

Autoharp Clearinghouse – March 1997 – Dave Kilby

Autoharpist **Dave Kilby**, to whom this issue is dedicated, hails from Peach Bottom, Pennsylvania--a small village about twenty-five miles south of Lancaster. His occupation is that of Member Services Officer and Head Teller at the Lancaster Red Rose Credit Union, where he has been employed for ten years.

Dave comes by his love for music honestly in that he is descended from musical stock, as well as having been exposed to vintage country, bluegrass and gospel music from earliest childhood. His paternal grandfather, Elder Blair Kilby, was a Primitive Baptist preacher who played clawhammer banjo. Dave and his brother, Tim, were given banjo lessons from their grandpa at a very young age. But, being left-handed, Dave recalls that he was never really able to grasp banjo technique. (Unlike the guitar, a banjo can't be "strung backwards" because of the fifth string.) Wave Kilby, Dave's grandmother, had an antique pump organ that she played by ear. She would sit the boys on her lap and place their little fingers on the proper keys. Dave recalls *Jesus Lover of My Soul* as being the first song he learned on the pump organ. Through the years, both grandparents nurtured and encouraged the boys' interest in music. Tim eventually became an accomplished banjo player in both the Scruggs and old-time styles.

Dave's father, Edmund Kilby, grew up in the mountains of Southwestern Virginia's Grayson County. During the nineteen fifties, he moved with his parents to Pennsylvania. Mary Kilby, Dave's mother, was a Carter from Ashe County, North Carolina, and is believed to be a distant relative of the legendary Carter Family.

Another musical influence on the Kilby youngsters was their father's sister, Anita Duncan. A skilled guitar player, Aunt Anita taught the boys the basics of that instrument. Tim, in particular, really took to the guitar, which has since become his main instrument. Still hampered by left-handedness, Dave discovered that the family's autoharp was much better suited to his capabilities. It was a *Silvertone* model, manufactured by the Oscar Schmidt Company and sold for many years through the Sears and Roebuck catalogs. Dave remembers accompanying one of his elementary school classes with that autoharp while they sang. Also, he and Tim, on autoharp and guitar, made music together at family gatherings throughout their growing up years.

During that same time period, Dave continued to have access to a myriad of sources of bluegrass, gospel and traditional country music. Promoter Bob Montgomery, who was known to festival and concert audiences as *The Ole Sheriff*, sponsored regular shows of top-name music acts at two nearby venues--Shindig in the Barn (winter) and Shindig at Cripple Creek (summer). Among the **many** performers who appeared there were Jim & Jesse and the Virginia Boys, the Osborne Brothers, Grandpa Jones, The Stonemans, the Oak Ridge Boys, the Kings Countrymen, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton, and Jeannie C. Riley. The Ole Sheriff also had a regular show on WIOU Radio, broadcasting from Ephrata, PA. It was "roots" country music, according to Dave, rather than what is passed off as being "country" on today's Top 40 stations.

The Kilby family's summer vacations took them back to the hills of Virginia and North Carolina to visit relatives. The focus of these gatherings was almost always music making. In addition to the participation of various family members, musician friends became an integral part of these reunions. Among them were guitarist and guitar builder Wayne Henderson and his mandolinist brother Max (who plays with the Grayson Highlands Band). The late E.C. Ball, a renowned guitar player and gospel singer was often present as well, as was fiddler and luthier Albert Hash.

Dave attended Solanco High School, where he honed his vocal talents as a member of the chorus and chorale. He also took part in a number of high school musicals, which resulted in his being honored with an award for Outstanding Senior Male Vocalist. At Millersville University, Dave sang in the college choir. Because he worked part-time to support his studies, the autoharp spent some time on the back burner while Dave completed his education. However, upon graduating with a degree in Business Administration in 1983, Dave purchased a 21-chord Oscar Schmidt Autoharp--and was soon back into the thick of things playing in the parking lots of fiddlers' conventions and festivals. Dave says he would wander from one group of musicians to another until he found himself in an "autoharp friendly" atmosphere.

Around 1990 or 1991, someone showed Dave a copy of *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. He copied down the address, subscribed, and says it was the beginning of a whole new chapter in the story of his association with the autoharp.

Another significant turning point occurred at the Lancaster County Fiddlers' Convention. It was there that Dave made the acquaintances of Catharine See, who plays lap dulcimer, and guitarist Jay Charles. The two musicians were sharing some tunes under a pavilion. Dave was so enthralled by the sweetness of their music that he took his autoharp out of its case and began quietly strumming along. The duo soon became a trio known as the *Appalachian Players*. Their first official performance was for a Sunday evening program of Special Music at Catharine's church in Lancaster. Soon, they were in demand not only for various church functions, but were also invited to appear at nursing homes, craft shows, civic organization events and family reunions. Instead of merely performing before their audiences, the *Appalachian Players* strive for audience participation by incorporating sing-a-longs and children's songs into their presentations. Together now for nearly five years, the group continues to be encouraged by the positive response to their "brand" of music.

During the summer of 1992, Dave attended the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering for the first time, and relates that he was in total awe at the magnitude of the talent that he witnessed on that occasion. It was there that he initially saw and heard George Orthey's Dulci-Harps and, shortly thereafter, placed an order for a 21-chord *Mary Lou Signature Star* chromatic instrument with a redwood soundboard. Three years later, Dave took delivery on a C-F diatonic *Gospel* model autoharp made by Tom Fladmark.

Dave's "sound" was so much improved through his acquisition of these custom-made instruments that he decided to put into action a long-time plan to make a recording of instrumental sacred music featuring the autoharp. Other events contributing to that decision were the deaths of three family members within a calendar year (Grandma and Grandpa Kilby and Uncle Bob Duncan). The album, entitled *Autoharp Praise*, was dedicated in memory of

those loved ones. Brother Tim contributed greatly to the success of the project by way of his guitar support.

In addition to the inclusion of a favorite hymn of each of the deceased family members, the concluding track on the album, *An Evening Prayer*, was in tribute to The Ole Sheriff--who always ended his radio programs by playing that record. Dave credits sound engineer Keith Kupp, who is also a multi-instrumentalist, for taking great pains to insure that the autoharp was voiced in a becoming manner. The recording, which has sold very well, is receiving widespread distribution from sources such as County Sales in Floyd, VA and the Lawrence Record Shop in Nashville, TN. It is also available through various Christian bookstores. In respect to airplay, selections from *Autoharp Praise* have been broadcast from WAMU-88.5 FM in Washington, DC, WPTG-107.9 FM, Williamsburg, VA and WGCB-96.1 FM in Red Lion, PA.

In August of 1996, Dave Kilby emerged victorious in the Autoharp Contest at the prestigious Old Fiddlers' Convention in Galax, VA. His winning tune was *Victory Rag*, which Dave says was inspired by hearing John Hollandsworth play the number a few years back at Mountain Laurel. Oddly, someone else claiming to be Dave collected his blue ribbon and prize money. The imposter was so bold as to allow himself to be photographed accepting the prizes. He was never apprehended but, several months later, Dave **was** given a replacement check.

A highlight of Dave's autoharp "career" thus far was in being invited, on two occasions, to join The Lewis Family on stage at the Mennonite High School in Lancaster. Dave and Little Roy Lewis played an autoharp duet of *Home Sweet Home* in May of this past year, and did *In The Sweet By And By* at the December show.

Last July, Dave was among the entertainers during a lunch stop for a group of 500 bicyclists participating in an event called **Cycle Across Maryland**. In September, he performed alongside other musicians at the **International Teddy Bear Festival** held at Bird-In-Hand, PA. Then, in October, Dave was invited to entertain at **Pumpkin Patch Days** at the Landis Valley Museum. He has also performed over radio station WITF in Harrisburg, and was honored to provide the music for an Amish high school reunion.

As a member of the Mt. Carmel Primitive Baptist Church in Bel Air, MD, Dave performs twice monthly with the congregational shape note singers at nursing homes and other extended-care facilities as well as providing unaccompanied music for worship services at the church. The group has made two cassette recordings, *Faith of Our Fathers* and *Awake*. Dave also belongs to the Lancaster County Folk Music and Fiddlers' Society, and is Treasurer of the Wakefield Lions Club. He is eagerly awaiting the onset of the 1997 festival season, and looks forward to adding to his circle of autoharp friends along the way. **ER**

Autoharp Praise is available directly from Dave on compact disc for \$15 and cassette for \$9 (postpaid). Send orders to: Dave Kilby, P.O. Box 206, Peach Bottom, PA 17563.

January 2008: Please keep in mind that the above article was written ten years ago. Dave is a member of the Cyberpluckers, and will most likely verify the accuracy of his contact info and the availability of his autoharp recording.