

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - August 1992 - Bonnie Phipps

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* takes great pleasure in dedicating this issue to the very innovative and vivacious Bonnie Phipps. Her record album *Autoharpin'* has always occupied a place of honor in my music library, as has her *Beginning Autoharp Instruction Book*. Imagine my delight a few years back when Bonnie was among the instructors for the annual autoharp classes at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops. Enjoy now her story. **ER**

I am writing this at a Mother Folker rehearsal, during my breaks. Who are the Mother Folkers, you might ask? We are a group of twelve women who play acoustic music with folk roots, and put on an annual series of shows. We have the most carefully pronounced name in show business. We each lead two songs and choose from the pool of female musicians to play on our song. The styles range from folk, blues, jazz, originals, instrumentals, a cappella numbers, et cetera. It is a real variety show and a lot of fun! We have two albums out, *The Mother Folkers Live* and *Confluence*.

This is about the only time I could find to write this. I seem to be so busy all the time rehearsing, performing, marketing my new tape *Dinosaur Choir*, learning my computer, and booking Bonnie Phipps & The Elastic Band that I have little time for anything else...and it's all the fault of the autoharp!!!

In 1971, I heard Joe Corporan play the autoharp when I was in California, and I bought one immediately. I found I could play melody on it right away...much easier than I could on the guitar. Well, that was that. I was hooked. I played for hours at a time. I bought the only autoharp albums I could find at that time, *Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp*, and the Kilby Snow album, and learned every song. Then I began experimenting on my own, asking questions such as "How can I play guitar sounds on the autoharp?", or "How can the autoharp sound like a mandolin or a real harp or a ragtime guitar?" I think I discovered more on the autoharp by doing that than via any other endeavor.

My marriage split up in 1977, and my life was turned upside down. I was a teacher at the time, and it was emotionally hard for me to be with children, so I quit and took a transitional job at the Denver Folklore Center coordinating the music school. I also began playing autoharp six hours and more a day as it was such a tremendous release. Things started happening as a result of this effort. I began playing things on the instrument I'd never heard before. It would just happen, and I would think, "I wonder how I did that, and can I do it again?" I think it was similar to mediation and/or therapy, and I always felt good after playing.

My first professional gig, other than a few small local performances, was in 1980 traveling with the Chautauqua Arts Touring Company, sponsored by the Colorado Arts Council. They sent a troupe of performing and visual artists to a number of small towns during the summer. I was with the Groucho Sisters with Bonnie Carol on dulcimer, Ellen Audley on mandolin and guitar and me on autoharp. (Those ladies are in the Mother Folkers, too, as are Carla Sciaky, Mollie O'Brien and others.) After that tour, I was committed to making my living in the arts.

In 1981, I put together the first version of the Colorado Folk Ensemble featuring autoharp, cello, guitar, concertina and pennywhistle, and did a recording for Kicking Mule Records called *Autoharpin'*. The arrangements featured all of the instruments, with the autoharp taking center stage. Just before the record came out, I won the 1982 International Autoharp Championship in Winfield, Kansas. The next summer, I toured with a revised version of the ensemble (autoharp, cello, fiddle and guitar). While we were playing at the Hudson River Revival Festival, we were picked up by a talent scout from Columbia Artist Management. We toured for them for a few years playing theaters in the western states. During that time, we did another recording, *The Colorado Folk Ensemble*. That project never ended up on a label because, not long after we did it, the ensemble broke up. So, both *Autoharpin'* and *The Colorado Folk Ensemble* are out of print, although I do have a few copies of each of them on hand.

The reason those recordings are out of print is that I don't perform for adults anymore, except when I am with the Mother Folkers. I am now performing full time for children and their parents as Bonnie Phipps & The Elastic Band. I have three recordings available for children, *I Wuv You*, *Singing With Young Children* (songbook and tape), and my newest release, *Dinosaur Choir*. My playing style has changed a bit for the kids in that it's more rhythmic. I've been coming up with some interesting stop and chunk patterns that seem to suit the material. You see, I had been performing for children "on the side" all along because it seemed so natural and easy to me.

In 1988, I put together The Elastic Band, which consists of Randy Kelley (who can play anything with strings), and Scott Bennett, who played guitar with The Colorado Folk Ensemble. Scott, Randy and I all love to arrange, so our music is pretty sophisticated. We aim the lyrics at the kids, at the same time making certain that the arrangements are clever enough to entertain their parents. One time, we were figuring a three-part harmony for a song about eating chicken, and we decided to do the chorus at the end in chicken clucks instead of words. To this, we added chicken "body language" and, while it sounds silly, it got a lot of laughs.

We are touring quite a bit, performing in schools and theaters. So far, we've been in various locations in New England, as well as Florida, California, New Mexico, Las Vegas and Georgia. Future engagements will take us to Texas, Guam, and back to California and New Mexico....and, all because of the wonderful autoharp.

Thank You Charles Zimmermann for developing the autoharp, Joe Corporan for introducing me to the instrument, and Harry Fleishman for divorcing me. You have all changed my life!! Here's to music and laughter. **BP**

Note: For an in-depth interview with Bonnie Phipps by Becky Blackley, see *View from the Top* in the Winter 1992 issue of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine.

2008 Update:

Detailed information regarding what Bonnie has been doing in the eighteen years since the above article was published, along with contact info, is available at the following website:

<<http://www.bonniehipps.com/index.html>>