

Autoharp Clearinghouse - December 1995/January 1996 – Boyd Jackson

Boyd Jackson was born in New York City in 1932, but his parents moved back to their native West Virginia when he was two years old. His maternal grandparents, who were German immigrants, had a small farm nearby. During his boyhood years, Boyd spent many summers there and has fond memories of listening to his grandmother sit on the porch swing and play her harmonica--which she referred to as a “French harp.”

When he was in the seventh grade, Boyd thought he would like to play the clarinet. But, after a few lessons, it became apparent to the school music director that Boyd didn't read a note of music. Needless to say, his stint in the band was short lived. During his teens, Boyd bought a harmonica and taught himself to play it.

While in his sophomore year of high school, Boyd married the former Betty Summers. (The couple will soon celebrate their forty-seventh wedding anniversary. They have two grown children and seven grandchildren.) Following graduation Boyd enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, where he taught jet engine maintenance. Later, he served in Korea as crew chief on an F-86 Sabre Jet.

After his discharge from military service, Boyd went to work for the DuPont Corporation's Washington Works as a mechanic, and later worked with insulation. He stayed with that firm for more than thirty-five years before retiring in June of 1992.

The autoharp made its entrance into Boyd's life in a rather unique manner. He was walking along a street in downtown Parkersburg one day in the fall of 1965 when he happened to notice an unusual musical instrument in the window of a jewelry store--of all places. Curious as to what it was, Boyd couldn't resist going inside and asking the proprietor if he might have a closer look. Boyd says that, from the moment his fingers first caressed the instrument's strings, it was “love at first sound” between him and the autoharp. Back at home, he dropped some pretty strong hints as to what he wanted for Christmas that year--and his wish was granted.

In those days, recordings of autoharp music were scarcer than hen's teeth, and an aspiring player had about as much chance of finding a teacher as he or she did of winning the Irish Sweepstakes. After much searching, Boyd happened onto a phonograph record entitled *Instrumental Country Hymns by Cecil Null With His Electric Gospel Harp* (Decca DL 74934--long since out of print). Boyd literally wore that record out as he played it over and over, night after night, until he was able to duplicate every cut on the album by ear. Even today, Boyd's point of reference style wise is Cecil Null. (For those of you who may not know who Cecil is, he has been around autoharp circles almost as long as there have been autoharp circles!)

Himself no slouch, Boyd has made our instrument and its music an integral part of his life for the past three decades. As a dedicated member of the Sims Creek Baptist Church, where his brother-in-law is pastor, Boyd first “went public” with his music by participating in worship services there. Today, his music ministry graces the sanctuaries of many neighboring churches as well.

Because he firmly believes that we are meant to “give back” a portion of our God-given talents, Boyd never accepts compensation for playing at places of worship.

He will, however, take expense money for his public service gigs. For those occasions, his repertoire expands to include show tunes, waltzes, country songs, and nostalgic and sentimental old favorites. He also honors requests from his audiences. Since Boyd prefers not to sing, he lets the autoharp become his “voice.”

When the occasion presents itself, Boyd is more than qualified to perform in a professional atmosphere. Some of the venues where he has been honored to entertain include the National Convention Of American Baptists, the State Convention of the Kiwanis, the West Virginia State Oil and Gas Festival, the Parkersburg Holiday Inn, Cracker Barrel Restaurant, and for the Wildflower Pilgrimage at Blackwater Falls.

Every weekend from the first of May through October, Boyd may be found at the Craft Village on Blennerhasset Island. Located in the scenic Ohio River, this historic site is part of The Mountain State’s park system. Dressed in colonial attire, Boyd greets and entertains nearly 100,000 tourists every season. One visitor saw to it that Boyd’s first recording ended up in the hands of Mikhail Gorbachev. Her name was Susie Chang, and she is director of the Law Institute of Taiwan.

In order to be heard in an out-of-doors setting, Boyd exclusively plays electric instruments. He was first enamored with the amplified autoharp through listening to the previously-mentioned recording, and it has since become more or less his signature sound. During a series of in-person, over-the-phone and through-the-mail interviews, Boyd made it clear that he appreciates and enjoys hearing all styles of autoharp music. It’s just that the electric instrument best suits what he does.

When not actually “on duty” at the Craft Village, Boyd was, until recently, situated at the State Welcoming Center out on Interstate 77 meeting visitors and handing out pamphlets about the historic site. One might say that he is not only a dedicated ambassador for Blennerhasset Island, but also for the autoharp. Exposure is often paramount to success and, although Boyd rarely ventures beyond West Virginia with his music, his reputation has become widespread by word of mouth and through his recordings. He has also been the subject of several in-depth newspaper articles.

Boyd entered my life when I ordered his gospel tape from an ad in *The Autoharpoholic* magazine. We began corresponding and, as the saying goes, the rest is history. From the very beginning, I was impressed by the way that Boyd approaches every song with a reverence for both the material and for our instrument. His arrangements are always musically interesting and artistically gratifying. And, without exception, his playing style is in character with the nature of each song.

Over the years, Boyd has also developed quite a talent for woodworking. This led him to try his hand at building autoharps, three of which have found their way into his permanent collection. The ‘harp that Boyd most often favors was made from a tree felled the year he was born. It is a

15-chord chromatic model created from black walnut. He has also designed and made wooden string anchor plates for Oscar Schmidt B-Model autoharps, which feature either a rose or wheat pattern.

In the fall of 1994, Boyd composed a melody in honor of Blennerhasset Island. The paddle-wheelers Delta Queen, Mississippi Queen and American Queen stop at the Island as part of their Ohio River cruises, and there is a possibility that Boyd's song will be played onboard the vessels as they approach, and dock at, Blennerhasset. Through his kindness and generosity, an autoharp arrangement of that piece of music was presented with this article.

(In closing, Boyd wished to express the following sentiments: "Let us never cease to try and improve our playing, and to encourage others to try this wonderful instrument. We share a beautiful fellowship. Eileen, in a note, said that I had done a lot for the autoharp. But really, the autoharp has done even more for me. I leave you with this thought--Do what you love, and love what you do. **Make** the time to do it, as life is all too short. May God bless you all--and keep on playing!")

Discography

Hymns From The Heart #1--My Best To You: I Am Bound For The Promised Land . Shall We Gather At The River . Whispering Hope . Sweet Hour Of Prayer . It Is Well With My Soul . Battle Hymn Of The Republic . The Great Speckled Bird . Footsteps Of Jesus . Near The Cross . I Will Sing The Wondrous Story . What A Friend We Have In Jesus . Amazing Grace . Rock Of Ages . The Old Rugged Cross

Hymns From The Heart #2—My Best To You: Life's Railway to Heaven . The Bells of St. Mary's . Just As I Am . Nearer, My God to Thee . Fairest Lord Jesus . The Lily of the Valley . Jesus Loves Me . Blessed Assurance . Leaning on the Everlasting Arms . Above the Hills of Time . It is Well with My Soul . In the Sweet Bye and Bye . Bringing in the Sheaves – Under His Wings

Christmas On The Electric Autoharp: Silent Night . Good King Wenceslas . The First Noel . The Little Drummer Boy . O Little Town Of Bethlehem . O Christmas Tree . I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day . Away In A Manger . Joy To The World . It Came Upon A Midnight Clear . We Three Kings Of Orient Are . Angels We Have Heard On High . Hark! The Herald Angels Sing . O Come All Ye Faithful . Silver Bells

These albums eloquently capture the essence of Boyd Jackson and his music. The contact info I have is: Boyd Jackson, 5360 DuPont Road, Parkersburg, WV 26101 – (304) 863-3510. My copies of these recordings are in cassette tape format, but CDs may be available by this time? Do keep in mind that the above article was first published twelve years ago. **ER**