

Autoharp Clearing House – June 1999 - CHARLEY GROTH

I was born, as they say, about ten thousand years ago, in the vast expanse of cornfields that was then Northwestern Ohio. In and near such sleepy hamlets as Arcadia, West Millgrove, and Rising Sun, I lived the life of a country boy. Consult Tom Sawyer for details and atmosphere. I was a member of a large and happy extended family. Music was a cornerstone of my life from the beginning as the first child of a very musical mother. At three years old I got an early start on guitar and piano. Mom's vision was severely limited. She spent a lot of time with her music. I vividly remember sitting on her lap, watching her fingers fly as she held her little Martin 0-18 guitar (a gift from her dad when she went blind at age twelve) in front of me.

Other musicians in the family included my paternal grandmother, who was a good piano player. Grandma was never one to shout. We knew she was angry, though, when she marched to her piano to play a rousing military version of *What A Friend We Have in Jesus*. She also played *Mockingbird Hill* with all the trills, which I thought was pretty cool. She had a large collection of 78 rpm records that captured music by artists ranging from Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers to Merle Travis to Bob Wills, and even, later on, to one Jerry Lee Lewis number. (For some reason she liked *Whole Lot of Shakin' Goin' On*. She'd play it and laugh and slap her knee.) My maternal grandfather was an accomplished fiddler and piano player and, more impressive to me as a little fellow, a railroad engineer. He had retired by the time I came along but, when I'd hear a fast freight roaring by deep in the night, I would still think maybe he was at the throttle. I didn't get the chance to know him very well, but he fired my imagination. My mother remembered falling asleep many nights as a child listening to her dad's jam sessions going on in the kitchen below her bedroom. Mom always said I took after him...and I think that worried her a little.

Music fascinated my grandfather and it fascinated me as well. Right from the start, I wanted to play all of it. By the time I got to school, I was starting to struggle with the idea of finger picking guitar, and trying to puzzle out ragtime sounds on the piano. There was no money for lessons, but I had teachers around me at home. No one we knew had an autoharp, but I remember falling in love with a little blonde girl in a short pink skirt who was yodeling in a show at a county fair. She was accompanied by her mother, who played an autoharp.

One crisp fall morning in the 1940's, I entered a third-grade classroom in Arcadia, Ohio for the first time and saw, sitting on a wide windowsill, an autoharp I could get my hands on. It was an old black A Model like the one I play today (without the Mark Fackeldey chord bar assembly, of course). Immediately I asked the teacher if I could try it?. Teacher was a Carter-style player and, looking back through the mists of time, it seems she was not bad. I then began to play the autoharp.

One manner in which poor boys earned money when I was a kid was to work on crews doing various farm jobs such as baling hay, picking tomatoes, and so forth. When I was still just a youngster, I learned that I could make as much playing music for three hours at a square dance as I could working twelve hours in the fields. At about the same time, I also found that people would pay me to teach them what I knew about music. Those discoveries led to a lifetime of making music and teaching music for a living. Over the years I've been involved in just about

all kinds of music: country, bluegrass, jazz, blues, early rock--you name it. I was even a member of the symphony orchestra while at college . I've played many different instruments to earn my bread and butter. I've spent ten thousand years on the music road, and have had all of that experience I ever want. (Many people are unaware that busses and trucks and other conveyances that carry music people around--the ones not owned by big stars, anyway--are usually not the least bit fancy and often have an odor reminiscent of high school gym locker rooms.)

Like most folks, I fell in love and got married along my way, to a pretty redhead named Donna. She had records of all the Beatles hits when I was managing a band back in the mid-sixties that wanted to do Beatles hits. We got together so I could lift the lyrics from her records. You know the rest. After quite a few years I found myself alone again when the marriage didn't work out. I've loved other women in my life, before and after my wife, but have not married again.

About thirty years ago, Donna and I moved to the west. (I relocated in Florida, where I presently live, in 1983). Looking back, it seems I must have played in every bar and dancehall from Austin to St. Louis to Los Angeles to Dallas to New Orleans to... Well, you get the picture. I was in and out of Nashville, too, and slept under a few picnic tables at rest areas here and there as well. Wrote a tune called *The Home Waltz* at a time when my home was more or less an old van parked at a rest area on I-40 in Tennessee. Many years later, Jan Milner recorded that one.

Every working musician has a million war stories, and I'm no exception. Consult me in a reminiscing mood for details if interested! There are far too many memories to include here--and you probably wouldn't believe a lot of what happened anyway. I'm not sure I believe some of it myself anymore! I traveled a gazillion miles. Through the years, I made a good many recordings, worked in a recording studio and, at one time, had a studio of my own. Likewise, I taught a lot of students--some of whom went on to professional careers of their own--and in general lived the music life. I played with and on bills with a number of people whose names you might know.

All through the years I continued playing the autoharp. After hearing and meeting Maybelle Carter in Virginia when she was with the Johnny Cash road show, I was inspired to further develop my skill on the instrument. I had been playing bluegrass banjo, and was having trouble with my shoulder due to the weight of the banjo and the strain of playing too much. Doctor's orders were to leave the banjo in its case for a while. I took a break from playing music for a living. (I am also a technical writer, so I went to work for an Earth Sciences laboratory in Silver City, New Mexico.) Autoharping did not involve the same kind of physical stresses that banjo playing did, so I focused on the autoharp while recuperating. I spent many afternoons sitting in my front yard at an altitude of 7,020 feet on Pinos Altos (High Pines) Mountain in New Mexico that summer, working things out in depth on the 'harp. It was during that time that I developed an easy-to-understand and easy-to-learn three-step method I now use to teach students to play melodic autoharp. (Finally, after all these years, I'm putting my melody method plus a variety of other autoharp resources into book form. The book will be published soon.)

In the early 1970's, I started featuring autoharp instrumentals with my bands on the festival circuits. Not many were doing that then. In those days, the instrument was not nearly as well

known as it is now. People found it interesting and “different”. I often had to explain what the autoharp was and how it worked before I played it. I wanted a real autoharp showpiece, so I worked out a flashy version of *Under the Double Eagle*. As far as I knew, very few if any ‘harpers were doing the tune at that time. At a major Midwestern festival, my group had a chance to play on a bill with Mac Wiseman and Jim and Jesse McReynolds in a big natural amphitheater. There was a large turnout. When I saw the many thousands of people pouring in to sit on the long hill and listen to music, I decided I would do *Under the Double Eagle* on the ‘harp, and really pour the coals to it. About halfway through, thundering along at something approaching 120 miles an hour, I snagged a fingerpick on a string. I can close my eyes and still see that pick glittering in the lights, whirling up and up and up and then out into the blackness where the very large audience--and a network television taping truck sat. Oh, I finished the tune. You have to. It wasn’t the version of *Under the Double Eagle* it should have been, though. Pretty much the same thing happened at the San Diego Folk Festival later that same year, and that one was carried on PBS nationwide! After that, I looked very carefully at how my picks were shaped and how I put them on my fingers. As a result, I’ve seldom lost a pick while playing since!

After finally “burning out” on the full-time music life in the early 1980’s, I stopped in Ohio for a while to complete some computer education. Then I moved on to Orlando, Florida, where I went to work for a large aerospace corporation. It wasn’t long before I began playing in area bands. The year after I arrived in Florida, I started performing at the Florida Folk Festival, which is one of the nation’s oldest and largest state festivals, and have been booked at that event annually ever since. One of the proudest moments of my musical career was opening for Doc Watson, along with Jan Milner, Doug Travers, and other good friends, at the Florida Folk Festival a few years ago. It was the second time I’ve had the opportunity to play on a bill with Doc, someone I’ve admired for a long, long time.

When the Florida Department of State’s Bureau of Florida Folklife named me a Florida Master Artist in the late 1980’s, my apprentice Cheryl Belanger and I presented what was, at that time, the only performance devoted entirely to autoharp ever given on the main stage at the Florida Folk Festival. (Since then, Mark Fackeldey has presented an all-autoharp concert, too.) Cheryl Belanger is one of several Florida state championship winners in autoharp I’ve taught and coached.

I'm particularly proud, also, to have been one of the original members of Orlando's folk club. I believe strongly in grass-roots efforts to keep acoustic music alive and kicking, along with the great spiritual value of live music shared by friends. The Orlando club put on festivals and other performances, offered jam sessions and, in general, had a great time making music. The club survives and prospers, and anyone visiting Orlando would do well to connect with some of the folk music activities there as well as going to see Mickey Mouse.

With nothing to do one autumn Saturday in Orlando, I decided to attend a festival at Barberville, Florida, a few miles north. Arriving at the grounds, I was informed that there was a hole in the schedule (someone had cancelled) and asked if I could fill it? Rounding up my friend Jay Wood to play backup, I grabbed a few instruments and went off in search of the producer of music for the event. That person turned out to be Jan Milner, of Palm Harbor, Florida. We met, fell in love, and spent a number of years together. I moved to Palm Harbor (near Tampa) to be with Jan. Standing in her driveway one evening, I looked up at a big Florida moon, then went in the house and, in about an hour, wrote *Florida Moon*, which has become far and away my most popular composition. That one started off as a sentimental slow ballad, but has even been recorded (by Florida singer Buddy Moody) as a country/western swing number!

Shortly after we began living together, Jan and I formed a musical duo (called, not surprisingly, Jan Milner and Charley Groth). We toured around Florida and, on occasion, to points beyond. (Two out-of-state festivals we did together stand out in memory: The Mountain Laurel Autoharp festival and the Doc Watson Merlefest, both great experiences.) We made two albums together, *Sunshine State Dulcimer* featuring Jan's lap dulcimer but fully instrumented and *I Would Do It All Again*. The first album, incidentally, contains what I think is one of famed autoharper Mark Fackeldey's very best renditions of a fiddle tune--his ride on *St. Anne's Reel*. Mark must have more than the standard number of fingers on each hand!

In 1988, not long after moving to Palm Harbor, I founded a project that remains very dear to my heart--the Sunshine State Acoustic Music Camp. The SSAMC is a teaching camp which takes place the second weekend of each October in a beautiful nature park in St. Petersburg. Today the camp offers over one hundred class sessions on a great variety of subjects including instruction in all the standard folk instruments. Instructors are the cream of the crop of Florida's acoustic musicians. Our autoharp instructor in recent years has been Cheryl Belanger (who was my apprentice in the Master Artist program many years ago and who went on to win the Florida State Championship in autoharp). Entry-level classes get folks started. More advanced classes increase existing skills. Techniques of playing with others in a group are taught, along with singing, songwriting, music theory and much more. Instructors join in jam sessions planned for the students' level of experience, or in informal jam sessions with friends (actually, the music never stops). There are also voluntary student shows. The camp concert Saturday night features all of our instructors plus special guests. It is three-hours-plus featuring some of the best music and the most accomplished musicians the country has to offer. The campground has ample room for sleeping bags, tents, camping trailers, campers and recreational vehicles. Bunks in rustic bunkhouses are free. Everyone has big fun the entire weekend. I just love it. Although I'm usually totally exhausted when the weekend is over, it is a great feeling to put on the camp each year.

After Jan Milner and I parted ways (on the friendliest of terms), I moved to Largo, which is just south of Clearwater. There I bought a big old frame house, in the classic early Florida style, on a quiet oak-shaded street. I'm renovating the place, doing all the work myself--something I love to do. There's space for an instrument room, and for a teaching area, as well as a great old-fashioned sunny kitchen. I have a quarter-acre on which to stretch out (and garden on--something else I love to do). The screened front porch is as big as the living room and, in our wonderful climate, is truly another room in the house. A lot of music has been made on that porch since I've lived in Largo. It has been determined that at least twenty players can fit onto it! We've had some spectacular potluck meals at my place, too. I continue to teach, which I've come to enjoy over the years at least as much as performing. My long-time friend Doug Travers and I have a duo, called Old Friends, that accepts bookings in the Tampa area and elsewhere in the state. (We recently had the pleasure of opening for autoharp guru Ivan Stiles in Lutz.) I have a little jazz group in which I get to play piano, and I do some recording.

One autoharp project in which I was involved not too long ago was the Alan Mager autoharp album *Hear the Colors*. I did guitar, bass and mandolin work on the album, and Alan was kind enough to record a couple of my compositions, *Friendship Waltz* and the fast-becoming-infamous *March of the Ten Thousand Autoharpers* on that one. (I wrote *March of the Ten Thousand...* after posing in a picture with who-knows-how-many autoharpers at Mountain Laurel one year. The tune has been recorded a couple of times, and I used it for an Interaction Lesson with *Autoharp Quarterly*--so maybe there are a few folks out there marching around to that one!) Alan has also recently recorded another of my pieces written for autoharp, *Alan's Rag*, which I composed especially for him. I like to write all kinds of music, and it is especially interesting to create things for autoharp. Not a lot of people are doing that. I've recently written a swing number called *The Tickler* that is piano-based but works well on guitar. Maybe I'll adapt it for autoharp? I'd like to see more writers do autoharp-intended compositions.

Unfortunately, I don't live near any blood relatives these days. My parents have long since gone on to whatever is next, but I do keep in touch with the rest of my family. Also, here in Florida and around the world I have many great friends who make a close family--and even some "adopted grandchildren" I love. Life is good.

Okay, enough! Now you probably know considerably more than you've wanted to know about me and my history. Of course I've left out far more than I've included. My days have been full of a rich variety of experiences, and I've met many fascinating people along the way. It has all been fun--and I expect to do a lot more of everything. Once I wrote a song about an old couple sitting on a porch reminiscing. I called it *I Would Do It All Again*. If I ever write an autobiography (and this is probably as close as I'll ever get to doing that) I think I'll also call it *I Would Do It All Again*. Because I would. CG