

Gregg Averett - AC December 1998/January 1999

“A most-welcome traveler on the autoharp trail” would be an appropriate introduction to this month’s cover personality, **Gregg Averett**. By his own admission, Gregg was a “latecomer” to our instrument. However, be assured that he has more than made up for any lost time. His impressive performance in this year’s *Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship* motivated me to invite Gregg to share his story with AC’s reading audience. I take great pleasure in dedicating this issue in his honor. **ER**

“I was reflecting on a way to begin this article and my first thought was to mention how music had always been an influence in my life. It was then I realized that this was true for everyone. Music must certainly be the most ubiquitous of the art forms, provoking, in its many guises, children's delight, adolescent hormonal surges, youthful romance, and adult escapism. From the simplest jack-in-the-box tune to the stirring strains of *Victory at Sea*; on LPS, tapes, CDS, radio, TV, parades, concerts, mothers’ lullabies or fathers whistling in the basement, music is an inescapable and indispensable part of our lives.

I’m pretty sure that, somewhere, I still have the old, yellow vinyl 78 rpm record of *The Music Goes Round and Round* ('oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhh...and it comes out here!') that was my favorite as a child. My earliest recollection of a favorite musical genre was listening over and over to my three Dukes of Dixieland albums on my father's Heathkit-built hi-fi. It had a single speaker cabinet (no stereo) that was four feet high. I would sit on the floor right in front of it, letting strains of *The Saints* and *Muskrat Ramble* wash right over me. I never had any childhood thoughts of playing music, myself, other than a couple of simple tunes on an ocarina or harmonica.

My first year in a boys’ military high school saw me spending drill periods with a rifle, suffering the abuse of upper upperclassmen who had a fondness for rapping the heads of freshmen with their senior rings. Standing in ranks on the parade field, the adjutant would command, "Pass in review." Whereupon, the band would strike up the stirring strains of Sousa's *Thunderer* and parade majestically back and forth before the rest of us as we sweated in our wool uniforms. I thought, "Now, that's for me." I applied for band in my sophomore year and was assigned a trombone. That was okay with me since they got the prime position, in the front rank. It only took a week of struggling with my books and that big, heavy trombone case on the public bus every day, not to mention the half-mile walk from the bus stop to my house, to convince me a change to clarinet was in order. Playing either instrument, I sounded about the same. Suffice it to say, my three years in high school band were not sufficient to make any lasting impression upon me or, thankfully, John Philip Sousa's reputation.

College brought a new list of demands on my time, none of which involved musicianship (Remember, I had an all-male prep school to make up for). I do remember that in the melange of Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, and the ever-present *Gloria*, a curious tune called *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* broke through the charts and became one of my favorites. Girls didn't much want to dance to it, though, so I was content to just catch a few bars on the radio or the *Beverly Hillbillies*.

After receiving my Navy commission and wings, my first duty station was *N.A.S. Miramar*, where I chanced to attend the San Diego Folk Festival at San Diego State University. There I saw and listened to the likes of U. Utah Philips, Elizabeth Cotton, and Ravi Shankar. I suppose it's fortunate that girls around there didn't dance much to the sitar, either, or my music could have taken a really strange turn. As it was, I came upon a hammered dulcimer player in a remote courtyard, playing sans name, stage, or audience, except me. It was my first encounter with such an instrument, and (presciently) its pure notes and sustained ringing were irresistibly magnetic to me. I hit the music stores and started buying up Trapezoid and Bill Fenig albums. That marked my departure from the rock roots of my courtship days (I had finally caught up) to the folk genre that delights me still.

Somewhere in this time frame I can recall seeing Bryan Bowers' television appearance on *Real People*--"First you got your rhythm, then a low melody line...." I didn't get his name then because I didn't pay attention until he started to play. It was my first introduction to the autoharp and was mostly a "Gee Willikers!" experience, but it would have a later impact. I attended a Mike Seeger performance, but was just as intrigued by his banjos, mouth harps, and folklore as his autoharp. I also attended a house performance in which the singer used the 'harp for a few songs. It didn't occur to me that I might take it up myself. I just wanted to hear more of her playing it.

Much later, in my search for new hammered dulcimer LPS, I stumbled across a couple of autoharp albums with a hairy, bearded musician on the cover. Putting two and two together with the TV show I had seen years earlier, I surmised that Bryan must have been that performer. Trapezoid began to lose its hold, as now I had a new favorite. I was fortunate to catch Bryan live when he came through Atlanta, marveled at his autoharp smorgasbord and got his autograph on my albums.

It was around this time that I first developed an urge to participate in the music I was enjoying. I was in the habit of attending bluegrass festivals in the area and could see that the real fun was not on stage, but rather in the parking lots and campground outside. I could get right up next to the musicians and almost feel a part of it. But not quite. I needed to join the action.

I bought a guitar at an auction, thinking this would be a logical instrument to take up. In case you haven't tried, there are easier instruments to just sit down in your living room with a chord book and learn to play. I couldn't get either hand to work worth a darn. It sounded awful from the start and just got worse. In the corner it sat. Then, at another auction, I bought a banjo. I'd always liked them, ever since hearing Earl Scruggs and, with one less string, it had to be easier, I thought. Well, I could never even get the tuning figured out, let alone play it, but at least it kept the dust off the guitar case.

One Saturday morning, I saw a PBS show with a lady in period costume playing a lap dulcimer in simple style with a noter and feather quill. I thought, "Surely, I can do that." On a subsequent weekend trip to Dahlonega, Georgia, I bought a teardrop dulcimer. Soon thereafter, I saw a mention in the feature section of the newspaper about the Dulcimer and Harp Convention in Cosby, Tennessee. I attended, marking the beginning a long and happy association with Jean and Lee Schilling.

Well, I never did much good with the dulcimer, either. I kept going back to Cosby because it was fun, but the soft, zinging sound of the dulcimer just didn't stir my juices. So I never practiced and, of course, couldn't play. Well, it was a Harp convention, too, and Steve Mayfield and some others were there with their autoharps. I cadged a little time alone with Steve's 'harp and, for reasons I needn't elaborate on for those of you who have played one, yourselves, I knew this was the instrument for me. Like most of you, I was full of questions about the best place to get one cheap, how to fix 'em, and tune them. Steve's harp was a G/D diatonic and I decided early on that that was the direction I wanted to go. It was the sound of the instrument that drew me to it and anything that enhanced it, I was for. Plus, eliminating chord bars was a plus for a new player, so far as I could see. Less to worry about and more room to play the strings. Open chording was not even on my horizon then.

When I got home I took out the yellow pages and called every pawnshop in Atlanta. Over a few weeks I managed to run down several B-Model Oscar Schmidts in good condition, save for missing strings and felts. One, an American-made instrument that I converted to diatonic in the keys of G/D, sounded especially good and was my mainstay for years before "going Orthey." Meanwhile, I became a sponge for information--anything to do with working on and fixing autoharps--but I still couldn't play well. I could pinch, pinch, pinch a version of *Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet*, but no one recognized it unless I told them what it was. I noodled around ineffectually at home and attended a few festivals where I mostly just carried my 'harp around in its pasteboard case and listened.

My second year at Cosby as a 'harpist, I ran into George and Mary Lou Orthey. She was sitting in a jam on the Schilling's front porch at dusk when I walked up with my autoharp case. She immediately beamed that big smile and urged me to join in. "No, no," I said. "I don't play." I was still in the throes of new player shyness. She later confided how funny it was to see me carry my 'harp everywhere and never take it out. But I followed George around like a puppy dog and pumped him, as I did everyone, for all the information I could on differences and nuances in setting up and refining the autoharp.

In addition to the *Autoharp Quarterly*, Mary Lou told me about the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, which I attended that year (1989) and every year since. It was around the pre-Otter Harp Heaven campfire that I finally "got it." Ivan Stiles was coaching the newer players on *Wildwood Flower* and showed how and when chord changes come when playing rhythm back up. Like a thunderbolt, I realized how a melody is built on an underlying rhythm chord pattern. That was the key to first, being able to join at least the fringes of a jam, second, learning the tunes and, third, evolving them to a melody during practice at home. Everything sprang from that first simple insight. I bought the first two volumes of Drew Smith's *Winfield Winners* tapes and was dumbfounded by the styles and talent I heard. Rather than feeling intimidated, however, I felt excited and challenged. Imitating and attempting to reproduce those tunes helped edge me into melody playing, even if it was the three-chord fake book version.

With melodies beginning to come with plucks amongst the pinches, I was introduced to open chording by Steve Mayfield at Cosby. Until then, even though I played a diatonic 'harp, I chorded every note. Open chording was another breakthrough, since it not only increased my playing speed, but also enhanced the fluid diatonic sound I found so appealing. It has been tonal

quality and sonority rather than chord color that has pricked my ear since I first picked up the 'harp. I was now a confirmed diatonic player.

Other memorable moments of those early years have been meeting, one by one, the musicians I had listened to and tried to emulate on those first two Winfield tapes. At the first Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, I was sitting alone on a hay bale in the main tent around 2:00 A.M., puzzling at a tune, when Marty Schuman strolled up and asked if I wanted to jam? I was dumbstruck. He was sort of a personal hero, a celebrity in my eyes. I said I only knew three songs. He replied, "Well, lets play 'em." That was typical of him, and true of all the accomplished players I continue to meet. There is no caste system. They've got time for anyone.

My association with the autoharp has proven to be a rich mine for personal growth, fulfillment, and enrichment. Much of this I can attribute to people I've grown to know, like, and love along the way. The openness and acceptance to learn and to teach at any level bespeaks a humility that makes for easy friendships and fun relationships. I'd say that most of my friends and all of my best friends are members of the autoharp community. It's almost as if everyone I might like to know had been gathered together and issued 'harps.

Reading of personalities in this column of the *Clearinghouse* has often left me feeling somewhat inadequate. I would have to be the archetypal, bootstrap musician. Nothing came natural and nothing came easy. I had no musical background, no training, no previous instrument of any significance; no tutor, no lessons and no circle of friends with whom to play. I came to the game late and scrambled to catch up. I always envied those who could boast of decades of experience. Aside from lost years of playing development, I just feel I missed out on so much in the way of friendships and experiences. I saw it postulated recently that most autoharp players take up the instrument in their early forties, which fits my mold. So I suppose my example is not uncommon.

Not long past my three-song days, I was complaining to Jean Schilling that I'd like to see more autoharp workshops and she said, "Why don't **you** do one?" Well, that floored me. I sputtered and hemmed and hawed about my inexperience but, after some reflection, I agreed to do it. There were areas of knowledge and ability in which I could make a useful contribution if I was willing to do some homework and preparation. I've been doing workshops for the Schillings every year since and it has been rewarding for me, personally, and I hope for the attendees as well. The main lesson is that everyone has something they can contribute. The other lesson is that everyone has something they can learn. I've seen many a contest champion in workshops next to me, still picking up tips.

As I alluded earlier, I spent a great deal of time getting familiar with the gizzards of an autoharp before I really began to play it. There was a certain "thrill of the chase" associated with tracking down and bargaining for mistreated harps. I got pretty good at spotting and pointing out needed repairs in the give and take of negotiating, especially if I thought I could correct them. You can learn a great deal about your 'harps if you're not timid about springs flying off and cap screws disappearing in the carpet. Rescuing castoffs became part of the hobby and also was a way of doing service for the autoharp community. If I wasn't yet contributing that much in the way of music, at least I could keep some of Oscar's old faithfuls in circulation. Although I prefer to just

deal in advice these days, it's still hard to watch a good prospect pass by. Fortunately, there are people like Todd Crowley and Chuck Daniels who still work hard at keeping Schmidts on the road. But just about anyone can be their own luthier. The first and most important "tool" required is a little confidence.

I have half a dozen projects and ideas in my basement laboratory, just waiting for the time I keep promising myself to devote to them. Two *Wildwood Flowers* 'harps need their string anchors secured and I'm fairly curious to see how a couple of OS A-Model diatonic and pentatonic conversions turn out. Since I moved up to some quality custom 'harps, I don't feel quite the need to keep things stirred up down there like I used to. But even with those, I am seldom satisfied. There is a sort of musical wanderlust in my soul that keeps me searching for new tones and sounds. I sold my first two Ortheys in favor of different setups. The successor G/D/A was recently retuned to G/D, and I plan to convert my little-used chromatic Orthey to an E/B. Another Orthey, formerly chromatic, I had George reconfigure as a 48-string F/C. Now, the one tuned as a C diatonic is redundant. It was once Marty Schuman's G 'harp, which I retuned to G/D, then E, then C, and which I will now probably convert to an E blues setup.

Yes, yes, I know many of you stopped short at my use of the phrase, "little-used chromatic Orthey." Sacrilege! Mary Lou has often prodded me get it out and play it. Certainly, it's as fine a sounding chromatic 'harp as I have run across. I bought it thinking the full, balanced response was what would make the difference over previous ones I had owned, but, alas, that is just not what makes my sap flow, if you know what I mean.

Note that this is not a search for the perfect instrument. Even if I recognized it when I ran across it, that 'harp alone would become boring. Having access to a variety of 'harps, with different tunings and tonal characteristics is musically exciting to me. The F/C and G/D Ortheys are my traveling standbys and personal first choices, but sometimes I just like to hear the unique tonal quality of a diatonic O/S B-Model. Or, I might get on a tear with my old black A-Model, playing lap style a la Kilby Snow. Many Scottish tunes just don't sound the same unless played in a pentatonic tuning, and my Goose Acres diatonic may be a little muddy, but it's loud and raucous. The point is that having a stable of second-tier 'harps is musically interesting or tune appropriate, promotes style variety, and helps keep me from becoming stale in my playing.

One of the more intensive and sincerely-held debates among autoharpers is the question of chromatic-versus-diatonic setups. Despite hearing some of the most heated and persuasive exchanges, this way and that, I've not seen many converts as a result. Some dabble in both, but most prefer one camp or the other. Usually, a truce is recognized in which each faction is left to pursue their own desires. But let a new player get between them and both sides will battle royal to enlist him or her in their number. It's the Kansas border wars all over again!

Frankly, I believe it is a struggle that cannot be won, and ought not be fought. It's like the similarly unending debate over the superiority of men or women. In truth, both have their strong and weak points, but we'd be in sad shape without either one. In the words of the late Southern humorist, Dave Garner, "You can not live on bread alone. You must have peanut butter." So, I will continue to watch and marvel as Alan, Lindsay, and Ivan spider-walk across the chords, but it's the ethereal playing of June Maugery and Carole Outwater that transports me off on a cloud.

And speaking of transportation, it's a happy circumstance that my primary occupation as airline pilot affords me an opportunity to juggle work schedules and travel around with a little more freedom than most. I can usually keep up acquaintances on both coasts. Mary Lou, my recent traveling companion to Willamette, will attest, though, that flying standby is often no joy. It took us fifteen hours to get from Atlanta to Portland. For most of that time (including detouring through Cincinnati) we watched planes depart without us, our noses pressed against the glass of the terminal, like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*.

Traveling to autoharp festivals certainly develops one's camping skills, and journeying by air hones one's packaging ingenuity, what with baggage and carry-on limits. Every year I get a little more elaborate, though. George kids me about my tent site taking more room than a double wide trailer house, but he's exaggerating...some. Of course, the sky's the limit now that I've discovered FedEx.

For most of my of my nine years with the autoharp, I have worked to reach that nirvana of clear melody playing. A few years back, out of frustration at not having progressed beyond a plateau, I decided to work on my vocals. I'd done enough shower singing to know that my voice was not the performing instrument of choice, but then, my playing wasn't that great either. I discovered that, like any set of muscles, they improved with training. Still, the world needn't worry about making room for the fourth tenor. It helps that the tradition of old time music has its roots in plain folk like me and an untrained, unornamented style is just fine.

Usually I tested my progress by playing for my family--primarily my father. He had been lead tenor in a gospel quartet in his youth and he still remembered the lyrics to any old gospel tune I could think to play (It's odd to realize, a couple of years since his death, that I can't recall him ever singing except when I played for him on the 'harp.) Although he knew all those good old Baptist standards, my brothers and I had been raised Catholics, so he didn't get much choral support.

Playing for my family helped me to polish my performing talents and also figure out what worked with an audience. Perhaps I, and many of you, could listen to autoharp instrumentals one after the other-- but if you try that with "laypersons," they will get restless rather quickly. It's not a good sign when conversation starts up in the middle of a tune ("Mo-therrr, I'm playing over here!"). I soon realized from this and my own observations as a frequent audience member that, when performing, variety is crucial to hold interest.

I learned a number of tricks to compensate for a still-developing performing ability. For starters, choose material with which you are comfortable. Whether it's a song or an instrumental, play it cleanly and don't stumble over the lyrics. Select songs in your vocal range and work out the keys in advance. If you can't sing a song beautifully, sing a beautiful song. Let the wordcrafter's lyrics do the work. An engaging song can almost be spoken with the 'harp inferring the melody and still be quite effective. If you can carry the tune, don't let the 'harp get in the way. It should merely be supportive, and less is often better. Use non-rhythmic styles, as well. Be critical in the selection of material. I used to know twenty-seven verses to *Jesse James*, and sang all of them once on stage. Even I was getting bored before the end. Stop before they're ready for you to and you'll have a more-receptive audience next time you open the case. Of

course, family always has to invite you back (and with some family members, you never leave) but, in show business, you may not always be related to your audience.

I do not do any regular performing but I have seen the business end of a stage from time to time. I recommend it as a personal growth opportunity, as well as a chance to experience some genuine fun. The key is preparation. Know your material. Be at ease with the audience--they are on your side. You don't have to be the best but, if you can be **your** best, you **and** the audience will have a blast.

One use useful tip for jamming is to keep a play list of tunes you know. It can prove very handy in those many moments when no one can come up with a tune to play. I also keep a loose-leaf songbook. It used to be a point of honor to have as many songs as possible memorized. Problem was, I didn't really sing them often enough to keep my memory well oiled. I met Neal Walters (another of my album idols) at Mountain Laurel a few years back and, while he seemed to know every song we could think to play, I saw him later by a small campfire jam, singing from a personal songbook. It made so much sense at the time. Is Christmas caroling any less fun if we read the lyrics? So now I keep a songbook, too. Sometimes I need it, sometimes not. Often an occasional reassuring glance at the words is all I need to keep the song flowing smoothly. In an informal setting, who cares? Here's an important tip: Use that fancy word processor to print the lyrics in large, bold type so you can read them in dim light.

Autoharping has certainly proven to be both fulfilling and time-consuming as a hobby. In addition to the enjoyment and emotional release of playing for myself, I have a host of new friends with whom to socialize and play. I spend idle time brainstorming ideas, and hours in the workshop bringing them to fruition. When roaming other cities, I find myself irresistibly drawn to music stores and pawnshops. I pore through music stacks in used bookstores, looking for songbook treasures. In between radio calls at 33,000 feet, I'm often working through song lyrics or an instrumental arrangement in my head. On the Internet, scores of fellow musicians are ever ready to share information and debate issues. New CDs ring forth from my stereo. The summer is filled with festivals and the winter with preparation of new material to present to friends. There is always something to see, hear or do. Neighbors could tell you, from the condition of my yard, exactly when I took up the 'harp and put down the rake. I've left the ant colony and joined the grasshoppers, and have never once regretted it.

If you will permit one last aside: My mother passed away while this article was being prepared. One of the melancholy details of estate settling is going through and separating all the personal effects and keepsakes that represent, in this case, 79 years of a person's life. In one, dusty, long-undisturbed cranny, among valued letters and mementos of her past, was a booklet by the Boston Music Company entitled ***How to Play the Autoharp*** by Frances Hall. Judging by the autoharp on the cover and the clothing style in Frances' picture inside, it dates from the early nineteen fifties. Now, I'm not your rabid conspiracy buff or one given to drawing wild inferences from simple coincidences but, I must say, when no one in the family owned or played an autoharp before me, I found that a little spooky. Why it was something mother had reason to treasure long ago will always be puzzle? Now, in addition to the many memories, she's left a mystery I'll carry into my dim future. I guess, when I reach those pearly gates where angels and

loved ones play in the real Otter Harp Heaven, I'll know what one of the first things that I ask will be. GA

Update:

Gregg, 60, resides in Marietta, Georgia, just north of Atlanta, where he has lived the past 30 years with his wife, Shirley. The couple has raised two sons--Steven, 33, and Andrew, 30. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, Gregg was a Navy carrier pilot for nine years, served in Viet Nam, and flew as a Captain for Delta Air Lines, Inc. for 25 years until his retirement in 2003. His interests include morning coffee on the front porch, travel, gardening, antique auctions, wine tasting, movies, the theater, his new HDTV, military history, web-surfing, his three cats, and above all, autoharps--which he began playing in 1989. He has been an MLAG board member since the Ortheys relinquished control of the festival after the 2000 Gathering. Gregg may be contacted at: 3812 Vinyard Court, Marietta, GA 30062. E-mail: gaverett@mindspring.com