

Autoharp Clearinghouse –December 1996/January 1997

Carole Outwater

Carol Outwater is yet another of the many treasured friends that I have met over the years at the Augusta Heritage Center in West Virginia. Our association has continued through subsequent meetings in Elkins, as well as at events such as the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Pennsylvania and North Carolina's Charlotte Folk Music Society activities. Carol's music has always impressed me as displaying a variety of influences. Whether playing autoharp, mountain dulcimer or acoustic bass, Carol invariably adds her own distinctive personal touch to all that she does. Not afraid of slower tempos, Carol is, in my opinion, an expert in the art of the waltz. However, she is equally adept at playing breakneck fiddle tunes with Mike Fenton or Cajun music as part of her current band. Carol is also highly-regarded in the field of music journalism, having had her writings published in several music trade journals. The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is honored to pay tribute to Carol's formidable and praiseworthy abilities by dedicating this issue in her honor. The story that follows is presented in her own words. **ER**

IT BEGAN WITH A CHILD

I found myself scurrying around the preschool looking for an autoharp. Autoharps had been present in my schools when I was growing up in the fifties. I'd even checked one out for a week from my college music department when I was taking a course in Music Instruction for teachers. I knew there would be some in my school...somewhere. Bingo! I found several ancient black relics and promptly discovered that they sounded like cigar box banjos with rubber band strings. I kept searching in storage rooms, and then found a blond beauty with its strings intact. In the box with it was a small Mother Maybelle sleeve of a long lost recording introducing the autoharp, and a book of childhood folk melodies and songs. This would do, I thought. I wasn't sure what to strum it with? The last person had obviously used a rubber gum eraser, for there were little pieces of gum fuzz all under the strings. But, it would suffice for now. As I strummed across the strings, it sounded pretty good to me. Yes, it would work nicely for Bryan.

Bryan was a child in my kindergarten class, and I needed something to challenge and channel his energy. I had discovered that he loved music, and I thought this might be just what we both needed. I was to find out that it was, indeed, just what we both needed--only I didn't know at the time that I needed the autoharp as much as he needed something to learn to play.

I carried the Sears Roebuck *Silvertone* model by Oscar Schmidt home and, together with my husband, Fisk, tuned it with the pitch pipe he used with his guitar. We decided on a three-chord song of Willie Nelson's that was popular at that time. My first tune on the autoharp became *Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys*.

Teachers are often just one step ahead of their students. At the same time I was mastering how to push buttons and change chords, I was also learning how to count out the beats. I had taken a couple of years of piano lessons when I was in elementary school but, for me, it surely didn't translate to strumming on the beat. I'd work on that autoharp at night, and then turn it over to

Bryan each morning. Within a few days, I was holding it up just like Mother Maybelle's picture on the sleeve of her introductory record.

Soon after I started playing, I discovered that a real gift came along with playing an autoharp. There is something very significant about holding an instrument so close to your heart and also so close to your ear. For me, the autoharp became a good way to express what I was feeling inside. One of my good friends was dying of cancer, and I was dealing with that impending loss. On the night before Navarra died, a handful of us gathered in her hospital room for a final party of sorts. In the evenings, I had been expanding my repertoire of songs, among which was *Amazing Grace*. It was beginning to be recognizable. That bleak Thanksgiving day in 1983, I took a big risk and decided to carry along my borrowed autoharp to the hospital. It felt foreign to carry a big, black chipboard case. As I entered the elevator to go upstairs to Navarra's room, I wondered what people would think I was carrying to her? I found out that it was just the thing to break the somber mood. Navarra loved music, and I sat down and showed her what I was learning. Everyone joined in on *Amazing Grace*. Before I left, I knew that I needed an autoharp of my own.

Fisk bought me an autoharp that Christmas, along with Meg Peterson's *Complete Method* book. During the holidays, I became an autoharp addict. I played in the morning and I played every evening. I played until my shoulder and arm muscles ached. I played every moment that my family wasn't around so that they wouldn't know how "hooked" I was on this instrument. I subscribed to *The Autoharpoholic* magazine and became aware of the existence of a bona fide autoharp community. Through that publication, I began to learn how to modify my 'harp so that it was easier to play. When I was ready to "come out of the closet," I discovered the fledgling Charlotte Folk Music Society--which was to become the true vehicle for my musical development. Through that organization, I joined a Sunday night Old Time Music Jam class which met at the local community college. At the time, I wasn't sure I even knew what Old Time music was, but I was willing to learn if I could just play along on my autoharp. That session was part of my musical life for ten years, and it was there that I discovered that I loved not only Old Time music, but also Celtic and Cajun music. Even more, I came to know so many great people who were willing to share their love of music, as well as others who were happy to teach and to pass this music on to all of us in the group so we might help to keep the music alive. Through CFMS and the Jam Class, I was introduced to jam sessions, performing, festivals, workshops and competitions. I anticipated summer like a child waits for Christmas, for that meant the festival season had arrived. Places like Fiddler's Grove, Mt. Airy, Latta Plantation, Galax, Augusta and Mountain Laurel became musical adventures...always fun.

Out of all those events emerged my participation with a wonderful traditional band called *The Annabelles* and, more recently, the current band I am with, *Carolina Gator Gumbo* (a Cajun dance band). I really cut my permanent autoharp teeth with *The Annabelles*...Vera Gamble, Dot Stiles, Martha Kiker and me. We all played autoharp (among other instruments, in some cases). Walking back from dinner one evening during a session at Augusta, we talked about starting an all-female autoharp band. We began with all of us playing our 'harps, but soon diversified to include mountain dulcimer, clawhammer banjo, guitar and bass. When Dot slipped on the ice, broke both of her wrists, and was unable to play for a time, we discovered her to be a sassy vocalist. Martha and Vera helped us work out chords and arrangements. Vera, primarily a guitar

player, would back me up for any competition I entered, and helped me to overcome my early battles with stage fright. After a couple of years with *The Annabelles*, I began to play the dulcimer and the upright bass along with the autoharp. Now, after several years in the Cajun band, I basically stick with the bass, occasionally adding a little Cajun autoharp. Although our instrument was not in any way a traditional Cajun instrument, I have found it to be very well accepted by Cajun musicians. In Louisiana, they are always happy to let me join in.

Bass is the instrument I prefer in a band setting or a jam session. However, the autoharp remains my first choice for solo playing. I prefer diatonic instruments, and own around eight autoharps. Those who know me well know that I favor waltzes and other slow melodic pieces. Give me a good waltz to learn, and I am content for a very long time. Mostly, I play the autoharp for my own pleasure, so I choose music that feeds my soul.

The autoharp has opened many doors for me...doors I would never have imagined on my own. Today, when I look back on all the music I've experienced in my life, I am both amazed and thankful. My life has certainly been richer for the music that has been laced throughout my days. I've carried and played my favorite F diatonic Orthey Dulci-Harp all over Russia. It has been my good fortune to have terrific instructors along the way. From my good friend and mentor Mike Fenton, I have been encouraged and inspired to find and develop my own style. I've learned to use my 'harp in creative ways in storytelling with children and adults, thanks to Fran Stallings. And, I've thrilled to that synchronistic feeling that Jean, Don, George, John and I have when our *Gator* band grooves into a rhythm lock while dancers are caught up in some kind of a powerful and magical happening. O Ye Yaille!

Oh, by the way, "little" Bryan just finished his first year at Wake Forest...majoring in music.
CO

Discography

Annabelles - Traditional Old Time and Celtic music - cassette only - Celtic Trader label

A Taste of Gator Gumbo - A spicy blend of traditional Cajun and Creole music - also a cassette

Carole may also be heard on the following two tapes:

Accent on Autoharp - A collection of autoharp favorites by Mike Fenton. Includes several cuts of backup bass, plus an autoharp duet with Carole and Mike. Mike Fenton's recordings may be purchased through: Heritage Records, Route 3, Box 290, Galax, VA 24333 - (540) 236-9249

Twenty Fifth Anniversary at Fiddlers' Grove - Celebrating the years of traditional music at this renowned Old Time Fiddlers' and Bluegrass Convention. Includes one autoharp track.

Carole's Autoharp Contest Wins

3rd place Fiddlers' Grove	1990
2nd place Mt. Airy	1992
1st place Fiddlers' Grove	1991

1st place Fiddlers' Grove	1992
1st place Fiddlers' Grove	1995

December 1996 Postscript:

The *Annabelles* do occasionally get together and play, but they are no longer performing--except once in a while at a church or other "special something."

The Cajun band is very active, playing primarily in and around their home region. All of the group's members have studied the music directly from Cajuns, either at Augusta or in southwestern Louisiana. They include dance instructors at their "big" gigs since they are, after all, a dance band. In addition, the *Gator* band has performed at various night spots and pubs, for weddings, in coffeehouses, and at festivals and area parks. One of their dances was video taped and shown on a television program sponsored by the Charlotte Folk Music Society.

January 2008 Update from Carole:

Carole made contact, at which time she provided me with the following updated information:

"I continue to use the autoharp in the college classes I teach for early childhood education teachers. I now have about one autoharp for every two students, and they do a great job after a few sessions. Like you, Eileen, I play gospel music on the autoharp in church with Fisk (husband) and some friends. I made a CD after winning the MLAG contest in 2002 entitled *Faces*. It includes some local Charlotte area musicians, as well as fellow autoharpers Bob Lewis, Mike Fenton and Martha Kiker. The recording is available either from me at www.carolinagatorgumbo.com or via the *Autoharp Quarterly Marketplace*. The Annabelles played a reunion concert as part of the Charlotte Folk Society's 25th anniversary gathering. My 'work' instrument with the Carolina Gator Gumbo band is bass for the most part but, every once in a while if the venue is right, I get to play autoharp on some of the wonderful Cajun or Creole waltzes that I love." CO