

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - July 1994 - Charles (Bussie) Miller**

*January 2009 Preface: This week's autoharp personality is the uncle who was so fondly mentioned in Dean Sapp's recently-posted cover story. ER*

When I contacted Charles Miller to set up our 18 May interview, he told me over the phone that he had been playing the autoharp for fifty years. Naturally, I expected a rather elderly gentleman to greet me when I drove the eighty miles or so to his Newark, Delaware home. Imagine my surprise when he turned out to be only a few years older than I am! The difference is that Charles started playing when he was nine, and I didn't take up the instrument until I was pushing forty-four and a grandmother three times over.

Charles, known to his friends and family as Bussie, was introduced to the autoharp by a grade school music teacher in Yorklyn, Delaware who came to his class once a week with three autoharps (and sometimes a guitar) in tow. Charles was the only student who was able to pick out melodies on the instruments, and his delighted teacher lavished encouragement upon him.

During summer vacations, Charles worked at a nearby horse farm as a stable boy and a "hot walker" for polo ponies. He saved his earnings until he had enough money to order a black 12-bar Oscar Schmidt Autoharp from the Sears "wish book."

(Charles was nicknamed Bussie by his sister [Dean's Mother] as a small boy because he had a toy bus that he played with constantly. As is often the case, his childhood name stuck and Charles is Bussie Miller to this day.)

Because he rarely encountered other autoharp players during his formative years, Charles is completely self taught. He does recall seeing Pop Stoneman perform at one of the many music shows held at Alex Campbell's record store.

As you can see from the accompanying photo (in AC album under Photos via the Autoharp Enthusiasts group's homepage), this veteran practitioner plays in the initial below-the-chord-bars manner with his harp resting on a table (or his lap in a pinch). His surface of preference is a wooden table top because he feels that the best sound is produced in that manner. At outdoor affairs, he has been known to use the trunk lid of a car as his resonator.

Charles prefers picking with other musicians to solo playing, and looks forward to the musical encounters which are a part of just about every family gathering from baptisms to funerals. He tunes by ear and then lets the other musicians tune to him. Rank does have its privileges!

When I asked Charles how often he changed the strings on his 'harp, he said that he only replaced them when they broke...and that some of them hadn't broken in the twenty years that he's been playing his current instrument. It's a 15-bar O.S. Autoharp of 1970s vintage. Charles didn't like the feel of the newer chord bars, so he replaced them with the black button-type bars from his old 'harp. He also thinks that the older bars had better action and were less noisy.

In terms of picks, Charles uses only two...a standard plastic thumb pick and a .025 gauge brass pick on his index finger. His style is especially interesting in that he goes in both directions with each of those picks, resulting in a mandolin-like tremolo effect at times. Then again, I thought I saw him cross picking? When I tried to pin Charles down as to what he was doing, he replied that he "did whatever it took to get the sound he was after." He maintains a traditional fire and inventiveness in his music that is well suited to playing the bottom end of an autoharp.

Some of the tunes that Charles played during my visit were *Ground Hog*, *Snow Deer*, *Rosewood Casket*, *The Storms Are On The Ocean* and *I Still Miss Someone*. He said that his most-requested song when he "plays out" is *The Bells of St. Mary's*. In honor of the occasion, we played it together before I left and I won't soon forget the look he gave me when I went to the minor chord!

Another of Charles' talents is that he is an avid and accomplished photographer. One of his pictures of a mountain range just before a thunderstorm appears on the cassette insert of the Dean Sapp & Harford Express album *Tears of Joy*. The photo was taken from the front porch of Charles' brother's home in Virginia.

Those of you who have been with the Clearinghouse for a while are aware of the enjoyment that I derive from cruising down musical back roads in search of some of the lesser-known players of our instrument. In this instance, it evoked for me fond memories of traveling through both flood and blizzard to spend long days listening to the late Mike Hudak (in New Castle, Delaware) play a similar style of music. This is a sound we might never want to return to, but one we miss all the same. I, for one, shall always have a reverence for the old-time style of autoharp playing.

January 2009 Update

I spoke with Bussie's nephew, Dean Sapp, a week ago, at which time he shared the following. "Bussie Miller is still alive and doing well. He is seventy-two now but looks like he in his late fifties." **ER**