

Autoharp Clearinghouse - October 1994

Dr. James A. Smith

"Have Autoharp...Will Travel" reads the business card of Dr. James A. Smith of Huntsville, Alabama. By profession, James is a Christian Counselor and a Medical Psychotherapist. In addition to individual and family spiritual counseling, he is much sought after to speak, sing and play his autoharps at church conferences, retreats, seminars and workshop-type events.

Before going further, I must thank both Becky Blackley and Bob Mead for almost simultaneously bringing James to my attention. He had sent an audio tape of his music and some photographs to Becky, who forwarded them to the Clearinghouse. Meanwhile, Bob Mead mentioned during the course of a conversation that "There's this doctor down in Huntsville you ought to contact who plays a Tom Morgan autoharp." Not being one to let any grass grow under my feet, I wrote to James, who called me while I was in West Virginia and then followed up with an autobiographical profile. I found his story, as well as his application of our instrument to his work, to be most interesting and decided to share it with you. *ER*

"I have always enjoyed all kinds of music. My mom was teaching piano for twenty-five cents a lesson to neighborhood kids by the time she was in high school and, after that, she studied at a music conservatory for one year in Memphis. So, I grew up taking piano lessons and studying music theory until I was about fourteen. I began playing bass tuba in the sixth grade and played until my senior year in high school. I also picked up C-melody saxophone in high school, which I played in church. During that same time period, I sang in the Gilbert and Sullivan musical *H.M.S. Pinafore* with the community chorus. I also sang in a concert choral group for one year while attending a private Christian school in Asheville, North Carolina. Anyway, I grew up enjoying piano music, orchestra music, band music, choral music, southern gospel quartet music, hymns, folk music and a good dose of country music.

While I was off in the Navy (USS Rich DD-820, Cuban Crisis of October 1962), I began to learn to play the guitar. By the time I was in graduate school, I had a beautiful twelve-string Martin and played at pizza parlors and steak houses doing the material of Simon and Garfunkel, Peter, Paul and Mary, Glen Campbell and such.

It was shortly after graduation, in 1972, that I acquired my first autoharp. What wonderful music. I haven't played the guitar since! The 'harp produces so much more music and is certainly less cumbersome to carry around. About 1980, I was living in the Atlanta area and had the good fortune of attending a workshop and concert by Bryan Bowers. Later, I had opportunities to see Mike Seeger and John McCutcheon play their autoharps, as well as to enjoy their other talents. Through the years, I have played my autoharps in churches, retirement and nursing homes and at bluegrass festivals and various club meetings, as well as in conjunction with my work.

My first chorded zither was a ChromAharp. Later, I bought an Oscar Schmidt #100-12 Centurion, onto which I installed a fine tuning system. Then, I looked in an instrument maker's book for luthiers who made autoharps and came across the name of Tom Morgan. Since he lived in my general neck of the woods (Dayton, Tennessee), I had Tom build me one of his 'harps

around 1984. For all practical purposes, this is the autoharp that I most often play. I love the way it looks and, even more so, I love the way it sounds.

A year or so ago, I found a wonderful little twenty-three string, late nineteenth century Zimmermann autoharp of Philadelphia vintage. It was in pieces in its original wooden case, which also held one of those black metal tuning keys with the "Z" on the handle, and the wire music holder. Included as well were the yellowed pages of an instruction book, written in both English and German, several St. Louis newspaper clippings of that era and some song sheets, one of which is entitled, "The Old Musician And His Harp." The possible name of the original owner, A.B. Anderson, was on the case. The nature of the poems and songs enclosed leads me to believe that this person was a woman.

I took my newly-found treasure to Tom Morgan to do the rebuilding for me, and he did a beautiful job. His restorative process included regluing the instrument inside and out and replacing the tuning pins along with shim inserts to help the 'harp hold its tuning. Tom also inserted a piece of stainless steel to cover the end and hold the back and end block together with screws, added a rosewood cover for the end and replaced all of the original red felts, the strings and the springs. Finally, the instrument was cleaned down to the original finish and then revarnished. It is now better than new thanks to Tom. *JAS*

Editor's Note: On the aforementioned audio tape, James plays "Wildwood Flower," "Tennessee Waltz" and "What A Friend We Have In Jesus" on the Zimmermann autoharp, and it sounds quite good for an instrument nearly one hundred years old. During a more-recent conversation, James commented that the old 'harp has proven to be a "big hit" when he plays it for the elderly residents of extended care facilities. He also wanted to add to his profile the fact that his father had learned to play the harmonica late in life, and that he and James had spent many happy hours playing harmonica and autoharp duets.

The Institute of Biblical Therapy, Inc. is Dr. Smith's non-profit Christian Mental Health and Counseling Center in Huntsville. He calls his program, "Strategies for Success in Life and Relationships," and the following subjects may be included in tailor-made lectures and workshops:

Feeling Good About Yourself Building a Healthy Family System Recognizing Unhealthy Family Systems
Understanding Why People Have Problems
The Characteristics of Co-dependency
Defining Family Roles as Coping Mechanisms
Overcoming Shame with the Assurance of Salvation
God's Forgiveness, Forgiving Ourselves and Others
How do we Protect Ourselves from Rejection and Disappointment? Understanding What affects Our Adult Patterns Of Behavior
How Do We Become Emotionally and Spiritually Healthy?
How Do You Work Through Grief? How Do You Manage Conflict?
What is the Purpose of Marriage?
The Pain of Divorce: The Danger of Remarriage

What is the Relationship Between Your Personality and Spiritual Gifts? Understanding Our Spiritual Developmental Process
When and How Does God Heal? Parenting Children
Parenting Adolescents
Mood Disorders - Adjustment Disorders
Personality Disorders
Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder Demonstration of Counseling
Model Gospel Sings

28 February 2009 from Dr. James Smith's Website:

James Smith, the Autoharp-Man from Al-la-Bam!, sings Old-Time Traditional songs accompanied by sizzling arrangements on his custom made Morgan-Autoharp that's guaranteed to bring a smile and a toe-tappin' good time. James is known for well crafted interpretations of traditional Irish, Scottish and Welsh folk songs (also gospel, blues and original compositions).

James is a veteran performer who began singing when he was age seven for a monthly chapel service at Shelby County Penal Farm near Memphis, Tennessee (along with his younger sister). Through the years, he has received training in vocal performance and has sung in musicals as well as choral concerts. During graduate school (1970-72) he played a Martin 12 string at the Coach & Six on Peachtree in Atlanta.

James is a member of the Huntsville Traditional Music Association and with the help of several members he hosts a HTMA monthly jam at the Constitution Village (local museum/1819 setting). He has recorded five CD projects of Old-time Traditional music: "Come from Alabama", "Uncle Joe", "Plenty of Haulin' to do", "Old Country Church", and "A Wee-Bit of the Irish". He competes in Old-time music festivals and plays concerts, private parties and church home-comings. (Group when needed: James' Gang)

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