

AC Cover Stories November 1998 – Carey Dubbert

Ever so often, an autoharpist comes to our attention who is equally proficient on one or more other instruments. So it is with **Carey Dubbert** who, in addition to having won the hammered dulcimer competition at Winfield, is becoming a force to be reckoned with in autoharp contests around the country. Carey's musicianship, on either instrument, is clean and innovative as well as being so comfortable to the ear that it is easy to overlook the incredible skill that creates it. The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is privileged to dedicate this issue in honor of Carey, and invites you to share the story of his musical journey. **ER**

My introduction to traditional stringed instruments came out of having lunch at a Northern California winery in 1985. Throughout the meal, there was beautiful music being played. I had only slightly noticed the woman playing the hammered dulcimer on my way in. The sound was new to me, but it caught my fancy and, after lunch, I got more information from the musician about her instrument. She (Claire Leverant) subsequently acquired my first dulcimer for me and gave me some lessons. Besides enjoying the sound of that instrument, it has provided me with an opportunity to exercise my percussion skills beyond drumming my fingers on the table. I played band and orchestral percussion all through high school and into college, and have found the dulcimer to have a much more socially-acceptable sound than a snare drum!

My father played percussion throughout his life. His experiences included providing percussive accompaniment (especially marimba) for silent movies and for Chautauqua traveling tent shows throughout Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. He was always a participant in local bands and orchestras. I grew up in Rochester, Minnesota. My dad listened to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on Saturdays and all the classical music to be found on the radio on Sundays. I learned to love the music, though I never had much of a feel for lyrics as the operas were always in foreign languages. From seventh grade on, I played snare drum, timpani, xylophone, and many other percussion instruments. My dad had a marimba in the front room, which I grew up learning to play. During my third year of college, I switched to bassoon. I majored in Music and Mathematics and, after graduation, went on to the Manhattan School of Music. There, I continued bassoon for a few more years heading towards playing that instrument with a symphony for the rest of my life. Then my life took quite a different turn and I stopped all playing, did computer programming for awhile, moved to California, and took a few years off to travel around the country in a converted bread truck. I began including folk and country/western into the music to which I listened. Then, some 20 years later, I heard Claire on her dulcimer.

After I had accomplished my first few tunes on the hammered dulcimer, I realized that learning unfamiliar music out of fiddle books was a mistake. It took me forever to memorize a tune and then, if I didn't like it, there wasn't much satisfaction in having learned it. As a result, I began learning from tapes. I did a lot of driving from home into the Napa Valley to work in the wineries. There was about ninety minutes of listening time in the car each day, so I started acquiring tunes from the recorded works of John McCutcheon, Malcolm Dalglish, and Bryan Bowers. (I can't remember why I had Bryan's tapes since I didn't play autoharp, but I had them and I loved his tunes.) While I'd be driving, when the tune ended, I'd press the "Rewind" button and count slowly. When I thought it was sufficiently rewound, I'd press the "Play" button. It

wouldn't take long to know about how long to count in order to get very close to the beginning. My wife, Ellindale, worried about the safety of all this, so she gave me a car radio which has a "Repeat" function that will play a particular tune over and over. Thereafter, I'd listen to the same tune for hours. That is still my preferred method of learning tunes, although I commute less now and have noticed that I am learning new tunes at a slower rate.

My hammered dulcimer music is a mix of styles including classical, fiddle tunes, hymns, and folk. For a few years, I played with four others in a group we called **Malarkey**. I was introduced to lots of Irish music, dance tunes and beautiful Gaelic songs. We produced an audio tape entitled *Thanks Dad*. In the late 1980s, a friend had told me about the Walnut Valley Festival at Winfield, Kansas. In 1990, I attended, with my hammered dulcimer in tow, and I won third place. While there, I found this delightful woman, Mary Lou Orthey, who invited me into her booth to chat. She introduced me around like she'd known me all my life. During that Winfield visit, I also made friends with a gentleman named Arne Langsetmo. He played hammered dulcimer and autoharp, both of which as I recall, he had made himself. At the end of the festival, while making my rounds of goodbyes, I asked Arne if he could show me something about the autoharp in five minutes or so. He handed me his 'harp, showed me three chord positions, and taught me the Shaker hymn, *Simple Gifts*. In those few moments, I was hooked. When I got home to Occidental, California, I borrowed an autoharp from a friend to make certain I liked it before buying one. For Christmas that year, Ellindale gave me a 21-chord Oscar Schmidt. This was an especially generous gift since she had made no secret of the fact that the autoharp was indeed not her favorite instrument.

In 1992, I returned to Winfield and placed first in the hammered dulcimer competition. I also entered the autoharp contest, with one of my tunes being *Simple Gifts*. I hadn't paid a lot of attention to the autoharpers the previous time at Winfield, so it was a real eye opener to hear the various competitors play. Once again, Mary Lou welcomed me into their area and, through her, I got to hear Ivan Stiles, Bob Lewis, Les Gustafson-Zook, Mary Lou herself, Mike Herr, Karen Mueller, and all who played at the evening *Otterharp Heaven* jams. I had, by that time, purchased an Orthey diatonic 'harp in the keys of Bb, F and C. It is made with redwood, and has a beautiful sound. I wasn't yet aware that the majority of autoharp tunes aren't arranged in those keys, so I couldn't play along for most of the jamming. However, each evening at the Orthey-hosted jams, Ivan would always include a couple of "F" songs just for me.

The next spring, I met Bill Bryant at a small craft fair near Sacramento. The deal was, that if you brought an instrument, you got in free. Bill and fifteen or twenty other autoharp players moved from place to place around the fair and played music. After an hour or two of struggling with tunes I didn't know, Bill pulled me out from behind the group and showed me how to watch the hands of a guitar player to tell what chords to play. It was like magic. I could play along with others for the first time, and it was such a joy. But, it meant I no longer had an excuse to hide out in the back row.

For a number of years now, I've been a performer and workshop leader on the hammered dulcimer and the autoharp at the Sonoma County Folk Festival in Santa Rosa, California. Bryan Bowers was a performer there one year and I got a chance to talk with him. We hit it off and, a year later, my friend and I hired Bryan to do a workshop. It was just the three of us, and it was great. At the same time, it was hard, as I had to confront the manner in which I react to being coached. I had asked Bryan to tutor me; however, after he told me the things he saw that would

improve my playing, I wasn't particularly eager to make the changes . But I did and, sure enough, substantial improvements showed up in my playing. (Among other things, I changed my key layout to what logically seemed a more advantageous system as it meant some portability from key to key. As a software designer, I love portability.)

My primary fascination with the autoharp is the chord sounds. In studying music in college, my favorite part of theory classes was that they all centered around Bach chorales, which are great examples of chord progressions. The autoharp was the first instrument that I had played which made a simple job of getting full chord sounds--and what great sounds they were. My initial tune to love and play a million times was the aforementioned *Simple Gifts*, and I was incredulous when Ellindale told me that she couldn't distinguish the melody in my playing. This really brought to my attention the importance of clean melody picking. I took to playing hymns and other sweet tunes, and developed some bars which allow for crystal clear melodies without disturbing the bass harmonies. Meeting Bob Lewis at Winfield was my next learning jump. He played *Fisher's Hornpipe* and knocked my socks off. I was trying some faster stuff and working on picking, and his playing was a great example of clean picking. I added a pick to my ring finger and also began picking some melodies by rocking between my thumb and index finger. I did not play the diatonic open style, but rather used my two special bars to pick clean melodies.* (I now wear picks on all five fingers, figuring that a digit won't even try to pluck a string if it isn't equipped with a pick.) I'm getting better and, since being at the MLAG and WVAG this year where I carefully watched Mark Fackeldey play, my last two fingers are beginning to be able to pick melodies, while my first and second fingers pick a middle line and my thumb picks a bass.

On my third trip to Winfield, I was there not only for the competition but also enrolled in a class that Bryan Bowers presented prior to the festival. In that session, I met Adam Miller, a great guy from the Bay Area who likes the same types of music that I do. Adam has since been my local playing inspiration. We get together every couple of months to play all the tunes we know in common as well as sharing our new favorites and specialty arrangements. Adam's playing is so light and clean that he keeps me "honest" as to when my melodies are-and-are-not easily distinguished. Adam has also been very instrumental the last couple of years in convincing me to attend both the Mountain Laurel and the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gatherings. It was at these events that I met Mike Fenton, Steve Young, Bonnie Phipps, and so many other fine musicians. Seeing and hearing other people play shows me what's feasible and, for the most part, if I know it's possible and I like the tune, I can learn to play it. Also, the competitive playing is a great experience in that I get to hear the tunes that are most dear to the other contestants while, at the same time, am afforded the opportunity to play for a large group of people who are really interested in, and knowledgeable of, autoharp playing.

A few years ago, while playing with Bryan Bowers and some of his friends, I had my introduction to playing with others and taking turns. On the hammered dulcimer, the tunes I played were selections I liked and had arranged. With the exception of my playing in the band *Malarkey*, I never much played with anyone else, so I didn't give a lot of consideration to what chords I chose. I played what I thought sounded good, and just made it all up to my own liking. My playing with Bryan also taught me about how chords move in a piece, and that it isn't the number of chords that are of prime importance, but rather using the correct chords at the right time. That concept changed the manner in which I learn tunes. I now master the chord progression first and **then** fit the melody to the foundation chords. With my two extra bars, I can play pretty much any diatonic melody over any chord in the same key. So now I usually begin a tune the first time through playing as cleanly and accurately as possible. Then I play variations of the piece, before ending with a clear statement of all or part of the melody.

I thank Eileen for inviting me to be featured in her great publication, and am equally grateful to all the people I have met, listened to, talked, played and tuned with, sat in awe of, and just plain appreciated. My life has been greatly enriched by knowing all of you who have been so very generous with your talents and friendship. And I thank my sweet Ellindale for her ever-present love and support.

*See *Dubbert's Anti-Mush Bars* in *Autoharp Quarterly*, Volume 8, Number 1, Fall 1995.

November 2007: A CD entitled *One of Mine* by Carey Dubbert features both autoharp and hammered dulcimer in "twenty mostly solo tunes." \$17.00 postpaid to: Carey Dubbert, 18000 Coleman Valley Road, Occidental, CA 95465. www.careydale.com for play list. **ER**

