

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - August/September 1995 - Fran Stallings**

A reminder that this is one of two annual issues that is combined (with the other being December and January). Let me begin it with an apology, and an explanation, for the delay in getting it to you. Two weeks into my stay in West Virginia, my seven month old IBM laptop computer suddenly went kaput. Unfortunately, a lot of the copy for this issue was on the hard drive. As you might expect, there was no one even remotely near Elkins authorized to do IBM warranty work. I had to ship the computer back to Annapolis, Maryland (which was an adventure in itself...meeting the Fed Ex truck at a Texaco gas station). As of this writing, I am still without the computer. Not only am I having to start over, from scratch, on a typewriter, but I was literally at a standstill for three weeks. Some news items, address corrections and such may be lost forever? In the future, I will know to put everything on a floppy disk. Again, my most-sincere apologies. I'm new to this modern technology, and made the mistake of relying on it. We live and we learn. Meanwhile, the *Clearinghouse* has received quite a few requests this past year for stories by, and about, performers who use the autoharp in conjunction with storytelling. The article that follows was written by Oklahoma musician/storyteller Fran Stallings...to whom this issue is dedicated. **ER**

Teenagers have a knack for deflating adults. "I don't know how I can write this autobiography for *Autoharp Clearinghouse*," I fretted; "I'm not really a serious musician." "No problem, Mom," quoth my 19 year old son Ben, "you're not a serious person." Storytellers don't get no respect.

People often ask how I got into storytelling. The fact is that I've always been a storyteller. Storytelling is my family's tradition, it surrounded me from infancy and, as the eldest of five kids, I had plenty of experience filling the demand for stories whenever someone older wasn't around. However, nobody considered storytelling an art form, much less a serious career, and I'm sure they never expected to see me on stage doing music.

There certainly was plenty of high-powered, serious music in the family. Grandfather played Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Schubert and more on his Steinway concert grand piano. Mother trained our ears by playing records of classical orchestral pieces and ballet scores, and got the opera on radio every Saturday afternoon. My own piano lessons began at age seven, but I didn't have the talent. The oldest of my brothers bailed out of several instruments before begging for a Sears guitar (he was going to be the next Elvis Presley). I inherited the blue-and-cream Silvertone monster when he lost interest, but the family, wiser by now, wouldn't pay for more lessons.

Luckily a high school friend shared what she was learning in folk guitar lessons. Together, we arranged songs from Joan Baez and the Weavers. That guitar kept me company through my teens whenever I slammed into my room to mope. As I built up my calluses and practiced my chord sequences, I sometimes daydreamed about running away from home and traveling the country as a modern minstrel, astounding strangers and earning my way with my music.

I proudly dragged it on the Greyhound bus for a summer visit to Mom's family in Ohio, but grandfather was not impressed with my earnest folk songs. "That's not real music," he grumbled. "Don't you want to take piano lessons again?" Only slightly crushed, I played folk guitar all through high school and college. My friends and I played and sang at parties and under the trees, but I never performed in coffeehouses or on stage. I mostly played "for my own amazement," as folks say. That old Silvertone was a good friend.

Meanwhile, my academic interests inclined toward scientific research. I majored in biology at Wellesley College. (No, I didn't know Hillary.) There, in a music history course, I was charmed by Medieval and Renaissance music. An alto recorder sent the old guitar into exile, and went with me to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin. Its mellow tones did not disturb my apartment mates, and I could play it quietly in the lab late at night while I waited for the stopwatch to signal sampling times. I even worked up some duets with a tape recorder, but it was all for my own solace and enjoyment. The musical dreams of my teens were buried in the dim past. I never thought of performing.

In 1968 I married Gordon Stallings, an Oklahoman I'd met when he was at MIT. We lived in Cleveland, Ohio while I finished my PhD (UW 1970) in a lab at Case Western Reserve University. I got an assistant professorship at Kent State University's Trumbull County campus. (No, I wasn't on main campus for the shootings.) Music was the last thing on my mind. All I played was the radio, as I commuted a hundred miles a day.

Gordon was a computer engineer, surfing the crest of the new technology, so we moved a lot. I taught at several universities, did a post-doc at the University of Michigan, and we started a family in Ann Arbor. When we moved to Bartlesville, Oklahoma in 1975, however, I found no place to continue the career for which I had trained.

Instead, I went back to my family's traditional roots in storytelling. The fact is, in retrospect, I can see that I had never quit. My university students had commented on the way I used stories to keep them awake and prevent them from forgetting key concepts: "Doc, we've decided your lecturing style is a cross between Margaret Mead and Carol Burnett." I told stories to my own children at home, and then at their schools.

By 1978 I was telling folktales at local events, and soon began traveling to a wider range of venues. By 1984, I felt that my solo story concerts could use a song for a change of pace. However, my untrained voice had such a narrow singing range that, if I accidentally started out in the wrong key, I ran out of notes...

An instrument would help. I got the old guitar out of the attic and found that, although I could remember my chord positions and progressions, some kind of nerve problem caused sharp pain in my arms and hands after just a few minutes. I could play long enough to get through a song, but couldn't practice long enough so that you'd want to hear it! I needed a different folk instrument which was portable (forget the piano), and which I could play while singing (forget the recorder).

I had heard autoharps at the Ozark Folk Center shows in Mountain View, Arkansas, but had never seen one close up until a friend let me borrow her old Oscar Schmidt. The chord buttons seemed self-explanatory. I picked the strings guitar-style with my nails. All the old folk songs came right back. Best of all, if I adjusted the strap very carefully, I could play without pain.

I asked Santa Claus (my parents) for a 'harp of my own, an OSI 21-bar. When Sears delivered the box early, I dove in (forgive me, Santa) and had some carols ready in time for our church's Christmas party. I let other people do the singing, though. It was hard enough for a novice autoharpist to find all those chords, and besides, the arrangements were either too high or too low for my voice.

As my storytelling work expanded, I realized I needed to improve my vocal volume and stamina. A trained friend diagnosed throat tension and breathing problems which had probably interfered with my voice all my life. She gave me a few warm-up exercises and some singing lessons, and suddenly it felt GOOD to sing! I discovered the joy of filling a concrete block gym with my unamplified voice, drawing it up from my toes and bouncing it off the back wall. My range and duration improved. I wanted to include songs in every program! At that point, the autoharp really moved into my act.

Finger picks took a lot of getting used to, and I still begrudge guitarists their infinite variety of chords. I can "hammer on," sort of, but it doesn't sound as good as on the old guitar, and "walk downs" don't have the same verve either. At least I **can** play the autoharp, while guitar may always be infeasible for me. I can also get some terrific effects which no guitarist can even dream of!

I can be playing music to soothe the savage beasts while waiting for last-minute listeners to straggle into the room. I can open with a song that invites imagination, memory, and emotions to help paint the pictures they will hear. A relevant song can make the transition between one story space and another, gently releasing the audience after a deeply touching tale or picking up the energy for a set of silliness. For a change of pace in the program, a ballad can tell a story too, compressing a fifteen minute narration into three minutes of high-impact lyrics, with emotional reinforcement from the music. I like to close the program with a reprise of the opener, to come full circle. I even close my teaching workshops with an appropriate song, a nice parting gift to my participants (and a way to keep them in the room while they fill out those pesky evaluation forms).

I also began experimenting with adding music and sound effects into my stories, inspired by the wild creativity of my younger brother Ken Oguss. Ken undoubtedly got the lion's share of musical talent in our generation of the family. He plays just about anything by ear and has been inventing songs and sound effects since infancy. Although he sometimes blames me for training him as a storyteller, I can blame him for first inspiring me to add autoharp songs and sound effects to *The Rooster and the Sultan*. When that went over well, I attacked other old favorites. A few, such as *Shingebiss and the North Wind*, have an on-going accompaniment behind the narration. This is the hardest to do, I think. I have taught workshops on this process at many storytelling conferences and folk music festivals, and did an Interaction Lesson on it for *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine in October of 1991. (For some good how-to advice in print, see

articles by Tom Schroeder and Marcia Bowers in the April 1995 issue of *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, pp 8-12.) I even began composing songs.

Until 1990, I only worked solo, and had never performed with another musician, although I enjoyed the jamming at Tulsa Folk Music Society house parties. I was always pleasantly surprised when I could figure out what key they were in, and where the chord changes were going! These folks' abilities to pick up new songs continually astonished me. They even picked up a new song of mine (*White Ships*) which was so freshly composed that I hardly knew the words myself, I had just finalized the melody on the way to the meeting, but hadn't yet figured out an accompaniment. Can you believe, they sang the chorus with me the second time it came around, and were playing multi-part harmonies by the third verse? I had always scoffed at musical comedy movies where a guy starts singing a new song on the street, and soon the crowd all joins in with an arrangement. Yeah, right. However, the TFMS folks showed me that, if you have the right crowd, it can happen! Nonetheless, I was still basically a solo performer.

Then, in 1990, desperately trying to put together a musical introduction and intermission interlude for a Women's History Week program of "HER storytelling," I met Gail Huggett of Jenks, Oklahoma. Gail had an extensive background in folk music, and was playing hammered dulcimer with a traditional dance troop in Tulsa. She knew seemingly hundreds of instrumental pieces with arcane names like *Planxty Irwin*, *Rose Tree* and *Swinging on a Gate*. All of this was totally new territory to me. An even greater void was that I didn't know that I didn't know how to play with someone. Years of solo performance had left me with timing and damage-control strategies that were eccentric, to say the least. I had to start from scratch, not only on the repertoire, but also on the whole approach to music. Thanks to Gail's patience, good humor, and peerless musicianship, we scratched up enough numbers for the program.

As it turned out, my OSI Autoharp's volume was inadequate for the (purely acoustic) job. At last I had the excuse I'd been waiting for... Arguing that the autoharp was taking an even larger role in my professional solo performances, I decided it was time to order an Orthey Dulci-harp.

With Gail's traditional repertoire (and the acoustic venue) in mind, I chose a G-D-A diatonic. By some miracle, we were ready by 8 March.

Playing with Gail was such fun that we couldn't let it stop there. After the Women's History program, we worked up other instrumental pieces and began singing harmonies on an odd mix of traditional and unconventional songs like *Overflowing Catbox Blues*. An Orthey chromatic 'harp joined us in 1992, to provide a wider variety of singing keys as well as the 7th chords I wanted for blues.. We performed at other venues, particularly historical and regional sites such as state parks and Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Looking back at the way we were both springing up green from the ashes of prior careers, we chose the name "Prairie Fire" for our duo.

We had so many demands for a copy of *Overflowing Catbox Blues* that, in the fall of 1994, we recorded *Cat 0' Nine Tales: Stories & Songs About Cats*. Gail wrote two instrumental pieces and an original song for this cassette, which also includes six other songs and a third instrumental, as well as my seven short stories (see review in the June 1995 issue of *AC*). We

were fortunate to get Moby Anderson to play string bass backup for us. Moby, who survived a wild and woolly youth as a professional musician, and now runs his father's oil field welding business in Tulsa, had jammed with us many times at church retreats, house parties, and Winfield campouts. When he can accompany us at live performances, Prairie Fire becomes a trio.

My primary work continues to be as a full-time free lance storyteller. But, even when I travel alone, I have learned never to leave my autoharp at home.

Music has found a place in every solo storytelling program I do. When I share the stage with other storytellers, I find that a ballad can be a good way to take a quick turn if others' stories have been running too long for our schedule. A song or a story with music can also provide a refreshing change of pace for the listening audience, especially if there's a chorus they can join in on.

Back in my lonely motel room, the music keeps me company just as it did when I was a sulky teenager. It even gave me the chance to live out a high school daydream. Several summers ago, thunderstorms had backed up flights for hours when I finally landed at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. At the departure gate for Tulsa, I sought a quiet corner to bide the time practicing a new piece and found myself surrounded by curious children, whose exhausted parents could barely lift a hand to warn them away from *The Strange Lady*. I saw that those folks needed a break, and the kids were about to run wild. "It's okay," I recklessly said, "I'm an Artist in Education with Tulsa Arts & Humanities." The parents nodded recognition, then fell back into a grateful stupor. The kids sat down on the carpet, and I entertained for the next several hours until our flight was finally called.

Although it wasn't as dramatic as my teenage daydream of musically calming the maddened multitudes in a major emergency, I think it filled a need. As I recognized the realization of that old daydream, I discovered another. Despite detours in other directions, I had indeed become the traveling bard I dreamed of. Who woulda thunk it? I hope grandfather is not spinning in his grave.

Much as I love the music, when I hear how other people can play, I refrain from calling myself a musician. (And I wish that musicians who take ten minutes to introduce a two minute piece would be more cautious about calling themselves storytellers. If they can hold the stage for an hour without an instrument, I'll concede them the title!) One of the most terrifying experiences in my performing career came several years ago when I lost my voice just prior to a long-promised charity benefit. Thank goodness by then I knew enough instrumental pieces to fill the time because that was ALL I was able to do.

I felt extremely uncomfortable in the role of Musician. The people were looking at me! You see, a storyteller "disappears" from the view of the audience while they travel in visions of their own imagination. When I couldn't take them there, when all I could do was play music, they started watching me instead! Panic time! No wonder so many musicians play with their eyes closed.

No thanks, I'm glad to include a lot of music in my programs, but I won't aspire to be a genuine "serious musician!" I suppose it's lucky that storytellers, by definition, are not required to be serious. *FS*

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