

Autoharp Clearinghouse June 1996 – Mark Fackeldey

For some, changing strings, cutting felts, and other autoharp maintenance is sheer drudgery; a necessary, but time-consuming, chore that cuts into one's few precious hours of playing time. But to luthier **Mark Fackeldey**, setting up a 'harp for optimum playability has always been a joy. Even before he began building the instrument, when his main focus was playing and developing his own style, Mark enjoyed spending hours taking his 'harps apart and trying to improve everything about them--from the springs to the dampers to experimental tunings and unusual chords.

Mark comes by both his musical ability and his tinkering ability naturally. His mother was a singer and guitarist who had been raised in Curacao and specialized in Spanish and Caribbean songs, and his father was an inventor and electronics engineer. As a child, Mark played the guitar in his mother's band. His father's love of classical music was also an early influence.

When Mark was fifteen, the family moved from his native Holland to the USA and settled in Southern California. Mark continued to play guitar and also took up the bass, which he played in a country band, and later in a swing band.

Mark's first autoharp was purchased years later as a gift for his former wife, who did not play any instruments. She didn't take to the autoharp, but Mark found it to be the perfect instrument for him. It became a vehicle through which to transfer his love for a wide variety of different musical styles. It was in attempting to fit these styles onto the instrument that he began experimenting with chords that were not frequently used on the autoharp, such as the minor 6th and major 7th chords. From the beginning, his style of bare-fingered playing had given him the ability to use picking styles that were not available to those who were dependent on keeping picks on their fingers.

Around 1985, a friend in California began collecting autoharps and asked Mark to help in the restoration of some of them. Through this work, he became familiar with the construction of the entire instrument. Since some of the instruments came to him without chord bars, he began to build his own wooden ones. These were so successful that he started replacing the aluminum and plastic ones on his factory-made 'harps with his own bars. The action was smooth and silent, and friends began asking if he could do the same for them? It was at that point that Mark first began to think of perhaps building his own 'harps some day.

Mark had married Linda in 1986 and, in late 1987, they moved to Florida where they found a thriving folk music community and an active statewide organization (the Friends of Florida Folk) to welcome them and provide venues at which *Harpbeat*, their duo, could perform. It was there that Mark met up with Marty Schuman--a true soul mate when it came to experimenting with previously-untried autoharp setups and musical styles.

By 1988, Mark's playing ability had progressed to the point where he was able to take first place in the International Autoharp Championship at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. His prize was a brand-new DulciHarp, built by George Orthey. Mark had the instrument apart and was changing the chord bars around before he ever left his motel!

Back in Florida, Mark also found other autoharp players who were interested in improving their instruments. These new friends became the first customers for ZephyrHill Autoharps, as he chose to name his new company.

From the beginning, the idea was to build a custom-made 'harp with excellent sound and playability, but that would not be out of reach financially for many people. To this end, Mark decided to keep the design simple, along the lines of the old A-model Schmidt Autoharps. By foregoing some of the "extras" such as binding, purfling and veneered sides, he would be able to keep the price down. His one exception to this Spartan design was to make an attractive sound hole.

Mark had always loved the sound of the A-model 'harps, and tried to determine the kind of wood from which they were made. He thought it was poplar or basswood, or maybe birch? He tried poplar with the intent of duplicating that old-timey sound, and found that poplar indeed had the sound, and was stronger than basswood (which, he later learned from Meg Peterson, is what Oscar Schmidt had used in the A-model).

In autoharp construction, the main factor in getting good sound out is the position of the bridge relative to the frame and soundboard. The type of wood determines the timbre, or "tone color" characteristics of the sound. How exotic or rare the wood is has little to do with getting optimum sound; construction does. As far as tone wood is concerned, the type used would be a personal preference. People may be surprised to learn that plywood makes a good tone wood on an autoharp, producing a very mellow sound.

Contrary to popular opinion, the sound of a stringed instrument comes mostly through the soundboard, rather than out of the sound hole. The successful luthier has learned how to transfer the vibration from the strings to the soundboard--and how that is done is each craftsman's secret. If you want to know how it's done, buy a 'harp and take it apart in thin slices! (Add salt and pepper to taste.)

For his chord bar setup, Mark chose a design which incorporated some of the best features of both the Oscar Schmidt 15-bar and 21-bar systems. The chord bar holders, whether two bars or twenty-two bars, are one unit--as in the O.S. 15-bar setup. Unlike on the Schmidt holders, however, the mounting screws are hidden from view. Inside the holders, the 1/4" wide bars travel on Delryn rod, as in the O.S. 21-chord bar setup. Mark is especially proud of his 3-row buttons, which people have praised for their comfort. He uses American Heritage strings, which are made by the same company as the major brand, and are half the price through Elderly Instruments.

Mark learned that an instrument doesn't start to age fully until the finish develops tiny cracks, like the crackling on a fine painting. So, he was happy to find a water-based lacquer that crazes, forms these tiny cracks quickly, and allows the wood to breathe and the resin in the cells to crystallize. An instrument can suffer from a heavy finish, which can actually stifle the sound

And, what 'harps does Mark have for his own personal use? His chromatic autoharp has fifteen chords and is centered around the key of F. He has single-key diatonic 'harps, also fifteen chords each, in G, D and Bb. He had a diatonic F, which he recently replaced with an F/C diatonic but, generally speaking, he doesn't like diatonics in more than one key because having some of the strings damped by lock bars doesn't suit his playing style. "After tasting the freedom of expression of a single-key diatonic 'harp played with bare fingers," he says, "playing any other way is like taking a shower wearing a raincoat." Mark also has a 'harp tuned in the Phrygian major/minor eight-tone mode, which he uses for "Mediterranean noodling" and Flamenco sounds.

Mark's personal 'harps all follow the same basic chord bar setup, which is the pattern for the key of F on the 12-chord #73 autoharps that came out at the turn of the century. It consists of the basic two rows of five chords, with the third row being the "fancy" chords.

As of this writing, Mark has completed about 25 autoharps. His latest innovation is a new design in lock bars which has them sitting underneath the strings rather than taking up the space of a chord bar. Mark plans to make building autoharps his life's work. As he is fond of saying, "It took me until I was fifty years old to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up." **LF**

On behalf of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* I take extreme pleasure in sharing this story in memory of **Mark Fackeldey** and in recognition of his **ZephyrHill Autoharps**. **ER**