

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1995 - George Foss

As *AC* begins its seventh year of publication, it is indeed a pleasure to dedicate this 66th issue in honor of a man who is much respected within the autoharp community--and rightfully so. George Foss, in addition to being an accomplished autoharp player, is perhaps even more well known as an author and teacher. His book, *Going Diatonic*, is widely acknowledged as the definitive work in respect to modifying chromatic autoharps to the diatonic configuration. George has also pioneered the subject of pentatonic tuning for our instrument. Although he is well-published in terms of technical articles about the autoharp, very little has been written about George himself. In response to multiple requests, I contacted George and he, in turn, responded by writing the autobiographical profile that follows. *ER*

I was born in Miami, Florida during the final throes of the Great Depression. My early years were taken up with the usual childhood pursuits of that region, somewhat dampened by the onset of World War II. By my first teen year, I was overcome by the urge to "belong" to something and faced the quandary of choosing between the Boy Scouts Of America and The Greater Miami Drum and Bugle Corps. I chose the D & B Corps (their uniforms were ever so much more "spiffy") and thereby hangs the tale. I began private lessons in trumpet, and spent my high school years in a cultural climate that included the Miami Jackson High School Band and Orchestra, the Miami Youth Symphony, Orange Bowl games and parades, and University of Miami music camps. The MiJax HS Band was an exceptional one which produced many professional musicians, and began for me what would be a pattern throughout my musical life of traveling and being able to hear and meet musicians from all over the world.

After graduating from high school, I left Miami for the first time to attend the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. I transferred to the Juilliard School of Music to study in New York City, and graduated in 1954. I stayed in NYC for an additional year to study at the Mannes College of Music and to play with the New York City Symphony. The following year, I joined the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. and, for ten years, played there as a trumpeter. While in the Nation's Capital area, I completed a graduate degree in music history at American University. With the National Symphony, I continued to travel throughout all of North and South America hearing first-hand the diversity of musical styles and traditions from Aleute Eskimos to Mexican Mariachis to Jivaro headhunters in Brazil to Gauchos in the Argentine pampas.

During my last year at Juilliard, I began an interest in American folk-song, which would continue to grow. In Washington, I began to spend much time studying the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress. I started playing the guitar, banjo and mountain dulcimer and, inevitably, began spending my days off between symphony concerts traveling into the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains seeking out old-time ballad singers, banjo players and yarn spinners. My earliest collecting was done with two new "folksong friends," Paul Clayton and Roger Abrahams. My collection of folk and traditional songs, ballads and tales continued to grow as I traveled through the Appalachian, Cumberland, Smoky and Ozark Mountains. This collection was later duplicated

and placed in the Archive at the Library of Congress. While still in Washington, I undertook some writing projects with Roger who was, by then, Dr. Abrahams, Chairman of English at the University

of Texas. We were co-authors of a college text, *Anglo-American Folksong Style*; a study of the well-known ballad singer Almeda Riddle of Greers Ferry, Arkansas entitled *A Singer and Her Songs*; and several articles in various folklore journals. During this time, I also wrote an instruction booklet for a friend in Staunton, Virginia, A.W. Jeffrys, who was a dulcimer maker. As far as I can determine, it was the first published instruction book for mountain dulcimer (1958). I began to do performances of traditional music throughout the Washington area in folk clubs, art galleries, and on television and *Voice Of America* radio.

I left the National Symphony to accept a professorship at the Louisiana State University School of Music as a specialist in trumpet and brass instruments. In addition to teaching trumpet and conducting the LSU Brass Guild, I also taught music theory, folk and traditional music, and music appreciation and history. I continued to visit the Ozark area where I had worked with Almeda Riddle. During those visits, I became familiar with the Ozark Folk Center (OFC) and became a guest performer there during my visits. It was on one such occasion that I first heard Ron Wall on an OFC evening concert and first paid serious attention to the autoharp. While living in the Washington/

Virginia metropolitan area, I had heard some of the traditional family bands like The Carters and The Stonemans, which included autoharp, but it was Ron Wall in solo performance that bowled me over with the musical potential and technical possibilities of the instrument. With me was my daughter, Tove, then in high school. She immediately put in a request for an autoharp as that year's Christmas gift. Santa delivered a new Oscar Schmidt Festival 3-key diatonic. I'm afraid that I gave it the same treatment many fathers give their young sons' electric trains in that I monopolized that autoharp. I quickly ordered a second one for myself.

Ron, who owned a woodworking shop in Mountain View, Arkansas at the time, graciously gave Tove and me some rudimentary instruction and tips on playing. He also introduced me to the concept of the purely diatonic 'harp. I soon acquired a second Festival 'harp and began experimenting. First, I re-voiced some of the chords to improve the sonority of the bass. Next, I completely redid one of my 'harps to a single-key diatonic in D. This, of course, led to the search for discarded harp bodies which could be revived and converted to various diatonic configurations--with me in the title role of Dr. Frankenstein. It was great fun, and I began to play the autoharp for my occasional appearances at the OFC.

Throughout the years of teaching at LSU, I continued to give programs of traditional ballads, folk songs and storytelling throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Oklahoma. During a visit to Arkansas, Almeda Riddle showed me a beautiful spot overlooking a section of Greers Ferry Lake called Devil's Fork. I bought it and shortly thereafter built a small weekend house there. My home in Louisiana, and the place in Greers Ferry, continued to fill with renovated autoharps of various diatonic configurations. After twenty-five years of teaching at LSU, both by wife, Nancy, and I decided to take early retirements and move full time to the Ozarks. We added to our small house mainly to accommodate my guitars, lute, fiddle, dozen dulcimers, and swelling collection of 'harps, as well as Nancy's grand piano (she taught piano at LSU), a

hammered dulcimer, psaltery and two folk harps. At last count (several instruments ago) we had over nine hundred strings on our instruments. Tuning day at our house is a nightmare!

I had begun teaching at the annual Autoharp Jamboree at the Ozark Folk Center in 1987, and have continued to do so every year since. I've also taught from time to time at the Dulcimer Jamboree there. In 1993, I was invited as an instructor for the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. As part of those activities I have been lucky to meet, work with, and become friends with, many of the best 'harpers in the world.

Shortly after retiring, I drew on my experience converting my own 'harps, as well as some further ideas I had on the subject, to write *Going Diatonic: a comprehensive guide to autoharp conversion*. The book sold quite widely throughout the autoharp community and led to continuing correspondence with many 'harpers from all sections of the country.

At one closing jam session at the Autoharp Jamboree some years back, I found myself seated between Ron Wall and Lindsay Haisley, whom I dubbed "Mr. Diatonic" and "Mr Chromatic," respectively. I said that, in order to achieve a separate identity amid such exalted autoharp nobility, I would return the next year with a new 'harp design and bearing the appropriate title of Captain

Pentatonic. So, I tore down a very old Schmidt autoharp and re-tuned and re-barred it to a pentatonic scale. Then, I began recruiting my "Pentatonic Army." To be a member of the army, a recruit must perform on a pentatonic autoharp and encourage the resurrection of that archaic scale form. So far, my "army" consists of wife Nancy, daughter Tove, Mike Fenton, Margie Earles, Mark Fackelday, Gregg Averett and the late Marty Schuman. I'm the Captain.

To date, my assortment of customized 'harps consists of single-key diatonics in G, D and A, what I call "Renaissance models" in G Major/E minor and C Major/A minor, and Pentatonic 'harps in F (my original) and G. (Nancy also has a 15-bar chromatic which we keep out of sight under the bed.)

After meeting and teaching with Becky Blackley at the OFC, she asked me to join her writing staff on *The Autoharpoholic* and, for the last two years of that publication's run, I submitted the "In Theory" column.

Nancy and I continue to perform regularly at the OFC in Mountain View and at the Visitor Center in nearby Heber Springs, presenting both regular season programs and special Halloween and Christmas concerts. We both enjoy traveling, cooking and being retired. I am presently putting together a book of ballads and songs with pentatonic tunes. *GF*

## **AUTOHARP ARTICLES, COLUMNS AND PUBLICATIONS BY GEORGE FOSS**

Articles contributed to Autoharp journals:

*The Autoharpoholic* - Volume 12, Number 1, Winter 1991

"Consider the Pentatonic Autoharp" - A description of the Pentatonic Autoharp with tuning scheme and chord-bar suggestions. Article also includes arrangements of two suitable pentatonic tunes, "The Riddle Song" and "The Cuckoo."

*Autoharp Quarterly* - Volume 3, Number 3, April 1991

"Play Your Harp by the Numbers" - An explanation of the system of chord designation by Roman numerals, and how it applies to the autoharp.

*Autoharp Quarterly* - Volume 4, Number 4, July 1992

"If Henry VIII Played the Autoharp" A description of the "Renaissance model" autoharp with its expanded possibilities in the minor mode. Article also included an arrangement of the Elizabethan ballad, "The Three Ravens."

*The Autoharpoholic* - Volume 14, Number 1, Winter 1993

"Tuning Without Tears" - A summary of the various tuning systems of interest to autoharp players, and some suggestions for taking the grief out of achieving accurate tuning.

"In Theory" columns in *The Autoharpoholic*

"Let's Make Notes" - Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 1991

A comparative survey of the ways in which we make music; by ear, by tablature and by notation.

"Here's the Pitch" - Volume 12, Number 4, Fall 1991

A definition of the musical component of pitch, and how it came to be notated. Also, an explanation of the octave.

"That's the Long and Short of It" - Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 1992 A discussion of the element of rhythm in music, and the system of rhythmic notation.

"As Time Goes By" - Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 1992

An essay on musical meter with an analysis of the most common meters. Article includes exercises for playing basic metric patterns.

"Add a Pinch of Spice" - Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 1992

A discussion of expanding autoharp harmonizations beyond the three basic chords (I, IV and V), even into "chromatic harmony," along with an arrangement of the traditional song, "Ten Thousand Miles Away" given in six different keys.

"Fanfare for the Common Tone" - Volume 13, Number 4, Fall 1992

An illustration of the "common tones" found between chords and how they can be located, isolated and used in harmony.

"Meanwhile Back at the Common Tone" - Volume 14, Number 1, Winter 1993 A continuation of common tone usage to produce smoother chord progressions and special effects. Article includes an arrangement of the old Scots ballad, "Mary Hamilton."

Publications for Autoharp Players by George Foss:

### ***Going Diatonic - A Comprehensive Guide to Autoharp Conversion***

An instruction manual for re-tuning, re-chording and re-voicing chromatic autoharps into diatonic, double-diatonic and Renaissance models. Contains chord bar patterns for eight different models.

### ***Music Study Cards - Designed Especially for Autoharp Players***

A set of 213 flash cards giving all the chords in all the keys found on standard chromatic and Festival model diatonic autoharps. Each card gives all pertinent information on a chord's quality, tone numbers and key function. Cards are color-coded by key, both Major and minor.

### **June 2008 Update**

George Foss is playing autoharp in the Heavenly Choir these days...his presence in our musical community being fondly remembered and sorely missed. As best as I have been able to verify, George's book and flash card set are out of print and no longer available except for the occasional second hand copy on eBay. Contact Mary Ann Johnston regarding the availability of the issues of *Autoharp Quarterly* that included George's articles. *The Autoharpoholic* has long since ridden off into the sunset, but the possibility exists that one might happen upon a copy of Becky Blackley's *Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* books, which were annual compilations of the magazine in twelve volumes. Meanwhile, both a photo and cover sketch of George is posted on the homepage of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo. Click on "Photos" and then look in the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* album. *ER*