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I strongly suspect that God put musicians like **Bob Lewis** on earth to keep the rest of us autoharpers humble. Granted, Bob's standards are higher than most of us could ever hope to attain. However, by refusing to compromise his musical principles, Bob has achieved a sheer musical intensity that nears perfection. Known for his pristine tuning and impeccable diatonic playing techniques (not to mention his outstanding singing voice), he holds the dual titles of both *Mountain Laurel Autoharp Champion* AND *International Autoharp Champion*. AC is deeply honored to dedicate this issue in Bob's honor, and is proud to present his story. **ER**

I first started playing the autoharp in 1975. One evening after a banjo lesson, I spotted a 21-chord OS Autoharp in the music store and bought it for my lady, who wanted to play an instrument too. As a footnote, this 21-chord model had just been released that year. I had played guitar since 1962 and, having been self taught, had not really progressed beyond the basics. I had quickly gravitated to the twelve-string guitar because I liked the multiple string sound of the twelve-string. I'm sure that this musical taste is the source of my attraction to the autoharp. My interest in bluegrass banjo was short-lived, when I found that I couldn't identify with the sound and just wanted to play in the more melodious open tuning.

The autoharp that I had purchased quickly became mine, when my lady was intimidated at how quickly I got some music out of it. My guitar background and classical training gave me an advantage, but she didn't see it that way. I had decided that I wasn't likely to become an accomplished guitar player and wasn't motivated to pursue lessons. At the time I lived in York County, Pennsylvania, which was then a hotbed of bluegrass music. After being audience to several bluegrass performances, I decided that I wanted to play with the groups that often performed at a nearby tavern. It took awhile to catch on to the chord progressions and there was some resistance to the participation of an autoharp, but I eventually gained some regard as a good player. I performed bluegrass and fiddle music with various groups in the ensuing years until the local interest faded to country rock.

During this period I had acquired an electric *Appalachian* model in an effort to be heard. I used a bass booster and a chorus box but never found a sound that "worked." In about 1979 I bought my *Centurion*, which I still play. Like many early *Centurions*, the top of mine quickly caved in but not completely. It still provides the most satisfying sound for private playing of any 'harp that I have.

I attended the Philadelphia Folk Festival a few times where I met Drew Smith, Ivan Stiles, and Bill Bowes. I remember seeing the Ortheys there and looked at some of George's early *Liberty* 'harps. During the 1982 festival, Ivan had an Oscar Schmidt booth and showed me the new *Festival* diatonic model. Those were real poverty years for me so I didn't manage to buy a *Festival* until 1984. As it happened, I got one of the first G/D/A models with aluminum fine tuners. This instrument was made in Japan. I have always regretted missing the window on getting an American made *Festival*. I've only played one and could not convince the owner to sell it. He had pretty well trashed its appearance but it sounded great.

After purchasing my *Festival*, I sent my *Centurion* off for new strings and didn't take it out of the case again for about three years. I immediately found that the *Festival* diatonic had capabilities that were much better suited to the music I wanted to play and I started playing open notes spontaneously. I liked the cleaner sound of the diatonic and thereafter never played chromatic again.

My life took a quick left turn after I had completed some schooling and professional certification and began employment with a software company. I had been playing very little at this time but when I moved to California in 1987, I found many more opportunities to play ... always to appreciative and encouraging audiences. That was the year of my first attendance at the Summer Solstice Festival in Los Angeles, where I met Bill Bryant and Becky Blackley and attended workshops by Stevie Beck, Will Smith, and Cathy Barton. At this festival, I bought some felts from Becky's booth and thereafter embarked on my first diatonic conversion project, turning my *Centurion* into an F/C, using a 15-bar conversion kit that I had bought years before.

Only a month later, during a visit to see my father in Pennsylvania, I drove to Newport to investigate purchasing a new Orthey instrument. I learned by comparisons that the *Festival* that I owned was short on tone and volume. Well, of course I didn't leave Newport empty handed. I bought a G/D/A diatonic. A few months later I entered my first Winfield contest and a year later attended my first Orthey Gathering.

During this same period, I had subscribed to *The Autoharpoholic* and gotten caught up with the wealth of information that I had missed in earlier issues. This information inspired many instrument configuration and improvement projects. Having found the information on string physics to be incomplete, I did my own research and completed a program to calculate optimal string arrays for the autoharp. I first met Steve Young in 1988, finding that he had done some parallel work on string physics. Since Steve has a doctorate in physics he was a great resource in completing some of the finer points of the calculations.

During this same phase, I started using an electronic tuner, did most of my work on tuning systems, and now doubt if there's much I don't know about tuning and temperaments as applied to the autoharp. Steve Young was also influential with this effort.

Because of my awareness of the International Autoharp Championship, due to earlier encouragement from Ivan Stiles, contact with the Ortheys and ads in *The Autoharpoholic* magazine, I decided in 1987 to go to Winfield and give it a try. At that time my instrument of choice was my *Centurion* converted to F/C. That was the year that Mark Fackeldey won the championship. I learned both that I wasn't ready and that I needed an appropriate and mature style and choice of tunes to be competitive. It would be many years later that I would reach my goal of completing the unfinished business of being a Winfield champion.

I was privileged to win the second Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship in 1992 after placing third in the previous year. After, I believe, 7 attempts in 9 years; I won at Winfield in 1996.

My autoharp playing concentrates on the 'harp as a solo instrument. I sing songs, play breaks and backup, and know pretty well how to play in a band. However, my real interest is in how the autoharp sounds rather than being a preservationist of some tradition regarding how the autoharp has been used and therefore "should be" used. Musically I am bound by no rules except what I think is good musicianship, what I think would be well suited to the diatonic instrument, and what I think would ultimately be well regarded by other musicians whom I respect. My primary repertory interests are in traditional fiddle tunes and Irish airs and dances. I've written and published one song and composed a few tunes never performed in public or named for that matter. While at home I listen to classical music except for the folk music programs. Go figure.

As one of two living winners of both the Mountain Laurel and Winfield championships, I feel a responsibility to share what I've learned and what I believe is in the best interests of the autoharp's future and that of the less accomplished and experienced player. However, I find that it is not easy to be helpful when the majority of players have chromatic instruments and are more interested in chromatic repertoire than in the sound of their 'harps and playing shoulder-to-shoulder and tune-for-tune with other instruments. I would have to admit freely that I am neither an advocate nor an admirer of the chromatic autoharp sound. I respect and admire what a select few players can do with a chromatic 'harp and, should the opportunity arise, believe that I could judge chromatic playing objectively and fairly alongside diatonic 'harps. I believe that it is no accident that almost all of the most prominent players of the autoharp play exclusively diatonic. The sound is full and clean, the harmonics are controlled, and the predominant "thwick" sound of the chromatic 'harp is almost completely covered. It should be noted that, in my opinion, although no autoharp records very well, only the diatonic comes across well enough to be worth recording. I'll allow for some exceptions rather than have a chromatic player, whose music I actually respect, be insulted. All those who play and love their chromatic 'harps have my best wishes as long as they don't take their playing too seriously when using the autoharp for anything except live accompaniment of singing.

I want to acknowledge those who have had a significant influence on my playing. My earliest influence was Bryan Bowers followed by Drew Smith. I have several ideas incorporated from Charles Whitmer. Steve Young was a major influence. John Hollandsworth, Mike Fenton, Mark Fackeldey and June Maugery easily come to mind as well. Actually many more have influenced me to some extent and I am humbly grateful to all for their talent and accessibility.

To date I have not recorded anything for public release because I don't believe the result is serious music, either due to the sound of the recorded instrument or the integrity of my playing. I believe there are already too many vanity tapes and would like to produce a recording that was worth listening to more than once. If I were to do a recording, it would be targeted to a much larger market, so the role of the autoharp might be downplayed somewhat.

My future goals musically are more as a workshop advocate of the diatonic/melodic style and as a luthier. I have already done quite a bit of chord bar assembly work and expect to concentrate on that for a few years. I have some original ideas in the works and expect to have prototypes in circulation this summer. Participating in the Mountain Laurel festival has been the centerpiece of my musical year for a long time and I expect to continue. I hope to see you there. **RTL**

