

Autoharp Clearinghouse - February 1999 - Cindy Funk

A decade or so ago, the late Paul Peter contacted me after having attended the Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival which, for many years, was an annual event in Northwestern Ohio. Paul had been extremely impressed by the performance of an "all girl" band that called itself Sweetwater. He sent me one of their tapes, suggesting that I might consider reviewing the groups' autoharp-inclusive recordings in the *Clearinghouse*. I mailed a sample copy of the publication to the address on the cassette jacket, and have since favorably reviewed each newly-released album by the ensemble. With the interest in incorporating our instrument into a band format seemingly attracting more and more attention of late, the time seems right for a feature story about Sweetwater's autoharpist, Cindy Funk. On that note, I'll turn you over to her.

ER

I'd like to thank Eileen for asking me to do this bio. I was shocked, thrilled, dismayed and elated all at the same time when she made the request. I tend not to think about what I do too much, and preparing this article has forced me to do so. Scared the heck out of me, I can tell you! I've been trying to think about my life as an autoharper in respect to what happened when, and to whom? I'll attempt to put things in their proper order, but have a feeling that I may fail miserably. Let's get started.

As a child, there was always music in my home. My mother played piano by ear at church, and also just for her own enjoyment. I recall that I always got a kick out of her playing. Mom's favorite piece was *Alley Cat* and, when she played it, she really let it rip! Music was also incorporated into my school days. I played trumpet and tuba, loved the school band, and took great pride in being one of the only female tuba players in my area.

Years later, at my mother's funeral, I was delighted to see my high school music teacher come to pay his respects. I wanted to tell him that all the music he taught me had not gone to waste and that I was still playing music--only on dulcimers and autoharps instead of brass band instruments. As he approached me, I exclaimed, "Mr. Kessler, I still have my music!" He responded by saying, "Well, don't you think it's time you returned it?" Maybe you had to be there but, even though the occasion was a somber one, I had to laugh. Mom would have loved the joke, too. In fact, the only regret I have regarding my music is the fact that my mother didn't live long enough to have become introduced to the autoharp. I know she would have taken to the instrument--and most likely would have come up with a rip-roaring rendition of *Alley Cat*.

I initially discovered folk music on our local Public Radio station, WYSO. At first I was just a listener and then became a volunteer worker at the station. My tasks included everything from stamping matchbooks to babysitting.

After a number of years as a member of the support staff, I was given my own weekly show, *Shamrocks, Heather and Roses*. As the title suggests, it was a program of Celtic (don't let me hear you say Sell-tic!) music. I'd spin records, and sometimes they'd spin me right back. Having been painfully shy for most of my life, I found that the freedom and creativity derived from being behind a microphone was addictive. I loved it! I began to soak up as much as possible of all genres of acoustic music, including blues and bluegrass.

Enter the lap dulcimer. It had been a kit that was donated to the station's fund-raising auction. I had never before seen one, and the sound grabbed me and wouldn't let go. There was just no resting until I had one of my own. It was also in kit form, and I assembled it myself. The resulting instrument was finished with a red mahogany stain and had what I would describe as a "big boom" sound.

Shortly thereafter, I was to discover that not only did a lot of other people know what a dulcimer was, but that there were a bunch of folks who actually played the darned things. I became acquainted with the Dayton Mountain Dulcimer Society, through which I got "plugged into" a whole vein of music that I never knew existed. That source led to many other discoveries over the years. More on that subject later.

I'll call this section "The Games Husbands Play." Scenario: Christmas morning...flat, heavy box under the tree...smile on the face of husband Jim. Enter Stage Right--the autoharp. In retrospect, my friend Shelley and I have often remarked about the glee our respective husbands exhibit when they buy us an instrument. You can almost see their lips move as they think, "Let's see her play this!" In a memoir of this type, one must nearly always be truthful--and so shall I. I had never particularly wanted an autoharp. But there it was, thrust into my lap. It has since been my experience that autoharps often "happen to you" while you are making other plans.

I thought to myself that the autoharp looked as though it would be difficult to play. Remembering my early musical training, I recalled that I had chosen the trumpet because there were only three buttons to push. And now there were 21! How in the heck would I know which one to depress--and when? And then there was the matter of tuning those 36 strings. It didn't take me long to ascertain that the pitch pipe was a lost cause, as was using a piano. If not for the advent of the electronic tuner, I seriously doubt that I would be playing the autoharp today. I shall be eternally grateful to the person responsible for its invention.

Holding the 'harp cradled in my arms was very nice. I spent a long time exploring the octaves, at that point using only the complimentary fuzzy felt pick. Okay--I was hooked. I didn't know how to play it, hold it, tune it or even carry it--but I was definitely hooked. Besides, since I had been given this instrument, I felt as though I was more or less obligated to put it to good use. It is my wish that I have since accomplished that objective.

Doubling back for a moment to my tenure at the radio station, there was a subsequent auction for which an autoharp had been donated. A gentleman named John Good happened to mention that he'd heard there was going to be a picnic with the focus on the autoharp. Who woulda thunk it? I was to learn that there was a group of 'harpers right in my own area of which I had been unaware. For several years, a bunch of dedicated autoharpers had been meeting under the wing of the late Lisa Chandler. (Although debilitated by disease, Lisa was a very special person who not only loved the autoharp but also took great pleasure in introducing others to the instrument.)

It was at that picnic that I met the aforementioned Shelley Stevens, who has since become my best friend. Together, we attended gatherings of both the autoharp club and the local lap dulcimer group. Before acquiring an autoharp of my own, the only 'harpist I remember meeting was Judy Ireton who owns and operates the Notably Yours music store. At that time, I was only

mildly interested in the autoharp, being mainly keen on getting some music out of the dulcimer. However, we were all intent on getting to know all about these folk instruments and the music we loved to play on them. Those were great days--filled with making music together, learning tunes and acquiring new friends.

When people enjoy playing music together, they generally like to play for others as well. The obvious outgrowth of this feeling is to form a band and then go out and show your stuff. It was in this manner that our band Sweetwater was born. We were four women with a penchant for harmonies and, after we sang Sally Rogers' *Lovely Agnes*, we decided to just keep on singing. The four of us--Shelley Stevens, Shari Wolf, Judy Leisch and I--took on the world in our own way. We loved to sing and play, and soon found that audiences enjoyed our vocal and instrumental blend.

From the beginning, we had made the mutual decision that, if it ever ceased to be enjoyable, we would stop. So far the fun goes on, and we're still carrying on as well. Judy left the group several years ago, so Sweetwater is now a trio rather than a quartet. In our thirteen years together, we have traveled to many wonderful venues and are proud of our accomplishments.

Our music has also taken us to other parts of the world. Doctor Susan Porter, under the auspices of the Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival, organized two tours of musicians to the British Isles in 1987. Our group was privileged to take part in the first of those trips. It was lovely to share our music with so many wonderful people in such fabulous places. Truly, it was an experience that we'll never forget. One highlight of the adventure for us was in having the opportunity to jam with some visiting Austrian musicians in a church in Ireland. You just don't have the occasion to do something like that very often. We also had a lesson in patience when we had to sit for eight hours on a plane with our instrument cases under our seats. Who says I haven't suffered for my art!

Taking our music to new ears has taken us across the United States as well. Several years ago, we took a six-and-one-half week tour from Ohio to the Pacific Northwest and Canada. We played and sang our way out there and back. Not only did we visit some of the most beautiful parts of this country, but we made many friends with our music. On two occasions, we were mistaken for a troupe of traveling nuns but, once again, you probably had to be there.

While we have performed at dulcimer and folk music festivals in various parts of the nation, we primarily tour around Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana. Recently, we've strayed into the realm of hosting our own event. Now, with just two years under our belts in respect to this endeavor, we think of our little festival as "just too much fun." Held in West Milton, Ohio in July, the focus at our Shady Grove gathering is on mountain dulcimer instruction. However, there is a lot of autoharp participation in the jam sessions and on the Open Stage. For two years in a row we've been blessed with wonderful campers at Shady Grove, and we're looking forward expectantly to the future.

Eileen requested that I explore the role of the autoharp in a group setting, and this is a topic with which I am both familiar and somewhat knowledgeable. Within Sweetwater, we all play mountain dulcimer, Shelley and Shari play guitar, Shelley plays acoustic bass and a wee bit of

hammered dulcimer. I play some whistle, concertina and both chromatic and diatonic autoharps. We all sing, and we all play kazoo (the one instrument we don't have to tune!).

From the beginning, I've seen the autoharp as a wonderful instrument to augment the overall sound by filling in all the "holes." You know--those spots between the melody and the guitar. There's a veritable playground there if you want it, with counter melodies and percussive rhythms as well as lead playing. The autoharp is such a versatile instrument that the ways to use it are practically endless.

I tend to think of the background stuff that I play as "pedal steel" on the autoharp. All those great licks you hear on most country records are there for the stealing, and easily applied to the 'harp. It is those little touches that make your ears stand up and listen. The high notes that set the tone of a piece and lead it to the finale are what make a song or tune memorable.

One thing that I tend to do might drive some band members crazy. (Come to think of it, maybe that's what has happened to Shelley and Shari!!!) On most of the numbers that we do, I try to play a new and different part each time. In addition to alternating octaves, I might throw in some high harmony on the autoharp. I think that technique especially adds extra drama to the conclusion of a piece. I'll try almost anything in my quest to discover something new on the instrument.

One of the reasons I was surprised when Eileen offered to feature me on the cover of this publication was the fact that I haven't made a solo autoharp recording. You'll most likely never see me competing in contests at any of the big autoharp gatherings. But you MAY see me at the jam sessions, whomping the heck out of one of my 'harps and smiling the whole time.

My most "Zen" of autoharps moments comes when I'm playing my Oscar Schmidt Wildwood Flower 'harp. That bell-like tone just goes straight to my heart. This was one instance when the "Games Husbands Play" really worked a treat. What a smart man he is!

Any deep autoharp thoughts from me? Rarely. I don't feel comfortable teaching the autoharp, although many have tried to cajole me to attempt it over the years. The main reason I don't teach is basically because I feel that the autoharp is a personal, interpretive instrument--perhaps more so than any other instrument, possibly excluding the fiddle. Anyone I've ever seen play the 'harp has had their own signature style. Even a simple thumb strum can tell stories of its own. Folks may want to play better, play faster or become more comfortable with chords. Those are all worthy goals, but I could never tell anyone how to play. Their hearts will tell them that. After all, that's where we hold the autoharp--close to our hearts.

My parting words of wisdom would be to suggest that you hug your autoharp as if it were your best friend. You can't help loving an instrument you have to HUG to play! *CF*

July 2008 Postscript from Eileen:

The contact info I had for Cindy has apparently expired because several attempts to get in touch with her met with failure. Perhaps someone who has updated info could forward this to her so

that Cindy might let us know the availability status of the following recordings she did with the Sweetwater band. (cindy@cindyfunk.com)

Flavored with. . .Sweetwater
Straight from the Heart
Christmas on the Farm
Remember When the Music
Full Circle/instrumental
Common Threads