

Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1997 - Fred Watts

Fred Watts and his lovely wife, **Polly**, are “regulars” at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops in Elkins, West Virginia. It was there that I first made their acquaintance nearly a decade ago. Even before our class got underway, I recall observing Fred (wearing what I mistakenly thought was a Hawaiian shirt) on the porch of the Halliehurst Mansion singing Calypso-type music late into the night while accompanying himself on the autoharp. Later, it was my good fortune to travel to the Virgin Islands on a business trip, at which time I was warmly welcomed as a guest at the Watts’ home on St. Thomas. (By the way, the dive-from-the-sky-and-hit-the-brakes landing at the St. Thomas airport is equivalent to a Tower Of Terror amusement park ride!) Over the years, there have been numerous opportunities to renew our friendship, and it pleases me immeasurably to dedicate this issue in Fred’s honor.

The Watts family originally moved to the Virgin Islands for what they thought would be a brief sabbatical--and then just never left. Fred wryly observes that he has lived in the Islands for twenty five years now and they’ve only had three days of bad weather. Unfortunately, all three of those days had names--Hugo, Marilyn and Bertha!

In his “day job,” Fred is a lawyer, with offices in a stone Eighteenth-Century building overlooking the town of Charlotte Amalie. When not working or playing music, he is an avid sailor. Polly spends her workdays in the capacity of school principal. Because of its near-perfect climate and favorable trade winds, St. Thomas is a magnet for sailors--many of whom are also musicians. Fred relates that it was fun to legally represent Neal Young--although circumstances prevented the two from connecting musically.

Fred and Polly are members of a string band/vocal group called **Harmony Dem**. The word “dem” is used in the West Indies to emphasize a plural--as in “look at all the people dem.” Harmony Dem’s specialty, as its name implies, is harmony singing--whether it be music by Hazel Dickens or Bob Marley. Theirs is a pleasingly diverse sound, with a repertoire that meshes varied influences, and includes choice morsels for virtually every musical taste.

Although he also plays guitar and banjo, the autoharp emerged as Fred’s main instrument about the same time that electronic tuners became readily available. Prior to that, Fred says that it was always a big hassle persuading other musicians to retune to him. His instrument of choice is one that he describes as “a beauty,” which luthier/musician Keith Young made for Fred in 1989. Fred plays our instrument with an attack-and-drive approach that he refers to as “aggressive.” In so doing, his autoharp becomes ideally compatible with most of the other instruments which he encounters. Fred plays the autoharp as a lead instrument, filling gaps in the vocal phrasing of Harmony Dem. This holds true whether he’s playing *West Virginia*, *My Home* or Sam Cooke’s *Bring It On Home To Me*.

Fred seems to be gifted with an inborn sense of band dynamics. When it’s his turn in the spotlight, his breaks are tasteful, appropriate and imaginative. Especially noteworthy is the manner in which he weaves pleasant textures into his music. Fred’s penchant for novelty songs further distinguishes him among his autoharp peers.

He credits the instruction he received at Augusta from Becky Blackley, Mike Fenton and Michael King with widening his horizons on the autoharp. Notwithstanding the fact that Fred had been playing the instrument for more than twenty years, he had not previously received any formal lessons. He says he never could figure out how to keep up with the fiddlers until Mike Fenton showed him a thumb and middle finger roll that greatly increased his playing speed. Fred claims to be the BEST autoharp player in the Virgin Islands, but gets sheepish when asked if there are any others?

When Harmony Dem “plays out,” which averages once or twice a month, Fred “plugs in” using a pickup which has been built into his ‘harp. He is experimenting with the use of a condenser microphone inside the instrument’s body. Fred says that he “dances” when he plays, and can’t stay still long enough to enable an external microphone to amplify his autoharp.

For the last twenty years, Fred and Polly have been the organizers of an annual music festival known as **October Sunday**. Since its parking lot origins in 1977, attendance at the event has steadily grown to where it presently draws close to 4,000 people. The current site is an old WWII submarine base, which is located in a pleasant waterfront setting. Music from the French community, of Greece, Italy and the myriad of other places from which St. Thomas residents bring their traditions provides a remarkably divergent atmosphere. October Sunday is one of the most-popular events on St. Thomas, second only to the two-week celebrations of **Carnival** in April. Even though music remains the primary focus of Fred and Polly’s event, the atmosphere of a country fair has developed wherein different groups raise funds for a variety of community organizations.

Back in the autumn of 1991, thanks in part to a grant from the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, Neal Walters, Keith Young, Kit Putnam and Kathleen Gotzmer of the **Mill Run Dulcimer Band** spent a week as Fred and Polly’s house guests. In addition to performing the day of the festival, the MRDB members gave workshops in area schools, provided music for Saturday night and Sunday afternoon square dances and even took part in a local radio broadcast.

Several years ago, Fred and Polly developed an interest in Cajun music. After participating in that genre’s theme week class at Augusta, they claim they were “juiced.” Not long thereafter, Larry and Jackie Miller of Iota, Louisiana paid a visit to the Watts household with one of Larry’s handmade accordions and several hayrake trefoils (triangles) among their luggage. Fred enthusiastically remembers struggling to take autoharp breaks while “sandwiched between that accordion and a fiddle.” He says that, when you live in an area that rivals paradise and tell folks to “come on down” they usually take you up on your offer. Therefore, the Watts homestead is very frequently alive with music. Both morning people, Fred and Polly say that they drift off to sleep many evenings to the sounds of banjos, dulcimers and other instruments still going strong in their living room.

This past summer at Augusta, Fred, Polly and instructor Sue Ribaldo treated other Vocal Week participants to a performance of *La Bega Carousel*. It is the Virgin Islands counterpart of a protest song aimed at the ten cent charge for a Mr. La Bega’s carousel ride (the sugar cane cutters in St. Croix only made twenty cents a day). With a Calypso beat on the ‘harp, it goes, in part: “I’d rather walk and drink rum all night, before me go ride La Bega Carousel.”

Harmony Dem has been playing for eight years now, with no end in sight, according to Fred. Their present assemblage includes a guitar, fiddle, autoharp and steel pan in addition to the vocalists. They have one cassette recording, which is entitled ***Celebrate Life***. The fifteen infectious selections it offers are: *Leaving Louisiana In The Broad Daylight* • *Rivers Of Babylon* • *So He Said* • *Hand Maid Servant* • *Peace Must Come* • *Heaven* • *Drifting Too Far From The Shore* • *We Are One Family* • *A Place In The Choir* • *Dreams* • *Sitting In Limbo* • *Comes A Time* • *Rough and Rocky* • *Early* • and the title cut *Celebrate Life*. The album is available for \$10 (postpaid) from: Fred Watts, P. O. Box 11720, St. Thomas, VI 00801-4720.

Note: As the above story was published eleven years ago, please contact Fred before placing an order for this or other albums, which may be available in CD format by now. **ER**