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During the fifteen years or so that I've been actively engaged in Music Journalism, one of the things that has given me the most satisfaction has been beating the bushes, so to speak, to flush out lesser-known musicians, and then bringing them to the attention of the appropriate sector of the traditional music community. In some instances, however, **they find me**. Such was the case when this month's featured artist happened upon a copy of this publication and got in touch. Several rounds of correspondence and a few phone calls led to a June 1998 visit by Fred (and Gerda) Bender to see the autoharp collection here at *AC* headquarters. After hearing Fred sing several of his more than fifty original songs (while accompanying himself with a ChromAharp), I was convinced that his was a story that deserved to be told.

Fred's initial introduction to the chorded zither was the familiar elementary school experience. He recalls, even then, thinking that there surely must be more to the instrument than lying it on a table and strumming chords behind singing. However, it wasn't until Fred was studying at Penn State University many years later that he saw and heard someone holding an autoharp Appalachian Style and picking out melodies on it. That impressed him to the point where he immediately purchased one through a mail-order catalog. In particular, Fred loved the sound of the instrument's minor chords, and soon began composing songs for it.

He served as treasurer of the *Folklore Society of PSU* and, through that organization, found others who shared his interest in "Hillbilly" and Folk. Early influences on Fred's taste in music were The Weavers, The Carlisles, Molly O'Day, The Maddox Brothers & Rose, Carl Story, James & Martha Carson, Hank & Audrey Williams, Mac Wiseman and Webb Pierce. They became his idols via both records and the radio.

In Somerset County, Pennsylvania, Fred met what he describes as "a precious lady named Verda." She taught him how to play the Hawaiian slide guitar, and Fred says that he took to it like a duck to water--adding that his favorite songs were often those at the **bottom** of the Hillbilly Hit Parade. (It should be mentioned here that, in those days, the term "Hillbilly" encompassed what we now refer to as Country, Western, and **Bluegrass** music.)

A two-volume set of books entitled *Somerset County Chronicles* provided Fred with material for two of his songs, which are among those included with this article. The tragic Casselman Flood took place near Grantsville, Maryland, and is related in *Buggy at the Casselman*. The rugged crags and crevices of Baughman (pronounced Bachman) Rocks near Springs, Pennsylvania were so named because of the gruesome event described in Fred's *Ballad of the Baughman Rocks*.

Following college, Fred worked on the staff of a Shamokin newspaper, through which he met Johnny Deutschlander, a ninety-year-old immigrant whose near-death experience in the coal mines at the age of eighteen inspired *Old Cable Wagon*. *Dear Pennsylvania*, as the title indicates, is a tribute to Bender's home state.

Drafted into the military service in the nineteen sixties, Fred took his guitar and ChromAharp with him to basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. It was his good fortune to be blessed with a sergeant who shared his interest in folk music. From there, Fred shipped out to Germany—once again with his instruments in tow. Through the Munich Post Special Services, he was called upon frequently to entertain the troops. Fred performed in concert at Munich's famed Burgerbrau Keller, and appeared in productions of the Munich Community Theater. It was also while on that tour of duty that he met his wife. (The Benders have two grown sons, Steve and Jens.) Following his discharge from the military, Fred taught English at the Kaufbeuren School in Germany for five years, and became somewhat of a world traveler during vacation periods.

Upon returning to the United States, he put in twenty years as a German and English teacher at Corolier High School in Denver, Pennsylvania. A second occupation was that of Travel Journalist and Photographer for the *Lancaster Sunday News* and several other area periodicals. Among the places that Fred traveled to, and wrote about, were Tibet, China, the Ukraine, Germany, Morocco, Haiti, Sicily, Hawaii, Egypt, Bali, Java, Ireland, Mexico, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, France, England, Ireland and Iran, in addition to many destinations in America. More often than not, he carried his instruments and his music with him on these excursions.

Retired from teaching in January of the current year, Fred is looking forward to being able to devote more time to pursuing his interest in music. He has collected a vast repertoire of traditional country and folk music from around the world, which he performs with autoharp, dobro, hammered dulcimer and 12-string guitar. A typical concert might include not only American, Scottish and Irish folks songs, but also a goodly number in German, Spanish and French. He also does phonetically-sung selections from places like India, Israel and the former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, as well as songs of his own composition. Gospel music is still another facet of Fred's musicianship.

On other fronts, Fred is a model railroad enthusiast, and also designs and builds Old World wooden models of toy castles. Both he and Gerda are avid travelers. He is anxious to have his songs performed and recorded by other artists, and invites inquiries. Fred may be contacted at: 506 5th Avenue, Denver, PA 17517-1102 - (717) 336-2236. **ER**