

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - February 1992 - Drew Smith**

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* takes great pleasure in dedicating this issue to our long-time friend Drew Smith. Drew sent in the information for a detailed synopsis of his 1991 musical activities, which I shall preface with some background information.

As is the case with so many of my friends in music, I first became acquainted with Drew Smith via correspondence, when I ordered his play-by-ear Great All-American Autoharp Workshop audio tapes. A few years later, I was delighted to spend a weekend at his home in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, during which time I conducted an interview with him for another publication. Considerate person that he is, Drew not only arranged for some of his music pals to come and meet me, but we also attended a huge fiddler's convention with contests for most old time, Irish and bluegrass instruments. Since all of this took place just a few miles south of New York City, I recall being amazed by such a large traditional music community so close to The Big Apple.

After racing motorcycles for nearly twenty years, Drew turned to music as a "safer" hobby in the mid to late '60s. For a while, he played the guitar, and even tinkered with the banjo a bit, becoming part of a great circle of musical friends in the New Jersey/New York metropolis. He recalls first hearing an autoharp, on which was being played Carter Family songs, at one of the pickin' parties held regularly by the musicians in this area.

Later, at a concert by the New Lost City Ramblers in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Drew's interest in the autoharp was further sparked by the musicianship of Mike Seeger. As if that weren't incentive enough, he was privileged not only to meet, but also to have several private audiences with none other than the late, great Kilby Snow. Drew credits those experiences with having had a tremendous impact on the direction which his music has since taken.

At the Smoky Green Bluegrass Festival in 1976, Drew was invited to play onstage with Roger Sprung, Hal Wylie and the Progressive Bluegrassers. He has been a regular member of that band ever since and has recorded four albums with the group. These are *Southwest Winds*, *The Irish-Bluegrass Connection*, *The New And Original Sound Of Irish-Grass* and *Let's Pick*. This band has performed throughout the northeast including such prestigious places as the Lincoln Center and the main stage at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. The combination of Roger Sprung's tastefully-played bluegrass banjo and Drew Smith's assertive style on the autoharp dispels the accepted theory that these two instruments are not musically compatible. Along with friends Mike Resnick, Susan Sterngold and Pete Peterson, Drew also performs at events which lean more toward "old-timey" music. This quartet, using various band names, has been playing together for two decades.

Drew won the International Autoharp Competition at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas in 1984, and placed second there in 1986. That same year, he took home the big prize from the Old Fiddler's Convention in Galax, Virginia. His distinctive thumb-lead style, which he developed to enable him to play single-string melody notes on fast fiddle tunes, is becoming legendary. Playing a custom-made Orthey chromatic autoharp almost exclusively, Drew considers himself to be a string band musician. Drew is also the owner of a rare Oscar Schmidt

Festival autoharp that was made by master luthier Bob Taylor when Bob worked for that firm's factory in New Jersey. (Update: Instrument now in the possession of Todd Crowley.)

Drew has pretty much pioneered the playing of Russian music on the autoharp, through his association with renowned balalaika player Sasha Polinoff. An Interaction Lesson of the tune *Korobushka* (the peddler's pack) was in the January 1991 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. Likewise, Drew's arrangement of *Jenny Lind Polka* appeared in the premiere issue of that same publication (October 1988). Both lessons are still available.

Many of the major festivals and other events around the country have featured autoharp workshops taught by Drew Smith. In addition to the aforementioned play-by-ear instructional tapes, Drew engineered what many consider to be the definitive autoharp recordings...that being his series of four one-hour, all instrumental, *Winfield Winners Autoharp* cassette tapes. As his Music Series expands, the next planned release will be a tape featuring the autoharp in duet-type arrangements with many unusual instruments. Down the road, Drew would like to do some themed albums such as Christmas, gospel, bluegrass, old time, ethnic, et cetera. He is always open to suggestion, and invites feedback directed to the address included herein.

Drew's outgoing, friendly personality and his bubbling enthusiasm for the music he loves endear him to all that he meets. I can honestly say that I've never heard him say an unkind word about anyone. From my observations, I would declare that jam sessions are probably his first love. And, in this capacity, he has made great strides to erase the "idiot zither" stigma that has been associated with the autoharp for so long in bluegrass and old time music circles. Now, here's Drew to bring you up-to-date on his activities. **ER**

## **WHAT KIND OF YEAR HAS IT BEEN?**

**by Drew Smith**

Well, 1991 has been an exciting musical year for me starting off in January with a studio recording session during which I added autoharp to some numbers as varied as *Dream A Little Dream Of Me*, *I Am A Pilgrim*, *Finger Poppin' Time* and *I Second That Emotion*. Then, there was a musical weekend with the Pinewoods Folk Music Club in Saugerties, New York in February, followed by a trip to Chapel Hill, North Carolina to visit and play music with friends there. Almost any given weekend will find me and my companion, Pat Bogert, getting together with other musicians to pick and sing.

At least once a month, I will travel to Peekskill, New York to play music with my world-class balalaika-playing friend, Sasha Polinoff. Sasha has lovingly and patiently coached my musical buddies Mike Resnick, Susan Sterngold and me with one exciting Russian folk tune after another. You can hear him, and us, on the *Korobushka* interaction tape previously mentioned.

April found me in Natick, Massachusetts to perform and conduct workshops at the New England Folk Festival. May brought two more three-day festivals at Indian Neck and at the Pinewoods. In June, Pat and I went up to Westbrook, Maine for an invitational festival called Birds Of a Feather. It was great to hear people talking and singing not only with that "Down East" Maine accent, but also with a touch of French Canadian flavor thrown in to boot. This event was

followed by my attending the Old Songs Festival, sponsored by the Andy's Front Hall people in Voorheesville, New York.

July brought the first annual Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania. This weekend event was exclusively dedicated to the autoharp, with luminaries of the instrument attending from the four corners of the earth. It was a milestone for me in that this was my first opportunity to set up my Great All-American Autoharp Emporium (and pickin' parlor) booth, which turned out to be tremendously successful. And, the jam sessions that took place under the canopy of my tent were great fun as well. This was an outstanding festival that promises to be even bigger and better in 1992.

Later in July, I again had a chance to set up my booth, in addition to presenting several autoharp workshops, at the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in Binghamton, New York. This event offers a great atmosphere for jam sessions, from which I am never prone to shy away! I had a tremendous time playing with Harvey Reid, who was the featured autoharp performer there.

Well now, August was a real winner of a month too! My friends, Mike and Susan, and I headed to Elkins, West Virginia where I was a guest instructor for the Augusta advanced-level autoharp class at Davis & Elkins College. This was my first, but hopefully not my last, time to participate in this excellent program coordinated by Becky Blackley. Less than an hour after my arrival there, I took part in one of the most remarkable jam sessions of my entire life, on the porch of the Halliehurst Mansion. Among the many fine musicians present were Robin Kessinger, Harvey Reid, Bill Dudley and an incredible lady fiddler from Chicago who was playing some really hot swing tunes. After ascertaining that I was in good tune with them, I stretched my abilities to the limit, and our combined repertoires intertwined to create pure musical magic. I also had an opportunity to play with Neal Walters of the Mill Run Dulcimer Band, and he taught me the tune *Dixie Banner*. My workshop there went very well, and I'm happy to say that I've received a lot of positive response from it.

Following Elkins, Mike, Susan and I continued on to Clifftop, West Virginia for the 2nd annual Appalachian String Band Festival. As the name implies, its great old-timey music pervades both the campground and the stage area for three days. Then, we continued on to Galax, Virginia and the Old Fiddler's Convention, which has been an annual trek for us since 1977. In addition to the widely-respected instrumental and vocal contests, there is "major league" jamming that takes place there between musicians that have literally come from around the world.

I conduct a round-robin type of autoharp workshop each year at Galax on Friday morning. The rise in the number of participants and spectators would seem to indicate the ever-increasing popularity of our instrument. There were also more autoharp players (42) who entered the contest this year than ever before.

Apparently in the midst of a winning streak, it was John Hollandsworth (backed up by his wife Kathie on bass) who walked away with the much-sought after blue ribbon. This was accomplished "on the heels" of his win at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering.

After a Sunday-to-Sunday stay at Galax, we drove the 550 miles back to New Jersey in time to make it to our day jobs on Monday morning. But, August didn't end there. Two weeks later, it was off to perform at the Philadelphia Folk Festival with Roger Sprung, Hal Wylie and the Progressive Bluegrassers. We felt honored to have secured a top spot on the large stage Friday night, followed by the teaching of workshops on Saturday and Sunday. The performer's party on Saturday evening always goes on until the wee hours, making it difficult to get going on Sunday morning, not to mention repeating the routine of driving back home and trying to be conscious at work the next day!

Three days later, Pat and I flew to Omaha, Nebraska and then drove to Avoca, Iowa to participate in, for the first time, the Old-Time Country Music Contest & Festival. This one is organized and promoted by Bob Everhart (who edits *Tradition* magazine as well as being a performer and recording artist). The festivities include countless contests and stage performances that seem to go on around the clock. I had been eagerly anticipating this event ever since I had been invited to attend by Dora Miller. Dora is a human dynamo and the spark plug igniting all of the interest in autoharping in that area through her Happy Hearts Autoharp Club, based in Newton, Iowa. She has boundless and infectious enthusiasm, and performs a wonderful year-round service by organizing so many autoharp-related doings for the members of her organization. Dora ran the autoharp activity center every day of the festival, presenting many fine performers and instructors on both the autoharp and the hammered dulcimer.

I was joined, on the workshop staff, by Mike Fenton, Laurie Sky, Judy Ganser and Kathy Wintermeyer (who won first place in the autoharp contest). My prize for placing second in that competition was a Mountain Laurel kit 'harp, diatonic in the key of D, made by George Orthey. The instrument sounds really great, and I am honored to have won it.

It was wonderful meeting some new people at Avoca. Judy Ganser was the winner of the 1990 autoharp contest there. Laurie Sky, along with her father, Bill, performs from coast to coast as The Bill Sky Family. I had a terrific time playing with these folks, as well as with Mike Fenton. Pat and I intend to return to this festival.

In September came a banjo rally in Essex, Connecticut, which was held in a large boatworks right down by the water. I played with Roger Sprung, as part of the program, and also heard a wide spectrum of banjo players representing the plectrum, tenor, bluegrass and gut-string classical styles. Following that, there came the annual Roger Sprung "bash" at his home in Newtown, Connecticut.

October brought a super three-day weekend at The Folk Project, held at a summer camp in western New Jersey. Mandolinist Peter Ostroushko, one of the truly great talents in acoustic music, was the featured performer on this occasion. Activities start to taper off in November, allowing for more time to attend house parties and to devote to my sessions with Sasha Polinoff.

Early December brought forth a performance at the St. Bartholomew's Church for the American Guild of Organists (of all things!). Mike, Susan and Pat accompanied me on this one as we presented a program entitled *An Autoharp Journey Through Time And Distance*. This format allowed me to start off by playing my Zimmermann #1 3-chord single-key diatonic autoharp and

travel through time up to my present mega-stringed Orthey chromatic 'harp and to the double-strung diatonic instrument that I won at Avoca. In the first half of our presentation, we covered music from the 1800s through the 1920s and 30s up to swing. Then, the performance was concluded with a musical trip around the world, which incorporated songs from England, Ireland, France, Scotland, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Arabia and Turkey (I was still stuffed from Thanksgiving!).

At the time of this writing, there are some holiday music parties on my agenda and then, in January, another musical weekend at the Pinewoods with the Folk Song Society of New York. In my spare time, wedged in between my full-time job as Director of Production for M.E.D. Communications, I have produced Volumes 3 and 4 of *Winfield Winners! Autoharp*. Each is a full sixty minutes in duration with nine winners from the Winfield competition on each recording.

As my wintertime project, I hope to finish, and then release, an album of me playing the autoharp one-on-one with a large variety of other interesting instruments. As if this weren't enough to keep me busy, I'm also rebuilding my 1951 Harley-Davidson motorcycle--from the frame up (I've owned it since 1952).

So there you have it...a year in the life of this autoharper. Hope you are all having as much fun with your music as I am. *DS*

### **October 2008 update:**

Since my long-ago interview with Eileen Roys for the article she wrote for *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, I haven't let life pass me by (and neither should any of you!).

I have attended the Old Fiddlers' Convention at Galax, VA for 31 years in a row, and played on that stage as a band member with Roger Sprung and the Progressive Bluegrassers each of those years. Within that span of years, I have won the National AH Championship at Avoca, IA. Also the Winfield Championships and the MLAG Championships, each two times.

About 1980 I successfully pushed for the Fiddlers' Convention to include an Autoharp Competition, and I've hosted the annual Autoharp Workshop for most all of those years. In the autoharp competitions I have earned ribbons of all colors, some of them Blue. And I've been there when John Hollandsworth earned his blue ribbons and several times was awarded "Best of Festival." The Convention recognizes that the autoharp is a true old-time instrument, and has more contestants registered and competing than any other autoharp competition. (Note: For those of you "across the pond," a blue ribbon is first place here in the USA and a red ribbon is second.)

With Roger Sprung, I have performed at Lincoln Center in NY, and at the Philadelphia Folk Festival for 18 years. Playing in the many keys needed for playing in that band, I found I needed many more chords than my two-row 15-bar harp had.. That required adding missing needed chords for the custom TWO-row harps I developed.

At Jeanette Carter's invitation I have performed on the Carter Fold stage with my group, "Ben Borscht and the Beats." With this group we have competed many times in the non-traditional string band category, at the Appalachian String Band Festival, at Clifftop, West Virginia, winning multiple awards.

I have performed and taught at just about all of the festivals and venues featuring the autoharp ... including California Summer Solstice festival, California Autoharp Gathering, WVAG, the Ozark Folk Center, Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops, Swannanoa Gathering, MLAG, Cranberry Autoharp & Dulcimer Gathering, to name a few.

Presently, I play in our trio, "Triple Play All-Stars" ... and we were the band performing at MLAG in 2006. Besides autoharp, Robbie Wedeen plays guitar, and Rich Rainey plays bluegrass banjo. Each of us adds tunes and songs from our repertoires and we sing three-part harmonies. When Rich is not with Robbie and me, we perform as "Double Play," and we often take our audiences for a musical trip around the world.

At 80, I'm still learning to play the autoharp, after playing more than 40 years. I have found that NOT ever learning to read or write music has been a very large advantage in my playing! And that's because it caused me to experiment with and learn the sounds of all the notes in chords on my harp. Both 3-note major chords and 4-note seventh chords have distinctive differences. When attempting to learn a difficult new tune, I do it in stages ... and test out the sounds these chords produce. That's part of "playing by ear."

There seem to be two schools of thought about the use of diminished chords, or not. For me, I don't need them as I can find appropriate passing notes of a tune without the use of diminished chords. That's because I have my 'harp configured with 23 chords, in my TWO-row arrangement. It can play in every standard string band key, without worrying about the problems of missing chords in the limited arrangements that musicians experience playing three-row 21 bar autoharps.

With my system, I have searched out eclectic arrays of tunes from most every type of music. And I mean Old Time, Bluegrass, Dixieland, Show tunes, and exotic tunes from many parts of the world. Being able to play all that, I finally produced the following full hour-long CDs:

"Now, That's AUTOHARP!" ... "The ART of the AUTOHARP"

These two CDs offer examples of all the above type of tunes. With my band, we have a CD called:

Triple Play All-Stars ... "HAVING a BALL!"

And finally, I've produced FOUR Volumes of "WINFIELD WINNERS – AUTOHARP," each an hour long and featuring winners and finalists over the years at Winfield. They are an excellent source for learning winning tunes, which are recreated by players, who include the late Marty Schuman and Mark Fackeldey, also Mike Fenton, Will Smith, John Hollandsworth, Bill Bryant, Les Gustafson-Zook, Drew Smith, Tom Schroeder, and others.

All CDs are \$15.00 each plus \$2.00 postage. They can be ordered from me by sending a check made to Drew Smith at 529 Ardmore Road, Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ 07423. If you contact me at <drew-smith-autoharp-emporium@verizon.net> I can e-mail you a list of tune titles for some of the above CDs.