

Autoharp Clearinghouse - July 1994

Dean Sapp

The first time that I was privileged to catch a Dean Sapp stage performance was as part of a benefit show for a little girl who needed an organ transplant. After getting better acquainted with him, I came to realize how typical that act of compassion and charity had been of this man. Just recently, Dean and his band gave of their time and talent to help raise funds for fellow bluegrass Jesse McReynolds, who has fallen into difficult times due to multiple family illnesses. Those are just two of many such instances of Dean's generosity to, and his consideration for, folks in need. Along with his hand, Harford Express (named for a county in Maryland), Dean performs regularly at bluegrass festivals and gospel shows up and down the east coast. Allow me, if you will, to tell you the music-related background of the gentleman to whom this issue is dedicated.

In almost any field of endeavor, a select few are born with an enormous, seemingly inexplicable, talent. One such person, Dean Sapp, came into this world in Wilmington, Delaware...with his family moving to Nottingham, Pennsylvania when Dean was six years old. A strong case might be made here for genetics, since both of Dean's parents were related to long lines of pickers and singers. His father's people were well known throughout the mountains of North Carolina as players of fine traditional music, and they brought it with them when they migrated north in 1943. Mary Miller Sapp, Dean's mother, is the sister of John Miller (a talented regional musician from Mouth-Of-Wilson, Virginia) as well as Charles Miller and the late Sonny Miller...both of whom will be further discussed momentarily. Another relative, Dean's great uncle Slick Miller, had been a member of the renowned North Carolina Ridge Runners band.

Dean says that he can't remember a time when there wasn't at least one autoharp around the house. Among the various instruments accessible in Dean's childhood home was a Sears and Roebuck A-Model which both of his parents played. However, Dean's personal inspiration toward the instrument came when he was in the first grade and saw Mother Maybelle Carter on a telecast of The Louisiana Hayride. Even before that fact became known to me, I had detected Maybelle's influence in Dean's playing, as nearly every song he does is infused with her trademark hammer-ons as well as the signature Carter Family rhythm lick.

Dean also learned to play guitar and banjo at an early age in order to accompany his Uncle Bussie (Charles) on autoharp. The duo has long been the center of attention at family gatherings, and they are also usually sought out at area jam sessions. Dean remembers seeing Kilby Snow, Mike Hudak and The DeBusk-Weaver Family perform frequently in bygone days and says, "Most places we went there was always somebody with an autoharp."

Growing up near both Sunset Park and the New River Ranch music parks, Dean was blessed with the good fortune of spending nearly every weekend at one or the other of those venues (sometimes both!). His Uncle Sonny, an almost-legendary fiddler before his untimely death, played with the New River Boys and also with Del McCoury and the Dixie Pals. Having an uncle with "connections" was like being related to one of Santa's elves for a young boy smitten

with music. Dean had access to the likes of Flatt and Scruggs, Mac Wiseman, Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, Charlie Moore, Merle Travis and countless others who graced those West Grove, Pennsylvania and Rising Sun, Maryland stages on any given summer weekend. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Dean absorbed some of his musical talent through osmosis.

Also among the founding members of the New River Ranch house band were the brother and sister team of Ola Belle and Alex Campbell. Dean refers to Ola Belle (Campbell) Reed as his adopted grandmother, and credits her with encouraging him and helping him to develop his strong singing style.

As a teenager, Dean saw The Byrds and The Critters use electric autoharps on television and acquired one for his own use in garage jams with members of his peer group. However, his interest in "heavy metal" autoharps was short lived, and Dean soon returned to the acoustic bluegrass, gospel, old-time and traditional country music into which his roots were so firmly established.

The band, Dean Sapp & Harford Express, was first formed in 1969. Over the years, the ensemble has drawn from the unusually deep pool of bluegrass musicians that reside in the northeastern region of Maryland and the southeastern part of Pennsylvania. Only Dean and banjo player George Osing are original members but, despite the inevitable changes in personnel, the band has managed to stay admirably intact as a tight and cohesive unit over the years. Dean and "the boys" love to perform the music of Lester and Earl, Merle Haggard, Mac Wiseman and some of their other idols. Impersonations add another facet to Dean's shows, and he is especially adept at doing Lester Flatt classics such as *You Are My Flower* and the Martha White Flour theme.

Don't let me leave you with the impression, though, that Harford Express does primarily the material of other bands. Although Dean has incorporated the many different musical influences with which he grew up, that is but a part of the total picture. An accomplished songwriter, Dean has penned a good portion of the group's songs, and all of his sidemen have contributed original instrumental tunes to the band's repertoire. Dobro player Ray Lewis has added more than a smidgen of forties and fifties country music to the band's overall sound.

A devout Christian, Dean also makes certain that several gospel selections are included in each set that the group does. His powerful, expressive voice and the band's unique melodic backup to slower songs give their sacred tunes an especially meaningful effect. Their influences notwithstanding, the Harford Express sound is one that is distinct and totally their own. This is a band whose reputation is not yet as widespread as it deserves to be. However, with five (going on six) albums under their belts and appearances at major festivals, fairs et cetera, it is most certainly only a matter of time.

Dean plans to have a Harford Express booth this coming September at the International Bluegrass Music Association Trade Show in Owensboro, Kentucky. That undertaking should serve to bring the group to the attention of the movers and shakers in the industry. (Filling out the roster of Harford Express' five musicians are Danny Curtis on mandolin and Tom Reeves playing bass.)

As an individual, Dean's virtuosity becomes apparent as he demonstrates his mastery over a wide spectrum of instruments. His highly-developed sense of music rings forth from the strings of whatever instrument that happens to be in his hands at any given moment. Likewise, his impeccable timing, impressive array of dynamics and innovative arrangements are indicative of everything he does. As if that weren't enough, Dean is also gifted with perfect pitch, and he is more than capable in the capacity of sound man.

It has been said that only a fool tests the depth of the water with both feet and, possibly with that in the back of his mind, Dean has maintained his day job as a carpenter until just a short time ago. Having worked with wood for most of his life, it seemed only natural that he was ultimately drawn into the field of instrument repair. In respect to the "chorded zither," Dean had the following to say: "I've fixed a lot of autoharps, but the worst case was that of one of my own. Uncle Bussie gave me an old black 'harp he thought was probably beyond repair. I filled the bathtub with hot water, soaked it for two hours, took it out and clamped it to my work bench where I let it dry for two weeks. Now this 'harp was in bad shape but, I unclamped it, replaced the shattered back with a new piece of maple, refinished it (black, of course), strung it up, and it's as good as new."

In respect to his autoharp playing, Dean is unique in that he is equally comfortable playing either lap-style or in the Appalachian manner. His chord bar assembly is set up in such a way so as to accommodate both approaches to the instrument. As a matter of convenience, he is more likely to play the 'harp held to his chest on stage since a suitable surface is not always available upon which to rest the instrument. (According to the late Cecil Null, the nuisance involved in carrying a table around is why Mother Maybelle first started playing the autoharp cradled in her arms.)

Over and above recording with his own band, Dean is in demand from time to time as a session musician for other artist's projects. Most recently, he played banjo, mandolin and autoharp on the album *Who Could Ask For More?* by Dr. Lundy and Staff. That release was reviewed in the April 1994 AC, and I'll refer you to that issue for the particulars rather than repeating them here.

The albums to date by Harford Express are:

Can't You Hear Me Calling (LP or cassette)

Hard Times Have Been Here (LP or cassette) Long Black Veil (cassette)

Last Public Hanging (cassette)

Tears Of Joy (all-gospel cassette)

A compact disc project, entitled *Above The Dixie Line*, will primarily feature original material together with a few of the band's most-requested numbers. Dean plans to incorporate the autoharp into that album. These recordings are traditional in nature, and may be ordered for \$12.00 each postpaid from Dean at 123 Wood Road, Box 816, Aberdeen, MD 21001. Call him at (410) 272-5372 for booking information and upcoming performance dates. If you have instruments in need of repair, or if you live in the vicinity and want one-on-one music lessons,

call the store at (410) 885-3319 or (800) 246-3319. A feature story about Dean as a banjo player is in the works for a future issue of Banjo Newsletter magazine. (Note: See updated contact info below.)

On Sunday 29 May, Dean and Harford Express shared the bill with Mac Wiseman at Sunset Park...also acting as Mac's backup musicians. Somehow, it seems fitting that Dean's music has come the full circle since he was an awestricken little boy watching Mac Wiseman perform on that very same stage. **ER**

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<<http://www.gotech.com/performr.dir/deansapp/deansapp.htm>>

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