

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - October 1991 - David Morris**

This issue of the Autoharp Clearinghouse is dedicated to David Morris, who was born and raised in the midst of the rich mountain culture near Ivydale, West Virginia. David learned his first music at home from his parents Dallas and Anna. His grandmother, Lula Jane Hill, taught him old hymns and ballads. His grandfather, Amos Morris, played the old-time clawhammer style of banjo, as did his father. Many members of this isolated rural community played music on the fiddle, banjo and guitar and would come by David's home for an evening of picking and singing. Several of these musicians became quite famous later on for their playing of the old style central West Virginia traditional music. David still sings the gospel songs he learned at church and later sang on talent shows at Clay County High School.

His first professional engagement was in the early sixties when he and his brother "Fiddlin' John" presented a concert of their "homemade" music at Normantown High School in Gilmer County, West Virginia. At this time, David was an Art and Social Studies major at Glenville State College. He first performed at the West Virginia State Folk Festival in 1963. He has continued to play there each year since, missing only during his 1967-1968 tour of duty as a combat medic with Delta Troop Third Squadron of the Seventeenth Air Cavalry in the Republic of Vietnam. David has played at two world's fairs. First, in 1965, he was selected to represent West Virginia folk music at the New York fair. In 1982, he represented Berea College, Berea, Kentucky at the Knoxville, Tennessee fair.

David has had extensive experience in organizing old-time and bluegrass music festivals. He, his brother, and their parents hosted the Morris Family Old-Time Music Festivals at their farm in Ivydale from 1969 to 1973. Many of the finest traditional musicians in the country performed at these festivals. Attendance reached 7,000 in 1971 with people from 36 states present. A film by Robert Gates of Charleston, WV, which documents the 1972 festival, won first prize from a field of 33 entries at the 1987 West Virginia International film festival.

In the early 1970's David and John received two grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and one from the National Endowment For The Arts to help organize grass roots folk festivals in communities throughout the Appalachian Mountains. The most successful of these festivals was held on Sodom Laurel Creek in Madison County, North Carolina. In 1975, David received a Rockefeller grant to produce a public television documentary concert entitled Where The Twisted Laurel Grows, which featured top folk artists from several states.

David has also produced many country/western and variety shows. In 1985, he booked and produced the shows for the grand reopening of the Capitol Plaza Theatre in Charleston, WV. The 1,100 seat facility, which was built in 1911, was completely restored by Renaissance Productions. This series of shows starred some of the best--known acts in country and bluegrass music, as well as performances by the Charleston Symphony.

David, himself, has shared the stage with many great artists including Johnny Cash, Bill Anderson, Cal Smith, Jim Ed Brown and Helen Cornelius, Billy Ed Wheeler, Tex Ritter, Charlie Walker, John Conlee, Johnny Russell, Kenny Price, Billy "Crash" Craddock, Stella Parton, Willie Nelson, Chet Atkins, Lester Flatt, Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, Mac Wiseman, Doc

Watson, The Osborne Brothers, J.D. Crowe and the New South, the Country Gentlemen, Eddie and MarthiAdcock, The Dillard's, Byron Berline, The Boys From Indiana, The Red Clay Ramblers, Mike Seeger, Bryan Bowers, Norman Blake, Grandpa Jones, Bradley Kincaid, Stringbean, Hazel Dickens, Merle Travis and Kathy Mattea.

David and John served as reform leader Jock Yablonski's campaign musicians in his 1969 attempt to overthrow the corrupt leadership of the United Mine Worker's Association. He was active in the black lung and anti strip mine movements, and David also served in both of Arnold Miller's campaigns for the presidency of the UMWA. He performed at the 1972 and 1976 UMWA conventions and was honored to sing the national anthem at the opening ceremony of the 1979 international convention.

The Morris Brothers Band did several pieces of Music for the 1977 Oscar winning documentary Harlan County U.S.A. David did the music for the B.B.C. film In A Dead Man's Shoes and was the subject of an award winning French National Television film Appalachian Lifestyles In West Virginia.

On 5 July 1985, he sang Coal Tattoo and Dark As A Dungeon as his friend Arnold Miller was laid to rest on a hillside in the West Virginia coal fields. Arnold had stopped to give David a ride when he was hitchhiking to Charleston to find work after his return from Vietnam.

For many years David Morris has served the people of his beloved mountains as an artist. He has sung at their funerals and weddings, in struggle and in triumphant celebration of the culture. His art has been called for at the important rites of passage in the lives of the people. He is counted upon to know what is appropriate to say, to sing and to do.

He is a man who has been deeply involved in the issues of his time and his place, yet is still strangely apart. There is an aura of days and events long past surrounding this man. His eyes betray a wisdom and a sensitivity far beyond his years. There is a magic in his music that transports the listener to another time and another place.

David Morris is a singer, an instrumentalist and a songwriter, but he is a philosopher and a storyteller in addition to his artistic talents. He is a man who was pushed into cruel maturity by the harsh reality of war. His is the eternal struggle to lead a humane life in an often inhumane world. In the final analysis, it is his art that has risen to each occasion and has been his salvation.

Now he sings hauntingly lyrical pictures as a painter wields his brush. He sings from deep within his soul and his music unites his listeners with the universal things in our humanity that make us feel as one. David displays a delightful balance of humor and honesty. Many of his songs and stories are hilarious, but even the ones which deal with harshness leave you with a promise of hope. His rendition of Palace Grand (Lady Mary) makes me cry every single time that I hear him sing it. The ability to convey this type of emotion is a very rare gift indeed.

In 1985, David was accepted into the prestigious North Carolina visiting artist program. He served for two years at Rowan Technical College in Salisbury. Then, in 1987, he brought his

talents to the Central Carolina Community College in Sanford where he "did at least four hundred concerts" for the people of Lee, Harnett and Chatham counties.

By now you're probably wondering when, and how, the autoharp fits into this picture--and I'm getting to that! David recalls being exposed to the instrument on numerous occasions during his growing up years. A "Mrs. Chapman" and a "Miss Marybelle Workman" both strummed lap-style autoharp to accompany their singing of hymns and ballads. David must have been at least somewhat impressed to have remembered the incidents all these years. But, it wasn't until his freshman year in college that he was really "turned on" by the instrument. An entertainer named Mark Moore came to David's area and did a concert. Mark had a black A-model Oscar Schmidt autoharp that he played, Appalachian style, with finger picks. This was the first time that David had heard melody coming from an autoharp, and it was a revelation to him and a turning point in his musical life. Mark Moore also aroused David's awareness of the need not only to keep traditional music alive, but to "spread the word".

Two days later, David borrowed an autoharp from the college music department. Since he already knew chord progressions from playing the guitar, he was able to pick out the melody on three-chord songs in just a few days. That was in 1962 and the autoharp has been an integral part of David's music since that time.

His instrument of choice is the 12 or 15-bar Chromaharp, of which David has several. He does a few modifications on the 'harps, including adding five more wound (guitar) strings to the lower end, which he feels gives the instrument a much fuller sound. David advocates applying silicone glue to the chord bar felts to give them added life, and he thinks it makes sense to move the chord bar assembly down, when space allows, to allow for more playing room on the higher strings. David lowers his chord bar action by gluing a double thickness of 1/4" strips of wide rubber bands onto the top of the end of the bar that covers the short strings. (Note: 3M Mounting Tape also works and needs no glue.) In reference to picks, David likes the sound of heavy gauge Dunlop brass finger picks and a National plastic thumb pick.

While he plays in **all** of the "autoharp friendly" keys, David feels that "F" is best suited to the instrument because it spans the whole 'harp from the lowest string to the highest. He plays strictly chromatic autoharp and avoids fiddle tunes, feeling that there are more than enough fiddlers around to cover that base! With tongue in cheek, David says that he emphasizes the harp half of the autoharp in his style of playing. "I drive my auto. I play my harp." He doesn't read music, nor does he use tablature. David Morris is one of those fortunate people bestowed with the ability to play by ear. And play he does.

David's two earlier recordings, with autoharp, are no longer available, but there are still some copies in existence. *From Grandfather's Land* was a tape of wonderful Scottish ballads, with just enough tear jerk to make them effective. In terms of vocals, David is so easy to listen to when he delivers a song that, the more I play him, the more I like him. The second tape *David Morris--Mostly Gospel* includes instrumental autoharp versions of fourteen sacred and Christmas melodies. (His arrangement of Silent Night earned him a standing ovation when he closed a show for Kathy Mattea in Charleston, WV last December.)

The first of the two currently-available cassettes is *David Morris-- Autoharpist*. This all-instrumental recording belongs in the music library of every autoharp aficionado. Cuts included are *My Old Kentucky Home*, *Wreck Of The Old 97*, *Rosewood Casket*, *Listen To The Mockingbird*, *River Shannon*, *Home, Sweet Home*, *Mary Of The Wild Moor*, *Blues*, *Over The Waves* and *Just As I Am*.

On David's most-recent recording *Song Weaver*, the autoharp was "sent out for coffee" on all but the title cut. However, within the vocal selections, David infuses every lyric with inspirational vigor. His Johnny Cash/Waylon Jennings type voice is perfect for his chosen repertoire. Somehow, David manages to revitalize old songs and make you think you are hearing them for the first time. Included on this recording are *Cherry River Line*, *In The Pines*, *Wild Rose Of The Mountain*, *I'll Think Of You*, *Oh Come Angel Band*, *Shiloh Hill*, *Last Letter Home*, *Jesse James* and the lone instrumental, *Song Weaver*.

Along with Bryan Bowers, David taught autoharp the first two years that it was offered at Augusta (1983 and 1984). He returned to Elkins in 1989 to be the instructor for the autoharp portion of Old Time Week. Just recently, David was one of the guest instructors for the Advanced Autoharp Sampler class, also at Augusta.

David, his wife Christine and their family are currently in the process of moving to Ohio where Christine has secured a teaching position.

For further reading about David Morris, I refer you to an interview by Becky Blackley in the Summer 1990 issue of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine. The piece was reprinted in Volume 10 of Ms. Blackley's *Care and Feeding of the Autoharp*.