

Autoharp Clearinghouse – October 1997 – Dexter Ramey

Having been born and raised in Dickenson County, Virginia, **Dexter Ramey** grew up well entrenched in the music of that coal-mining area. Although he was exposed to the more worldly music during his formative years, by way of radio and television, those powerful early regional influences were to win out in the long run. Dexter's musicianship, whether it be in a vocal sense or as applied to the autoharp and hammered dulcimer, first came to the attention of folks outside his home region when he began attending the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia. It was there that I became an astute fan of Dexter's musical abilities, and also his friend. Later, I had the pleasure of reviewing an exceptional recording that he made with his long-time musical associate Kay Justice. It gives me joy to dedicate this issue to Dexter, and to afford him the opportunity to tell his story. **ER**

Before I begin, I wish to thank Eileen for inviting me to be featured in this issue. I very much appreciate the fact that she believes in me and in the music I play enough to deem me worthy of being the subject of a cover story. I truly consider it to be an honor. While I'm at it, let me also extend my thanks to Eileen for the wonderful review she did on my first album *Diamonds In The Rough* in the October 1996 issue of *AC*. After presenting her with a copy of the tape last summer, I was on pins and needles waiting to hear her impressions of my initial trip into the recording studio. Following publication of the review, I was on cloud nine! Receiving a favorable review made all the hard work Kay Justice and I did in the process of recording the project worthwhile. What a dose of encouragement! Now, on with my story.

My full name is Ersel Dexter Ramey. There aren't too many Ersels in this world, are there? I inherited that name from my father. My mother used to tease me and say that she came up with my middle name because she had a washing machine with the brand name *Dexter* printed on it. Once, in a fifth grade class, we had an assignment to explain how we had been named. After I told the washing machine story, I recall my teacher responding that it was a good thing we hadn't had a *Maytag*!

I am originally from Haysi, Virginia, a small coal mining town in the southwestern sector of the state. It is nestled in a mountainous area that borders West Virginia and Kentucky. My father worked in the mines for thirty-seven years, and was one of the early pioneers of the United Mine Workers of America. Because of cheaper coal prices overseas, the domestic mines began shutting down, and today Dickenson County has the highest unemployment rate in the state.

One of our county's claims to fame is that it is the birthplace of *The Stanley Brothers* who, until the untimely death of Carter Stanley, were legends as a duo in the field of bluegrass music. Ralph Stanley and his band, The Clinch Mountain Boys, continue to carry on the tradition even now. Needless to say, bluegrass and traditional country music were ever present in and around the area in which I was raised. Ralph Stanley plays clawhammer banjo as well as the three-finger style, so I was exposed to old-time music also.

Growing up in Haysi, there wasn't much for young people to do in terms of entertainment. As for me, it was church activities that kept me happy and contented. Our area was somewhat of a "bible belt" in that you could find almost any religious denomination there--each having its own

“brand” of music and style of singing. Those that I remember well were Presbyterian, Freewill Baptist, Old Regular Baptist, Pentecostal Holiness, Church of Christ, Primitive Baptist, Hardshell Baptist and the Holy Rollers. My father was a member of the Freewill Baptist Church and his father before him, Charlie Ramey, had been an Old Regular Baptist preacher from Elkhorn City, Kentucky. I recall waking up many mornings and seeing my dad sitting in front of our fireplace reading his bible while listening to the music of The Carter Family or The Chuck Wagon Gang on the radio. On Sundays, preaching and gospel music would be the only things allowed on either the radio or the television at our house.

Along with my brother (Johnny) and my sisters (Ann and Engie), I grew up during the rock and roll and Beatles era. Our father didn't care for that kind of music at all, but that didn't discourage us from wanting to hear it. Many times dad would take the glass tubes out of the back of our Philco radio in an attempt to keep us from listening to it, but Engie almost always managed to find where they were hidden and reinstall the tubes. On many occasions, we neighborhood kids would gather on one of the local hillsides and sing the songs of The Beatles at the top of our lungs. Engie later confided that, when she heard that Paul McCartney had gotten married, she thought her world had come to an end.

For a while, it seemed as though bluegrass and other more traditional forms of music took a back seat to rock and roll. However, in our area at least, we still heard a lot of The Carter Family and gospel music over the radio. The earliest Carter Family song I learned was *Sweet Fern* which, ironically, was taught to me by our next door neighbor, whose name was Janice **Fern** Cumbo.

Instrumentally, my initial instrument was a *Truetone* guitar from our local Western Auto store. There were a few guitar players among my mother's relatives, so I guess it was natural for my parents to conclude that I should play the guitar also. Not long thereafter, a second instrument was to enter our household when a great aunt gave us a very large pump organ. It was the type that required having the life pumped out of it in order to get any sound. Although our aunt never had any formal music training, she was able to play almost any song requested strictly by ear. I would certainly credit her with having been a primary source of musical influence in my early life.

Engie was the first at our house to learn to play the pump organ. She always managed to get a good sound out of it. In time, I became interested as well, and began to make chords before I even knew what they were called. During my high school years, I was in the band--where an attempt was made to teach me to read standard musical notation. Because I was impatient and didn't want to spend the time required to learn music reading, I began to play solely by ear. I did eventually take piano lessons, but only made it through the first grade of the John Thompson series of books.

Being a Young Christian throughout my secondary education, I loved to listen to all types of gospel music. The Stonemans and The Carter Family were my favorite groups, with Mother Maybelle Carter being somewhat of an idol to me. I thought that her melody picking on the autoharp was remarkable. The Stonemans were occasionally on television, and I loved hearing Pop Stoneman sing and play his 'harp. I knew then that someday I wanted to have my own autoharp and try to learn to play like those two pioneers of the instrument.

While attending Clinch Valley College in Wise, Virginia from 1974-78, I met John McCutcheon, who was the Professor of Music there at that time. It was John who introduced me to the hammered dulcimer. The music he played on the instrument was so beautiful and so impressive that I immediately fell in love with the sound. I was hooked! When John started teaching classes in Old-Time Music that included the fiddle, banjo, guitar and hammered dulcimer, the enrollment in the Music Department increased dramatically. I took his *Beginning Hammered Dulcimer* class as well as one on *Hammered Dulcimer Construction*, wherein I built my first instrument

He exposed me to areas of music that I had never before encountered, such as Sacred Harp or Shape Note Singing. I had seen the oddly shaped musical notes in church hymnals, but it wasn't until I enrolled in John's class on that subject that I understood the significance of those symbols. John also taught a series of traditional dance classes that included English Morris Dancing, Rappard Sword Dancing and New England Contras. Having had a background in square dancing, I learned quickly and, when John left his position at the college to pursue a full-time performing career, I continued to teach his dance classes for two more semesters.

It was also John McCutcheon who took me to my first musical festival, which was held in Knoxville, Tennessee. During one of his sets on stage, John accompanied himself on the autoharp while singing the old gospel tune *We Are Going Down The Valley*. I recall being deeply moved by the music that came out of his 'harp. Following that trip, I purchased an Oscar Schmidt 21-chord *Appalachian* Autoharp and, within hours, was playing melodic renditions of *Wildwood Flower* and *Lord, I'm Coming Home*. I was thrilled at how easily I could pick out the melodies of those songs.

Making the acquaintance of Kay Justice was another one of the highlights for me of my college years. Terry Gilley, a singing partner and fellow classmate, introduced me to Kay after having mentioned repeatedly this young woman he knew who had such a wonderful singing voice. After meeting Kay and her singing partner at that time, Evelyn Hamilton, I had no doubts that what Terry had said was true. Kay and Evelyn harmonized to perfection and, to this day, I have never heard anyone sing *The Sweetest Gift* as well as they did.

Kay and I, along with several of our mutual friends, began playing music together and eventually formed a group that was to become known as *Between Friends*. Although the band was short-lived, we were together long enough to perform during Amateur Time at the Carter Fold in Hiltons, Virginia. What a privilege it was to meet Janette Carter and to sing and play on that hallowed stage.

In 1975, Terry Gilley and I made a 45 rpm record of the Utah Phillips song *Green Rolling Hills*. The flip side was a medley of hammered dulcimer tunes entitled *Sculley's Reel/Childgrove*, which would later be re-recorded for the *Diamonds In The Rough* album.

By the time I graduated from college in 1978, Kay, Evelyn, Terry and our circle of friends had each gone their own way. It wasn't until five or six years ago that my path and Kay's were to cross again. By then, she had made a name for herself in the field of old-time music with her

singing partner Ginny Hawker. Kay had also recorded with Alice Gerrard and Hazel Dickens, and had become very well known and respected in the old-time music community. I, on the other hand, had stalled musically--sometimes going as long as a year without playing either my autoharp or hammered dulcimer. Not knowing how to find other people with whom to play had become a source of frustration and discouragement to me.

Through the years, I **had** learned some new tunes on both the dulcimer and the autoharp and, when I played them for Kay, she offered the encouragement I needed to renew my interest in making music. Along with some of her friends, we began to meet weekly at Kay's house to share tunes. I have learned a tremendous amount these last few years, and I have Kay to thank for much of my progress.

It was also Kay who made me aware of the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia and urged me to go there. That was in 1994, when I enrolled in the *Hammered Dulcimer Techniques* class taught by members of the group *No Strings Attached*. The next year, I returned for John Hollandsworth's week-long *Autoharp: Old-Time Repertoire* workshop. I got so much out of that class, and met so many talented autoharpers in the process, that I decided to enroll again the following year. Before taking John's class, I had never taken my autoharp apart, nor had I replaced chord bar felts, rearranged the bars or lowered the action for ease in playing. I gained the confidence necessary to modify my instrument so that it might better complement my style of playing. Likewise, John pushed each of us to stretch our abilities as musicians. It was, without a doubt, a turning point for me in respect to my relationship with the autoharp.

Long after the workshops were over, John continued to help and encourage me in respect to the recording of my album. I phoned him often with reference to problems I was having with my autoharp, and he never once acted too busy to patiently answer my questions. I can't emphasize how much I appreciated John's assistance and support.

Another memorable aspect of the Augusta experience is the wonderful people you meet there--many of whom, in my case, have become treasured friends. The exchange of knowledge and techniques among fellow students is an important part of one's musical education at Augusta. Almost everyone is more than willing to share their expertise, and to offer words of encouragement to less-experience players. It is because of classmates like Eileen Roys and Pat McGuire that I worked up the courage to attain my goal of making a recording with autoharp and hammered dulcimer. When I told Kay of my plan, she was also extremely supportive. With the benefit of her experience, guidance and talent we went into the studio and recorded *Diamonds In The Rough*. When it was released on 10 July 1996, a long-time dream of mine had finally been realized.

Since that time, Kay and I have performed at various local venues. However, the performance I shall always remember occurred last December at the world-famous Barter Theater in Abingdon, Virginia (where I presently reside). It is a prestigious theater that helped launch the acting careers of both Patricia Neal and Ernest Borgnine.

I am very fortunate and thankful to be able to count Kay Justice among my friends. Not only has she been blessed with an outstanding singing voice, but she is credited with helping to preserve old-time music and to pass it on to others through her wealth of knowledge on the subject.

In closing, I would just like to say that, when my brother John listened to *Diamonds In The Rough*, he was very excited about the album, and suggested that our next project be a gospel recording. John passed away in February of this year. Hopefully, sometime down the road, I can do that gospel album in his memory. At this time, I would also like to ask your earnest prayers for my sister Engie. Just two months after our brother's death, she was diagnosed with a form of cancer known as lymphoma. With God's help and with your prayers, perhaps she can beat the disease. I dedicate this article to her. Dexter Ramey.

Diamonds In The Rough contains Country, Old-Time and Traditional Instrumentals, along with four vocals: *Fisher's Hornpipe* • "Mudgey" Waltz • *Sculley's Reel/Childgrove* • *Diamonds In The Rough* • *The Church In The Wildwood/At The Cross* • *Old Pal Of Yesterday* • *The Great Reaping Day* • *Petronella* • *Sandy River Belle* • *Soldier's Joy* • *Si Bheag Si Mhor* • *Your Cheating Heart* • *Spotted Pony* • *When I Grow Too Old To Dream* • *Cluck Old Hen/Liza Jane* • *Wildwood Flower* • *Who Will Sing For Me* • *Da Slockit Light*

Available in cassette format only. Send check or money order for \$10 (postpaid) to: Dexter Ramey, 27294 Denton Valley Road, Abingdon, VA 24211-6234.

February 2008 Update from Dexter:

At the present time I may have about five copies of the cassette. The original project sold well along with reorders. I have been in touch with the recording studio about purchasing more copies of the album, but the recording engineer wants to turn the project into CDs and not cassette. He feels that cassette tapes are obsolete and CDs are the way to go. With the price that he has quoted me I need to decide if I want to put more money into *Diamonds In The Rough* or do a new project. I have some ideas for new projects and would eventually like to do an album of solely instrumental Christmas music. Another project that I would like to do is an album of vocals and instrumental music of Traditional Hymns that I grew up with. If this comes to pass, I plan on calling it *Time Has Made a Change*. My first goal is to do the holiday CD and, if plans work out, I would like to have it completed by next Christmas. Musically, I am still very much interested in and learning Old Time Music. I am still playing my autoharp and hammered dulcimer and am currently taking a beginner's Lead Guitar class at Mountain Empire Community College, Big Stone Gap, Virginia. In the fall of 2005 I finally got to meet Mr. George Orthey and purchased one of his custom made autoharps. He personally delivered it to me here in Abingdon on his way to the Memorial Service of Janette Carter. I have enjoyed this instrument tremendously and recommend an *Orthey* autoharp highly. Since buying the *Orthey* 'harp, I have not picked up any of the Oscar Schmidt Autoharps that I have. In the article I mentioned that I was from Dickenson County, Virginia also home of Ralph Stanley. Since *Diamonds...*, and as you may know, Mr. Stanley has risen to fame and fortune since his film debut in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* He is a big celebrity in Dickenson County and has recorded with a lot of Country Music Stars and is one of the biggest sought after performers in Bluegrass Music. As for my career, I am no longer in Retail Management. At the same time that I was doing Retail Management I was also doing Adult Care. I am now doing Adult Care full time and am in a Business Partnership with James Potter. We currently own and operate an Assisted Living Facility named MalondaFaye Adult Care. On the third of December this past year, we were given an award for "Outstanding Long Term Care Provider of the Year For 2007." Our facility was chosen out of facilities from six counties and the cities of Bristol, Virginia and Galax of the Southwest Virginia area. Finally, on a personal note, I am proud to say that one of my great-grandfathers, William Ramey, was named "Founder" of Elkhorn City, Kentucky. Elkhorn is also the home of Patricia Ramey, a Country Music performer otherwise known as Patty Loveless. In closing, I wanted to add that my sister Engie recovered from her aforementioned bout with Lymphoma and will soon be an eleven year cancer survivor. **DR**