

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse March 1993 – Bryan Bowers**

When the decision was made to dedicate this issue to Bryan Bowers, it seemed appropriate to ask one of his close friends to tell Bryan's story in a manner that hadn't been done time and time again. Kathy Ferguson has played host to Bryan many times when he had performances booked in the Washington, DC and Northern Virginia areas. In recent years, she has also traveled extensively with Bryan as his relief driver. Last spring, when he was recovering from surgery, Kathy stepped in as his chauffeur and autoharp bellhop on a tour that might otherwise have been canceled. The information for the article that follows was gathered by Kathy during a visit with Bryan at his home in Washington State. ER

Bryan Bowers has deservedly been referred to as "Master of the Autoharp" and "Autoharp Virtuoso" by countless reviewers, music trade journals and other autoharp performers. I will not attempt to describe his talent or style since I am certain everyone who subscribes to this publication has already heard him play at a festival, concert or on a recording. If not, run, don't walk, to the nearest well-stocked record store and purchase one of his four recordings: *The View from Home . Home . Home on the Road . By Heart . For You.*

The first time I saw Bryan perform was at the Birchmere in Alexandria, Virginia, and I have been an avid fan of his ever since. I took the 1983 and 1984 week-long classes that Bryan and David Morris taught at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia, and have attended many of his concerts, workshops and festival performances since that time.

Bryan was born on 18 August 1940 in Yorktown, Virginia, and raised as an only child in nearby New Bohemia. His earliest exposures to music were the radio and the hired hands singing while they worked in the fields. As a child, Bryan says that their music was mesmerizing to him what with all of the field chants they did as they whiled away the long hot hours. He would go out and follow along behind and try to sing with them. It must have been odd, actually, to see a little white boy tagging along behind the gangs of black laborers singing *I'm Going Up North Satisfied*. There was also a variety of music at local barn dances, including waltzes, schottisches, polkas and fiddle tunes, plus Bryan experienced gospel music at area churches. In the 1950s, he sang the popular songs of that decade, and won a 4-H talent contest with his rendition of *I Believe*. There came a time, however, when Bryan got caught up in getting an education and participating in sports. He says he didn't consciously stop singing, but rather he just temporarily drifted away from it.

After Bryan's junior year at Randolph-Macon, he initially began playing guitar and then the autoharp. The first piece he learned was the spiritual, *Where the Soul of Man Never Dies*. He recalls being astounded at how good it felt to make those chords to accompany his singing. Within a week, his grades at school began to suffer and so did his basketball practice sessions. Bryan's desire to play music became an obsession as if it wasn't something he chose to do, but rather something he was compelled to do. In those early years, he even dreamt music.

Bryan started his career in music by singing and playing in small clubs. Through his friends, Bill Danoff and Taffy Nivert, he secured an audition and job at a club in the District of Columbia.

That was just prior to John Denver recording their song *Country Roads, Take Me Home*. Later, through Bill and Taffy, Bryan met John Denver and played a song for him that he had just written entitled “Berkeley Woman.” John liked it and recorded it on his RCA Records album *Farewell Andromeda* in 1973.

Other musicians who helped Bryan gain a wider audience were The Dillards. They were playing at the Cellar Door in Washington and, through a neighbor’s introduction, Bryan played the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* for them. They loved it and invited him to go to a bluegrass festival in Berryville, Virginia that weekend. He accepted, and The Dillards had Bryan play one of their encores. That was the first time he had been in front of a microphone performing for thousands of people, and it was a revelation. He realized that everything he had been doing in street singing and coffee house situations applied in front of a big crowd as well.

In respect to autoharp music, Mike Seeger, Kilby Snow and The Carter Family were all tremendous influences. Bryan saw Mike Seeger with the New Lost City Ramblers in Norfolk, Virginia playing a 3-finger picking style, and it was an eye opener for Bryan to watch Mike’s fingers move. Then, Mike “turned him on” to Kilby Snow and Bryan says he was just “blown away.” It was so beautiful the way Kilby played the ’harp with little runs in between the chords and sweet melodies. It was from the recordings of Mike, Kilby and the Original Carter Family that Bryan discovered the wonderful gift of mountain music.

Bryan treasures having met Mother Maybelle Carter. He was playing at a festival and, while on stage, could see off to the side Maybelle and her daughters getting ready to come on after him. He remembers that they were wearing long, gingham dresses. When Bryan finished his portion of the show, he left the stage with his autoharps and had to walk right past Maybelle. He wanted to introduce himself and say what a big fan he was of hers, but didn’t want to bother her since she was ready to go on stage. When he started to walk on by, she stepped into his path and looked right at him. Bryan recalls that it was like looking into his grandmother’s eyes. He felt really comfortable in her presence despite the fact that it was blazing hot and he was sweating profusely and had his arms full of autoharps. Maybelle told him, “Well, I never would have dreamed that such beautiful music could come out of those ’harps. You just keep on playing that thing, son. You really have the gift.” Talk about make your day...make your life would be more like it! Bryan still travels down to the Carter Fold in Hiltons, Virginia annually. He says it is a little slice of heaven to go down there, visit with friends old and new, and immerse himself in that culture and that music.

Bryan has made his living as a traveling musician for the past 25 years. He has performed on stage with The Dillards, Seldom Scene, John McCutcheon, Steve Goodman, John Prine, Leo Kittke and Kris Kristofferson. His concert tours have taken him to Alaska, Canada and most of the “Lower 48.” In 1987, as part of the State Department’s cultural exchange program, Bryan traveled to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Abu Dhabi for the U.S. Information Agency...going where no autoharps had dared to go before!

In addition to performing in concert, Bryan is a popular workshop instructor. As mentioned above, he has taught at the Augusta Heritage Center in West Virginia. In addition, Bryan has performed and led workshops at most of the major folk, old-time and bluegrass music festivals

such as the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, the Merle Watson Memorial Festival in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, the Sonoma County Folk Festival in Santa Rosa, California, the Red, White and Bluegrass Festival in Sebastopol, California and the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania...to name a few. Bryan has also conducted workshops for many of the autoharp clubs “from sea to shining sea.”

He doesn't view his role as trying to teach students to play as he does. Instead, Bryan wants to pass on things he has learned over the years that make playing easier. This would include proper tuning, maintaining comfort while playing through the use of a strap, how to avoid tension, keep picks from flying off and how to develop both right and left-hand techniques. Bryan wants students to be aware of the diversity of styles from the old-time way of playing right up to present day techniques. He says, I have had a lot of positive stuff come to me in my life, and workshops are a way for me to say ‘Thank you’ to the powers that be. It is my way of trying to put something back into the autoharp community for all the wonderful things that have come my way as a result of having fallen in love with this instrument. I really never even dreamed that I could have the kind of life that I enjoy these days where I can travel the world over playing, singing and telling stories. Yes, I am a lucky human being.”

As much as Bryan enjoys being on the road, he also relishes the time at home between tours. Home is a large three story plus basement house in Seattle overlooking Lake Washington. It was built in 1893. Bryan and his wife Jeri have done extensive renovations to it over the past eighteen years including routine scraping, sanding and polishing woodwork to replacing the roof and gutters. They even jacked the house up in order to repair the foundation and put in new sill beams. As you might imagine, there is a lot of maintenance required on older homes, but the Bowers especially enjoy its spaciousness. Bryan has a room for his autoharps and Jeri has one for her sewing in addition to an office and the usual living quarters.

Bryan and Jeri also own thirty acres in the country ninety miles north of Seattle, which is great for back-to-nature relaxing. It is in a little valley with a nice old growth of trees and a salmon stream running through the middle of it. While there, they can sleep out in a tent and hear coyotes almost every night. Also in the area are elk, deer, bears, squirrels, eagles, blue herons... and trout all year long. Bryan says that time spent in the country affords him a slower pace and some much-needed peacefulness.

Parked on the property is “Old Yeller,” the 1966 Chevrolet panel truck Bryan lived in for seven years before buying the house in Seattle (pictured on the cover of *Home, Home on the Road*). Bryan commented that he is hard pressed to let go of old friends and old vehicles that have served him well. Old Yeller took Bryan back and forth across the United States more times than he can count. It has 483,000 miles on it, has had three engines, and everything in it still works. Having been retired, the truck now serves as a storage area for their tent, tools and other items that Bryan and Jeri leave behind when returning to Seattle.

They also love fishing, boating, crabbing, reading, hiking and playing basketball with Bryan's son from a previous union, who lives nearby. The autoharp community is truly fortunate to have such a talented, dedicated and caring performer sharing his musical magic. Bryan encourages

players at all levels of ability to develop their own style and to enjoy this wonderful instrument.  
**Kathy Ferguson**

September 2007 Update: Sadly, since writing this article, Kathy Ferguson has passed away following a valiant battle with cancer. There have been changes in Bryan's life which are his stories to tell. Another recording entitled *Bristlecone Pine* has been released, and is available at: [www.autoharpquarterly.com](http://www.autoharpquarterly.com) or via telephone: (304) 387-0132. ER