

## Cathy Barton-Para – Autoharp Clearinghouse November 1994

**Cathy Barton** began playing music when she entered elementary school. Her father, a career military man, was stationed in Hawaii at that time and the ukulele was taught there as part of the music curriculum. Cathy recalls learning all of the words to *Froggie Went A Courtin'*. Since that early introduction to stringed instruments, there has never been a time when one or more of them haven't been a part of Cathy's life. Although not themselves musicians, her parents both had a love for, and appreciation of, good music of all kinds. Cathy's father would regularly visit libraries on the various military bases and borrow a wide range of recordings. When he traveled to foreign countries on assignments, he brought home samples of the music from their respective cultures. Hence, Cathy absorbed some of her musicality from rather unlikely sources, and has never failed to do justice to those crazy-quilt influences.

Her older sister, Claudia, played guitar during the period in time when the folk revival was taking place. Cathy cites her sibling's collection of records by such artists of that era as Peter, Paul & Mary and Ian & Sylvia as being influential in fostering an awareness of that genre of music in her. Since the ukulele and guitar have numerous strings in common, it was a relatively smooth transition for Cathy to learn to play the latter-mentioned instrument by imitating her sister.

The family moved to Missouri when Cathy was between the sixth and seventh grades and, since that part of the country was (and is) a hotbed of traditional music, it was there that her interest in old-time and bluegrass music was first aroused. By that time, Cathy had taken up the banjo and credits a fiddler friend, Taylor McBaine, with influencing **her** playing through the way he approached his own instrument. Some of the tunes that she learned from Taylor are still an integral part of her repertoire. While in high school, Cathy saw the movie *Deliverance*, and shortly thereafter won a school-sponsored talent contest playing a one-person rendition of *Dueling Banjos*.

In 1973, Cathy's parents took her to the newly-constructed Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas. It was there that she was introduced to both the lap dulcimer and the autoharp. Lynn Young, brother of luthier Keith Young, was the first person that Cathy ever heard play our instrument. She recalls that his hands were so large that he seemed to have access to all of the strings without changing position, and that he played powerful versions of tunes such as *Victory Rag*. Also in Mountain View, Cathy heard Jean Simmons play autoharp and lap dulcimer with the Simmons Family Band. (Jean married, became Jean Simmons Jennings and played with the *Leatherwoods* band in that same area.)

Sufficiently intrigued with the sound of the instrument, Cathy ordered a 15-bar Oscar Schmidt Autoharp from the Sears Roebuck catalog. Later on, she was given a 21-chord Schmidt by a member of one of her audiences. The 'harp had belonged to the gentleman's wife, who lost her life in a plane crash. He thought so much of Cathy's music that he wanted her to have it. Understandably she was deeply touched as well as flattered by his act of kindness, and Cathy plays that instrument to this day.

Back at the Ozark Folk Center, through a chance meeting with performer Jimmy Driftwood, Cathy learned of an impending week-long folklore workshop at that facility and promptly signed up for it. While there, she made the acquaintance of a fiddler by the name of Kermit Moody who introduced Cathy to other musicians in the area. Among them was Aunt Ollie Gilbert, an octogenarian whose “claim to fame” was the fact that she had committed to memory over four hundred songs...the titles of which she carried on her person in the form of a little pocket-sized scroll.

Cathy enrolled in Stevens College, majoring in humanities. Having been enthralled by Aunt Ollie’s knowledge of folk songs, she herself undertook a field collection project of songs as part of her studies. It might be mentioned at this point that Cathy does not read music and plays all of her instruments either by ear or through memorization of the tunes and songs. She continues to cultivate this talent by way of ongoing exposure to multiple forms of music.

While at college, Cathy would spend her summers in Mountain View in an attempt to further her musical development while also continuing her education. It was there that she crossed paths with Grandpa and Ramona Jones (of Grand Ole Opry fame). Ramona needed a banjoist to play with her in a local crafts store during the tourist season, and Cathy was hired in that capacity. She would go back to school in the fall, and then return to Mountain View to play with Ramona each summer. During that period, Cathy also entertained at the Grandpa Jones Family Dinner Theater, as well as appearing on the *Nashville Now* television show with Ramona.

As part of a radio broadcast, Cathy heard a recording on which Bill Spence played *Flowers of Edinburgh* on the hammered dulcimer. It took significant effort, but Cathy finally located a source for Bill’s album and practically wore out the record. On its jacket was a picture of a hammered dulcimer from which Cathy’s father built one for her out of redwood. She says that she was always able to fairly easily move from one stringed instrument to another, and the hammered dulcimer was no exception. After playing that first dulcimer for about six months, her Dad improved upon its design and his craftsmanship and made her a better one.

An academically-trained folklorist as well as an accomplished multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, Cathy went to Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green after her college graduation and earned a Master’s Degree. In the interim, she worked for a year under Bill McNeil, the folklorist at the Ozark Folk Center. Cathy credits Bill with encouraging her to pursue folklore as a field of study.

**Dave Para**, whom Cathy married in 1979, is a native of Chicago. Like Cathy, the ukulele was his first instrument. Dave also had some piano lessons as a child, as well as a short stint on an electric organ. His father was an orchestra musician during the thirties, so music was always a part of their family life. During his high school years, Dave’s sister-in-law gave him her old guitar, after which he took some lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music there in the Windy City. Dave laid down his guitar for a number of years but, when he picked it back up, it was obvious that he had plenty to say.

Following his secondary education, Dave relocated to Columbia, Missouri in order to attend the state university. During his college years, Dave worked at and eventually manage the Chez

Coffeehouse, one of many such college town venues affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. It was in the line of duty there, booking talent to entertain each Friday and Saturday night, that Dave met Cathy, who had been playing at the Chez since she was a teenager. On one occasion, Cathy accompanied herself on autoharp while she sang, and had pre-recorded a harmony vocal and guitar line which she played on a portable tape recorder into a second microphone. It didn't take Dave long to realize that his girl needed a duet partner and, of course, he figured that **he** was just the man for the job! Practice sessions followed, with a performance for Dave's folklore class at the university being their first "gig" together.

After college graduation and his marriage to Cathy, Dave worked for several newspapers as a reporter, serving in an editorial capacity for the *Boonville Daily News*. He and Cathy would do road dates, performing over the weekend, and then have to drive all night coming home in order for Dave to be on the job at the newspaper Monday morning. Cathy was earning more working for Ramona Jones than Dave made as a journalist, so they decided to make music their business as well as their hobby. The rest, as they say, is history.

Still residing in Boonville, Missouri, Cathy and Dave have become popular and experienced musicians whose dynamic performances are acclaimed for their variety and expertise in both vocal and instrumental styles. They are not only good singers and pickers, but also good communicators. Their repertoire and informal audience rapport are marked by a special affection for traditional music.

During the course of their twenty odd year musical odyssey, Dave and Cathy's talents have taken them to festivals, clubs, concert halls, schools and recording and media studios across the United States and five European tours. Through a referral by Bob Everhart, who founded the National Traditional Country Music Association, Dave and Cathy's musicianship has been enjoyed in Holland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, France, England, Scotland and Wales. Cathy made it a point to say that she was extremely grateful to Bill Clifton for having "paved the way" for the autoharp abroad at that point in time.

Venues where Dave and Cathy have performed domestically include, in part, the Grand Masters Fiddle Contest (Nashville), *Hee Haw*, the Grand Ole Opry, the Ozark Folk Center, the Walnut Valley Festival in Kansas, the California Traditional Music Society's Concert Series and Summer Solstice Festival, the Old Songs Festival in New York, the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops in West Virginia, the Memphis Dulcimer Festival in Tennessee, the Greater Washington (DC) Folklore Society and many, many others. As you can see, their audiences have been as diverse as their repertoire.

A versatile duo, Dave and Cathy perform and conduct workshops with hammered and fretted dulcimers, banjo, guitar and autoharp as well as "found" instruments like bones, spoons, mouth bow and leaf (yes, LEAF). Their music ranges from hard-driving string band stuff to contemplative ballads and airs. They have a knack for finding unusual, rarely heard songs from both traditional and contemporary sources in their home region as well as from elsewhere in America and Europe. They have conducted topical workshops on such subjects as songs from the Carter Family, the Civil War, river lore, children's songs, Christmas music and Ozark ballads...to name a few.

Much of their Missouri music has been collected from some excellent and noted traditional musicians like fiddlers Art Galbraith and the aforementioned Taylor McBaine, gospel singer Thelma Conway, and collectors Max Hunter and Loman Cansler. This effort has graced them and their audiences with a heightened awareness of where their music comes from, and a genuine affection for material learned from good friends. With an informal performance style, Dave and Cathy demonstrate a workable combination of urban sophistication and rural sensitivity, playing in both settings with ease. Their anecdotal approach enlivens the contexts of their music.

Dave and Cathy also recognize their responsibility to introduce new audiences to folk music. Included on the artists-in-residence roster for the Missouri Arts Council for many years, they have done residencies and assembly programs in schools across the state.

A recognized master of the frailing banjo style, Cathy has twice won the Tennessee Old-Time Banjo Championship. The late Roy Acuff often called her his “favorite banjo player” because her playing reminded him of earlier country music sounds. Cathy can also be credited for some of the growing interest in the hammered dulcimer in the Midwest. In the mid 1970s, she introduced it to the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, and has since provided a number of current players with their first hearing of the instrument.

In respect to the autoharp, Cathy’s style is reminiscent of that which was popularized by Sara and Maybelle Carter. Both Cathy and Dave give Ron Penix most of the credit for fostering their interest in Carter-style music. Ron had studied the Carter’s recorded works so intensely that he could play any of their songs, lick-for-lick, on either guitar or autoharp. Dave and Cathy made two classic albums with Ron Penix and Jay Round which are, unfortunately out of print at the present time. (Aside: Ron Penix still lives in Baltimore, Maryland but is unable to be active musically these days due to multiple health problems. Ron owns one of Maybelle Carter’s New Golden Autoharps, and was the third place winner in the 1981 International Autoharp Championship.)

Of Cathy Barton and Dave Para’s eight recordings as of this writing, the first few were self-produced. In 1982, the *Walnut Valley Occasional* called their *Ballad of the Boonstick* album “the finest acoustic music heard this year.” The release of *On a Day Like Today* album in 1986 for Folk-Legacy Records was a special achievement. That small, family-run record company, renowned for exceptional recordings of important traditional and contemporary folk musicians, has greatly influenced Dave and Cathy and helped to inspire their study of traditional music in their own community. Teaming up with the company’s founders, Sandy and Caroline Paton, they also produced an album of lesser-known Christmas music, *’Twas on a Night Like This*, which the American Library Association named a Notable Recording in 1990. They have appeared on several other recordings with the Patons, as well as Ed Trickett, Ramona Jones, Bob Dyer, Wade Hampton Miller, Judy Domeny and Lisa Redfern.

More recently, the American Library Association has awarded another album to Cathy Barton and Dave Para. The Recording Evaluation Committee of the Association for Library Service to Children has named *Johnny Whistletrigger: Civil War Songs from the Western Border* a Notable Recording in *Booklist* and the *School Library Journal* magazines and in a brochure

sent out to its 55,000 members. Cathy and Dave produced and released the album last year in conjunction with songwriter friend Bob Dyer. The first ever album of Civil War music from Missouri, Kansas and Arkansas marked an extensive research effort, as well as the debut of Cathy's songwriting.

*Whistletrigger*, an album of traditional, period and contemporary instrumentals and songs from their region, garnered accolades from reviewers and listeners all over the country. The Kansas City *Pitch Weekly* called it "a landmark release that will delight both Civil War buffs and lovers of spirited folk music." The album is the first recording ever devoted to Civil War music from west of the Mississippi River. Reviewers in the Midwest credited Barton, Para and Dyer with helping rectify the scant attention that history texts pay to events of the war in this part of the country. Critics acclaimed both the extensive historical research, evidenced in the album's 32-page illustrated booklet, as well as the quality of musical performance. Present plans call for a second volume to be recorded in January and February of 1995.

In other news, Barton and Para have been selected to be part of the Missouri Arts Council's Missouri Touring Program for 1995-96. The program allows funding assistance from the state council for sponsoring organizations throughout the state. The artist roster includes a wide variety of performance artists including classical ballet, theater, jazz and ethnic music.

April 15-16, 1994 marked the third annual Big Muddy Folk Festival in Boonville, for which Dave and Cathy serve as artistic directors. The event, sponsored by the Friends of Historic Boonville, continues to grow and, this year, included a Friday night dance and a folk art exhibit. Concerts and workshops were held in historic Thespian Hall, a circa 1850s opera house. It is one of the finest concert halls in central Missouri. Dave and Cathy also direct a small folk festival in nearby Arrow Rock. As of this writing, these are the only folk music festivals in this region.

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is sincerely honored to dedicate this issue to two of the nicest people we have ever met...Cathy Barton and Dave Para. Spending a week in class with them every year at the Augusta Heritage Center has become one of my most-anticipated rites of summer. The interview for this story was conducted over a leisurely dinner at the Elkins Motor Lodge following Becky Blackley's *Introduction to Group Playing* class where Cathy and Dave were among the instructors.

July 2007: Because the article above is now outdated by thirteen years, it is suggested that you click on following URL for a complete discography, performance schedule and other updates ([www.bartonpara.com/](http://www.bartonpara.com/)). A photo of Cathy and Dave plus Cathy's portrait sketch by Elizabeth Bukowsky are in the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo, where they will remain for two weeks. Non members may request them directly from me. **ER**