But then, instead of noting the chords thus, Alex uses a different color to identify each chord (orange for the one chord, green for the five-seventh, yellow for the four chord, etc.). For starters, this requires getting either a set of marking pens or colored pencils and "color coding" each arrangement. (I found that the "magic markers" bled through the page, so would suggest that colored pencils be used instead.) The idea is that you will see the colored tablature with your peripheral vision, thereby allowing your eyes to follow the notes on the staff. According to the text, "The human mind identifies color directly, but requires a slower intellectual process to identify chord names or symbols."

I should qualify the following by saying that I am dyslexic and often experience difficulty in grasping unfamiliar techniques. Although I managed fairly well with the three- or four-chord tunes, beyond that I couldn't seem to remember designations such as red for the six minor, "orange outline" for the one-seventh and "purple on blue" for the two minor chord. Perhaps a student starting from square one would be more successful? The question also arises as to how one transfers from this method to the playing of "mainstream" autoharp arrangements from other sources? Is this color thing a breakthrough--or just another "crutch?" (The instruction books of Meg Peterson and Clay Jones come to mind--wherein one was taught to play our instrument by numbering the autoharp's strings.) Time will tell. Meanwhile, I think I'll "cheat" and mark I, IV, V7 and such in my book! **ER**