

Charles Whitmer – Autoharp Clearinghouse December 1997/January 1998

To say that Charles Whitmer is a gentleman who is highly regarded for his abilities as a teacher, performer and recording artist would be a substantial understatement. There is strong evidence to support the assertion that he has started as many--or perhaps even more--students of the autoharp than anyone else on the scene today. For the last fourteen years or so, Charles has been making friends and developing fans in all parts of the country through his workshops at most of the nation's autoharp-inclusive events. He has given much along the way to enhance our music and our instrument, having taken the "autoharp message" with him wherever he has gone.

I have been trying to coax Charles onto the cover of this publication for quite some time now, and find it difficult to adequately express my satisfaction in having finally succeeded. Charles has been a major influence in my own association with the autoharp, and I am certain that there are hundreds of you about to read his story who share that sentiment. It is with immeasurable joy that I dedicate this issue to my friend and mentor Charles Whitmer. **ER**

My musical endeavors began in 1969 when I started playing the saxophone in school during the sixth grade. I continued to play the instrument all through high school, and majored in saxophone as my main instrument in undergraduate school at the University of Houston. It was during my final years in undergraduate school when I was first exposed to an autoharp-- having never, to the best of my recollection, previously seen one. We were taught how to tune them and use them in elementary school general music classes. I had no idea at the time that it was even possible to play a melody on an autoharp, nor did I have any knowledge of the history and usage of the instrument in respect to traditional music. During my final year of undergraduate school, and for a year after my graduation, I basically forgot about the autoharp and did not pay much attention to it.

An accident led me back to the autoharp. Literally. During the first year after graduating from college, I did not go into teaching right away because the pay was so poor at that time here in Texas. Instead, I worked in the grocery store business, where I had spent seven years in the produce department working part-time during high school and college. One day, while picking up a fifty pound sack of carrots in a cooler, I felt a sharp jabbing pain, which turned out to be a type of hernia in my lower abdomen. Needless to say, surgery was necessary to fix it. After such an operation, I found that, for about seven weeks, I could not play my saxophone, and didn't have access to a piano. Following about three weeks of total boredom while recuperating, I was desperately missing playing some sort of musical instrument. I remembered the autoharp from college, and ordered a 27-chord ChromAarp Caroler from Rhythm Band, Inc. Using Meg Peterson's Complete Method book, I learned every one of her recommended strum patterns. At that point, I still hadn't heard anyone produce melodies on the instrument.

I soon purchased an Oscar Schmidt Centurion 'harp and began to seriously seek more information regarding the autoharp. Meg's book had mentioned the term "Bluegrass Music," which was foreign to me as I had never heard of it as a folk tradition. The only time I recall hearing the word "bluegrass" was once during high school. On that occasion, some sort of bluegrass function took place in my school, and was held in the band room. Over that weekend, someone stole the school's sound system. After that happened, I assumed that bluegrass must be

some kind of rock music that attracted the kind of participants that would steal. I didn't learn any more about that genre of music until after I took up the autoharp.

In my quest to learn more about the instrument, I happened to buy a copy of the late *Frets* magazine, which featured news and information regarding acoustic stringed instruments. Since Meg's book had piqued my curiosity in respect to bluegrass music, I sought out somewhere I could go to hear it played. In the events listings, I spotted an ad for a bluegrass festival in Bronson, Texas. Although I did not know where that was located, I was determined to go there and, hopefully, find someone who could show me more about playing the autoharp.

When the appropriate weekend arrived, a friend and I headed deep into East Texas where the event was to be held and found the site to be no more than a ghost town in the Piney Woods region of the state. Nonetheless, the festival was a wonderful experience. Upon my arrival, I marveled at all of the campers as I proceeded to find a spot for my own tent. On my first evening there, I observed people bringing out stringed instruments and playing together.....without sheet music!!!! As a classically-trained musician, I found this to be totally fascinating, as I had never before been exposed to that type of phenomenon. I got out my 'harp and roamed around the campground hoping to find another autoharp player. My skills at that time were very basic, and I knew that my self-teaching was falling way short of what the possibilities probably were. Although I was unsuccessful in locating a fellow autoharper, I got favorable receptions from the other musicians, many of whom seemed to be familiar with my instrument. Most of them associated it with a group they referred to as The Carter Family and, in particular, someone known as Mother Maybelle.

Later that year, or perhaps the next, I found myself taking an annual pilgrimage to see the autumn colors in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas. Previously, I had always limited my excursions to the extreme northwest corner of the state, but something led me to venture a little farther east that year. Lo and behold, I found myself in Mountain View--and had no idea as to what I had stumbled upon. That evening, I attended a concert at the Ozark Folk Center and saw my first "real live" autoharp player--none other than Ron Wall.

Ron was living in Mountain View at the time and was a regular performer there. I was mesmerized by what I saw and heard him do with the autoharp. After his set, I rushed backstage to ask him to show me what he was doing on the instrument. Ron was very friendly and extremely accommodating in respect to demonstrating his techniques. Unfortunately, upon my return to Texas, I found that I could not remember exactly what he had shown me? However, our meeting did have an impact on my playing by opening a door to the possibilities of what could be accomplished on the autoharp. I believe that I must have retained some of what I had observed Ron doing because there is still a hint of his style in my playing. I shall always be grateful for having had the opportunity to meet and be influenced by Ron.

Back in the Houston area, I became aware of local bluegrass gatherings that were called jam sessions. While attending one of these jams, I met a guitar player by the name of Paul Langston. He had been playing bluegrass and traditional fiddle tunes on the rhythm guitar for many years. Paul was drawn to the sound of the autoharp, although he admitted he hadn't paid much notice to the few-and-far-between autoharp players he had previously encountered. The music and

playing style of the Carter Family was of particular interest to Paul, and he expressed an interest in getting together with me to see what kind of music we could make together.

We began to meet regularly to practice traditional tunes. Up until that time, I had never sung outside of the college classroom. I initially began to sing again in order to lend variety to what I was doing with the autoharp as I had no desire to just play backup all the time, nor did I want to play the melody exclusively. During the first year of playing with Paul, I developed my autoharp style through the trial-and-error process. Paul was very forthright in his opinion as to whether or not what I was doing on the autoharp fit with his traditional guitar stylings. Over time, my style of playing developed around what Paul was doing on the guitar rather than around anyone else's autoharp style. I believe this to be the reason why my autoharp playing blends so well with Paul's guitar, as well as with other traditional guitar styles.

I'm sure that many of the students who have had me over the years may wonder why I give very definite ideas on what to do as well as what not to do on the autoharp. One of the reasons is that I've probably done almost everything that shouldn't be done while playing with other musicians, and had to learn the hard way what is and is not appropriate. I have recordings of my first year or two of playing along with Paul, and I sometimes cannot believe how awful I sounded. (I did make certain that I was always in tune, however.) Those recordings will only be released posthumously--if ever! During that period in time, I actually had the nerve to play solo a couple of times on a local bluegrass music show. Throughout this period of trial and MUCH error, Paul and I stayed together as a musical duo. As time went by, we started to get hired to play at festivals. That experience, together with plenty of practice resulted in my style becoming refined to its present state.

In 1981, I found out about *The Autoharpoholic* magazine and subscribed to it. Through that publication, I met Becky Blackley and learned of the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. I attended the event that year and began to get involved with the autoharp activities there. After participating for a couple of years, Becky asked if I would teach some workshop sessions, and I happily accepted her offer.

I continued to work on my playing skills to where, in 1985, I decided to attend an all-levels autoharp class at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia. Since I had never been any farther east than Arkansas and Missouri, enrolling in the class would be a good excuse to see some of the eastern part of the country. I listed my playing level as "advanced" and, as it turned out, was the only student to do so. Several weeks before the session was to begin, Becky called and asked if I might be willing to come aboard as an instructor rather than a student? It seems as though the enrollment had exceeded the amount of students she and fellow instructor Ivan Stiles would be able to handle, plus there was a waiting list. The rest, as they say, is history--and I completed my twelfth year as an Augusta instructor this past summer.

That 1985 class was a landmark one in so far as the people involved with it who later became "movers and shakers" in the autoharp community. In addition to the aforementioned Becky Blackley and Ivan Stiles, the list of students enrolled in that session included such well-known names as Mary Lou Orthey, Tom Fladmark, Ann Schmid, Eileen Roys and Mary Ann

Johnston--all of whom have played significant roles in the development of our current autoharp community.

Enough cannot be said for the impact that Becky Blackley has had in respect to the revival of the autoharp, as well as to my own status among the instrument's players. During my early years of involvement with the instrument, I witnessed her almost single-handedly bring the autoharp out of obscurity and into the mainstream of folk music. In my opinion, she has done more for the autoharp in our generation than any other individual, and her impact and accomplishments will surely survive her as well as the rest of us. Becky's mark in history will be enduring and her contributions recognized for a long time to come.

Following my initial role as an instructor at Augusta, I began to teach at other workshops and workshop-oriented festivals such as the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering, the Memphis Dulcimer Festival, the Autoharp Jamboree, the Stringalong and the Summer Solstice Festival--as well as many local events here in Texas. I also started to do freelance teaching as the need arose, and taught workshops for a number of the autoharp clubs around the country. By then, I had begun to phase out of performing with Paul Langston and decided to concentrate primarily on teaching autoharp--as the rigors of keeping up with concert and festival gigs had begun to take the fun out of playing. However, Paul and I recorded two albums together (*Whitmer & Langston, Volumes 1 & 2*), and hope to do more recording in the future.

Presently, I am on staff with the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas, where I teach three different week-long autoharp classes each summer as well as teaching during that facility's Autoharp Jamboree. I have also become a "regular" at the Summer Acoustic Music Festival (SAM Fest) in Houston and the Lone Star State Dulcimer Society's Winterfest event. My plans are to continue teaching at Augusta when asked and to participate in whatever other functions I am able to work into my schedule.

I managed to earn my Master of Music Education degree in 1989, and am currently teaching Band to seventh and eighth graders at Moorhead Jr. High School in the Conroe Independent School District here in Montgomery County, Texas. In addition, I assist at the high school that is connected to my present place of employment. During the school year, my band directing duties demand 90% of my energies in the music field, but I'm doing something that I enjoy a great deal. I do try to expose my students to traditional music, as you never know what seeds will be planted that may sprout and grow years down the road.

My involvement with the autoharp also led me into teaching and participating in shape note or "Sacred Harp" singing, which is a form of traditional a cappella folk hymns. I have come to enjoy tremendously being actively involved with it. Even though it is performed without instrumental accompaniment, I've been able to borrow a few songs from this large body of music and adapt them to the autoharp with wonderful results. Another "connection" is that I often teach shape note classes at autoharp venues such as the Augusta Heritage Center and the Ozark Folk Center. As a result, I have gotten other autoharpists exposed to and involved in this type of folk music.

I see both the present and the future for the autoharp to be very bright. With the tremendous foundations laid down by players such as Becky Blackley, Bryan Bowers, John Hollandsworth, Mike Fenton, Mike Herr, Alan Mager, Drew Smith, Betty Waldron, Ivan Stiles, Evo Bluestein, Karen Mueller, Ron Wall, Tom Schroeder, Lindsay Haisley, Marty Schuman, Michael King, Bonnie Phipps, Will Smith, Maybelle Carter, Pop Stoneman, Kilby Snow, Sarah Carter, Anita Roesler, Eileen Roys, Roz Brown, Les Gustafson-Zook, Steve Young, Mary Lou Orthey and a dozen or so other players whom I could also list, the autoharp has its place in the traditional music world firmly established. In addition, the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania deserves a tremendous amount of credit for promoting the autoharp with such a well-run event (which every autoharp player ought to try and attend at least once). George and Mary Lou Orthey have done miraculous work in creating and hosting this monumental festival, which stands as a tribute to their insight and hard work.

I feel blessed to be living at this time in an age when there is so much going on for the autoharp. It is my hope that I can continue to be a part of it as well as contributing to it. The publications that we have now, and have had in the past, such as *The Autoharpoholic*, *Autoharp Quarterly* and the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* have brought our autoharp community closer and made it stronger. Luthiers Bob Taylor, George Orthey, Tom Fladmark, Mark Fackeldey, Keith Young, Mitch Pingel and Buck Lumbert are providing us with quality upper-line instruments that enhance the vitality of autoharp playing at advanced levels, thereby insuring our instrument a place in the music world as a serious instrument. With so much going for it, the autoharp is most certainly here to stay--and I'm happy to be a part of it all. **CW**

For further reading, I refer you to *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp*, Volume 8 - *View from the Top* by Becky Blackley. **ER**

May 2008 Update from Charles:

I am now teaching jr. high school band (grades 6-7-8) in Coldspring, TX. This is my 5th year there. Since the original article was written, I had lived in Japan for one year where I met many of the wonderful autoharp players there with whom I still maintain contact. I am currently undergoing a project of updating my library of autoharp song arrangements which will be available for purchase in mid summer. I currently have 500+ songs tabbed out for autoharp. I continue to teach and perform at festivals here in the US. I will also continue to add to my library of autoharp song arrangements in the coming years. **CW**