

Autoharp Clearinghouse - December 1991/January 1992 - Billy Garrison

This issue is dedicated, with respect and admiration, to Billy Garrison. His story is a touching and inspirational one, and it is presented here verbatim as submitted by Billy. He is a lovely person and a talented musician. However, Billy tends to be “over the top” on some issues. The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* respects the right of each person to worship as they chose. The views expressed in these pages are not necessarily those of this publication. **ER**

"My introduction to the autoharp took place somewhere around 1964 or 1965 when I saw the folk group Ian and Sylvia (Tyson) play one. Of course, at that time, about the only autoharps out there were the A-model black ones and I wasn't too impressed by the instrument at that time.

I played folk music on the guitar--a kind of folk blues--during the late sixties. In Florida, I worked at a coffee house called The House Of Pegasus. Also, I was quite involved at the Catacombs, the Euphoria, the Flick and the Gaslight coffee houses. From Florida, my travels carried me to Greenwich Village, where I played for three months at the Cafe Wha and other establishments there.

After returning briefly to Florida, my travels then took me to San Francisco and the Haight Ashbury district, where I lived for one year (1968-69) playing coffee houses and being a hippie. At that time, I returned once again to Florida, but I had begun taking drugs and my music had started to decline. It was very subtle at first, but the drug use eventually got stronger until it became my lifestyle.

In 1969, one month before Woodstock, I began to search myself and really began to seek if there actually was a God. Then, on Easter Sunday, I found Jesus Christ as my Savior and was filled with the Holy Spirit--totally delivering me from drugs. For that reason, my life is so wrapped up with Jesus Christ--because he set me free and gave me victory over drug addiction.

From 1969 through 1976, I worked with World Ministry Outreach, a Christian ministry to the street people of south Florida. I was still playing the guitar and singing inspirational music at this time, as well as writing many Christian songs during this period.

In 1977, I went through a divorce and, in 1979, moved to Wichita, Kansas to be closer to my children. In that city, I was working with our church radio broadcast and also with the college radio station KMUW. While at the college, I took a folk music course that was offered. Bryan Bowers came and did a concert and introduced me to the diatonic autoharp. After his show, he let me play one of his 'harps and I've been in love with the instrument ever since. The next day, I went to the local pawn shop and traded my shotgun for an autoharp.

In 1981, I moved to Dallas, Texas to attend the Christ For The Nations Institute. Just before classes started, I went to the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. It was there that Roz Brown showed me how to convert my chromatic pawn shop autoharp to a diatonic tuning. Since that time, my instrument of choice has been the diatonic autoharp. My ideal instrument would be a 40 string autoharp with every note in the double octaves to be doubled strings (excluding the bass note strings). It would have Brazilian rosewood on the back and sides, a spruce top,

off-white binding and, of course, 10-carat gold tuning pins! My favorite key configurations are D and A, C and G, F and C and G and D. I like an autoharp that plays in two keys. Bob Taylor's "Clapping Trees" instruments would be my first choice, followed by the American-made O.S. Festival Autoharps. I like the Orthey 'harps a lot and I'm also fond of Tom Morgan's autoharps, because Tom uses rosewood.

I add 3-5 lower gauge strings (thicker) to the bottom end of my 'harps because I like a fuller sounding instrument. But, I think the bottom D note on the O.S. Wildwood Flower is too low. I use cork and felt to lower the action on my chord bars. Sometime I use silicone glue on the chord bar felt, and sometime I don't. I feel that I don't need fine tuners as I can tune accurately enough without them. On occasion, I will use 2 violin tuners on my "off" note on the 2-key autoharps. In respect to my actual playing technique, I use a pinch primarily along with an alternating two-finger lick with the thumb playing bass. And, I have developed a method by which I can pluck the strings as one would on a standard harp.

Getting back to the autobiographical information, I met my present wife, Stacy, in the fall of 1981. She saw and heard me play the autoharp in the chapel service in Dallas and wanted to take lessons. Our relationship developed and we were married following that first year in school. After spending that summer in Atlanta, Georgia, we returned to Texas for our second year at the college. It was during this second year that I felt God calling me into music ministry. I was also involved with the North Texas Irish Music Festival and the Lone Star State Dulcimer Society.

After graduating from C.F.N.I., we stayed in the Dallas area for about two years, still visiting the college and singing in local churches and at folk festivals. It was during this period (1984-85) that we attended the Walnut Valley Festival together. I entered the autoharp competition both years and won second place on each occasion. We stayed in Texas until August of 1986, at which time we decided to move to Maine. Stacy is from Canada (Maritimes) and we wanted to be closer to her home for a while.

En route to Maine from Texas, we stopped and took part in the autoharp weekend at Mountain View, Arkansas. The people at the Ozark Folk Center are some of the most hospitable folks you could ever want to meet. I would highly recommend this facility to anyone who might be traveling near northern Arkansas. After leaving Mountain View, we stopped at the Carter Family Fold in Virginia. The museum was most interesting and, at the music store, we were fortunate to meet Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash.

Upon our arrival in Maine, we settled in South Portland. During our three years of residence there, we were affiliated with the Portland Folk Club, the Down East Dulcimer Festival, the New England Folk Festival and other music-related events and organizations. Of course, not much happens in Maine during the winter! But, being "snowed in" allows for a lot of practice time while waiting for the "spring thaw". And, spring always brings new festivals and opportunities. While in South Portland, I worked with S.P.T.V. making some local videos, singing sea songs and the like with autoharp accompaniment. My "crowning" achievements, while in the northeast, were the two cassette albums that I recorded. *Diatonic Autoharp* and *Home Of My Heart* were recorded at Fish Traks Studio in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. My favorite festival in Maine is

called The Common Ground Festival, which takes place in Windsor during the latter part of September.

While residing in Maine, I was invited to be an instructor at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops Intermediate/Advanced Autoharp Class in Elkins, West Virginia. I met a number of students from Florida while there and they told me about the folk music movement in that state. During the winter, I usually spent some time in the Sunshine State and, in 1988, I was hired to play at the Florida Folk Festival. That first year, I heard many performers singing about the declining natural resources of the state. That was something that had always bothered me, since I was a native Floridian. This consciousness brought forth a burst of ecologically-related songwriting during the next few years. It was the inspiration for *Home Of My Heart*, as well as a second album on that subject entitled *Ikaniuksalqi*. These two recordings, dedicated to the people of the peninsula, should be available early in 1992 as a double cassette.

We moved permanently to Florida in 1990, and I have basically played local festivals and environmental celebrations at state parks, Earth Day, Pioneer Festivals et cetera. Then, in June 1991, I felt that what I had to say about Florida was coming to an end, that the music was changing and that it was time for me to "move on" musically.

Now, I would like to share some personal thoughts with you: As I've stated before, I had lived in Texas and had attended Christ For The Nations Institute, feeling that God had called me into the ministry of music. Gradually through the years, I had slipped away from this calling through the playing of folk music. I now regularly attend the Orlando Christian Center and am totally dedicated to this ministry. During the summer of 1991, I lost almost everything, and had only the Lord Jesus to rely on. Through prayer and much time in the Bible--God's word--I have learned to have a pure music ministry wherein God is glorified and the Holy Spirit moves upon people.

One has to separate his or herself from this worldly system. Many people today who play folk music and sing gospel songs know nothing about God. I can't help but ask myself why do people do this? I also grew weary of the occult and sensual nature of some songs and stories that are heard at song swaps and festivals. My soul was very vexed at these times, and I feel I must speak out. A Christian is one who does not allow these worldly things to soil them. This can only be done by being born again by the Spirit of God. Being born again is when we realize that our own goodness does not equal that of God and, by our deeds, we can never have the righteousness of God and enter heaven.

Look to Jesus Christ, who is the righteousness of God, and who took all our sins and diseases on Him by His death on the cross. By accepting God's gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, we are born again. Faith is a person. And, He gives us the Power to live a Godly life by the filling of the Holy Spirit.

So now, my life is to give Him the glory in the music that He has given to me. I have been writing new songs of worship and praise and playing many on the autoharp. In the future, as the Lord leads, I may put out a cassette album of worship and praise with the autoharp, orchestra, choir--the works.

I think that would be great. Now, I will be playing more in churches than at festivals and maybe someday on the TBN Network. I believe Jesus is coming back to catch away the true church (His body of believers) very soon. If you are on the edge of deciding to live for Christ, don't wait. Make your decision to give Him your all today. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. O God, my heart is fixed and I will sing and give praise on my autoharp." ***Billy Garrison***