

Autoharp Clearinghouse – October 1998 – Hal Weeks

Hal Weeks, the 1996 National Autoharp Champion, has been a full-time professional singer, storyteller and autoharpist for nearly a decade. In addition to entertaining at folk and bluegrass festivals, elementary schools, libraries, churches, camps, preschools and retirement communities, he also regularly appears with the *Imagination Makers Theater Company*. A committed Christian, Hal specializes in musical ministries to kids, as well as presenting meaningful programs of old-time music for praise and worship. Songwriting workshops are yet another facet of this multi-talented musician's capabilities. Most likely due to the fact that he is based in Colorado, one of Hal's most popular school assembly programs is *The Snow Show*. Another offering, *Rainforest Rendezvous*, features an ecological theme, with *Voices of Children* focusing on bilingual songs written for (and often by) his young audiences.

Although I had been aware of Hal's presence in, and impact on, the autoharp community through my contacts in the Denver area, it was Dora Miller of the Happy Hearts Autoharp Club in Iowa who "nominated" him to be the 86th autoharp featured on the cover of this publication. On that note, I'll turn you over to Hal and let him relate the story of his association with our instrument. **ER**

My parents are originally from West Virginia, which is probably why I still call my father "Daddy." They now live in Colorado, where we moved in 1966 when I was five. Daddy's favorite song, all the time I was growing up, was *Wildwood Flower*. I think that may have been the first little bread crumb God left for me to find. A whole trail would follow.

Although Daddy had no knowledge of the connection that song had with autoharps, nor did he know that it was The Carter Family who made it really popular, it is the first thing I have to tell you when it comes to relating this tale. Now, it is really odd that his favorite song was *Wildwood Flower* because, in general, my Dad rejected "pop culture" and went in for classical music in a big way. Not that he was a musician or anything, but he really loved the classics. He had what I would call an elitist attitude about popular music, and I developed that early on. Popular music was not for intellectuals.

That's why I say it was odd that he had this affection for *Wildwood Flower*. He had a big plywood Stella guitar, knew three chords and could strum his way through about five songs. They'd all go along something like this: "*I will twine and I'll mingle your...(a long pause while he got his hand moved to the next chord) raven black hair...*" You get the idea.

Perhaps his second favorite was *The Minstrel Boy*. I remember him singing it to lull me to sleep. These two songs, so intricately entwined in my childhood, would come back later in a big way. Bread crumbs. So it was that Daddy gave me the gift of music.

Mostly, I learned to appreciate the classics and inherited an "anti-pop" intellectual attitude--which estranged me from my peers and their culture in general. Not all of this was a bad thing, now that I look back on it, because it made me who I am. However, I had a lot to learn in overcoming that attitude.

Musically, I suspect I was born backwards. When all of my friends were listening to the hits of the day on AM radio, and while the 'sixties and 'seventies were bustling around me, I was discovering Beethoven, Bach, Stravinsky and Mussorgsky. But, that isn't the only backwards part; I wanted to be a composer--not a performer--right from the very beginning.

I need to interject a non-musical bread crumb here, which I'll pick up on much later. While I was not interested in performing **music**, I **was** a performer. At age seven, I started getting into puppetry and ventriloquism in a big way. I had a love for the theater and, by the time I was ten, I was performing at birthday parties, libraries and festivals. This all lasted until I was in high school, at which time it sort of fizzled out. Too "immature" for a teen. I'll return to this later.

Getting back to music, I never really had an instrument that I mastered. Would-be composers need to tinker with them all in order to know how to write for them. So, I dabbled with many instruments and learned all about them. But, I was the master of none...I was a composer. In retrospect, it really is a shame that I didn't stick with the piano because I missed out on a wonderful opportunity--and it was mainly due to my lack of discipline.

Around the age of eighteen or nineteen, I discovered rock music and listened to quite a bit of it. My father couldn't understand what had happened to me, and felt as though I had "sold out." I just couldn't keep on being a snob and letting a whole lot of wonderful music pass me by. Let me be understood here that no part of the popular culture be it folk, rock, jazz or country would have passed Daddy's test. In his estimation, it was all simple and lowbrow.

However, I did keep on writing classical music. Remember that early love of theater? When I was eighteen, I wrote and had performed a two-hour theater piece that included an eighteen-piece orchestra (which I conducted) and a twelve-person theater troop. But, successes like that were few and far between. No one was really interested in avant-garde music, and I had that intellectual attitude that said I shouldn't care; this was art and no one understands the true artist. After having done it for some years, I was finding it to be more and more frustrating. When you write for instruments that you don't play, you have to rely on other people to play them for you. I found that to be difficult to coordinate, especially without the benefit of the almighty dollar. By that time, I'd become so intensely identified in my own mind as a composer that I couldn't deal with my disillusionment. I hated it, and resented being imposed upon by myself to write these big works that no one cared about.

College was a bust. When I figured out that I'd end up teaching music theory if I pursued my chosen course of study, everything kind of blew up in my face. I was totally messed up, and dropped out of a full scholarship to "wander in the wilderness" as it were. I was twenty or twenty one.

A few years later, I was still spinning my wheels. Although I hadn't stopped composing, I didn't seem to have the drive anymore. I had played keyboards in a rock band for a year, but the noise and lugging the equipment around burned me out fast. There must be something else. During the time I was in that band, I worked in a record store in Denver. One of the recordings that came my way and caught my eye was *Autoharpin'* by Bonnie Phipps. (*Aha--the plot thickens!*)

I bought that record and fell in love with it. It was more than just the sound of the instrument; I totally began to rediscover folk music.

While I had not yet considered buying an autoharp and learning to play folk music on it, I **had** begun to toy with the idea of special tunings. My classical music had lots of harmonies, built-in fourths and such, and I thought the autoharp would sound great re-tuned to play such harmonies. When I did finally make my initial autoharp purchase, I decided, however, that I had better learn to play it straight first.

Naturally, I turned to folk music again and began by learning to play one of the beautiful folk tunes that had been pirated for classical music. It was Aaron Copeland's *Appalachian Spring*--a tune which I later learned had its origins in a Shaker hymn entitled *Simple Gifts*. When I looked up the lyrics, I just couldn't believe it:

*'tis a gift to be simple,
'tis a gift to be free.
'tis a gift to come down where we ought to be;
and when we find ourselves in a place just right,
it will be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,
to bow and to bend we will not be ashamed
to turn, to turn will be our delight
since by turning, turning, we come 'round right.*

I know that you are most likely already familiar with these words, but I quote them so that you can see that this was just what had been happening to me. I was becoming simpler and was rediscovering the folk roots that Daddy had planted **before** Beethoven. I went on to learn *The Minstrel Boy*--that song I'd first heard as a baby--and *Wildwood Flower*, of course. In fact, when I bought Meg Peterson's *Complete Method for the Autoharp* book, that was one of the first songs she used to teach melody picking. The book also included a dedication to Mother Maybelle Carter, who most likely recorded and widely performed the consummate version of that song. Not long after that, I discovered that the Oscar Schmidt company had even manufactured a *Wildwood Flower* model autoharp. The coincidences were starting to overwhelm me! God's little trail of bread crumbs was starting to show.

A few years later I began teaching autoharp and, when I asked my first student what kind of tunes he wanted to learn to play, he responded by asking if I knew *The Minstrel Boy*. More bread crumbs. So, now you can see what I meant when I said I was born backwards. My musical beginnings were highbrow and complex but, when I learned simplicity, I found freedom.

Around that same time, my son was born and I found myself looking for a way to make some extra money. The old nine-to-five was getting to be a grind after my having dropped out of college and having no real sense of direction. One day a former employer called and asked if I'd drag out my puppets and entertain at his kid's birthday party. I hadn't put on my old show in years, and really only had about fifteen minutes of material that I could easily do. With that in

mind, I decided to take my autoharp along, sing a few children's songs and maybe tell a story as well. That portion of the show turned out to be a lot more fun than the puppet show--and bells started going off in my head. I interviewed several local children's entertainers, and was soon "off and running" as a kids' musician and storyteller. That was about nine years ago.

At this point, I want to make a big jump and bring this story up to date so that I might let you know just what it is that I do. In order to make a living as a musician, my gigs are quite varied, and I think that is what has kept me interested all this time.

I perform at public elementary schools and private Christian schools quite a bit up and down the Colorado Front Range. Mostly I do assemblies for three hundred or so kids at a time. These shows are laced with humor and are by no means limited to folk music. As a matter of fact, I do quite a bit of blues, rhythm and blues, rock, rap and other "cool" music to keep the older youngsters involved. On those occasions, I play an electric 21-chord 'harp made by Keith Young. I always play an amplified autoharp for assemblies because it keeps things simpler. Also, I implement a drum machine and sequencing, along with many effects pedals on the 'harp. (There's where I start losing the folk music purists.) But, I have been able to widely expand the possibilities this way, and can even do pitch bends. In contrast, I go to several preschools on a weekly basis, where I play musical games with the younger children. It is usually just me and my 'harp at those gigs.

One of the most enjoyable things I have been doing is songwriting workshops. I work with up to one hundred fifty kids at a time writing a song on a given topic. They throw out their ideas, which we then try to incorporate into the evolving song. By the end of the session, we have a new piece of music. I have lots of these songs now, and some of my shows are exclusively kid-written. Their ideas are always so fresh and funny and are hard to beat.

My favorite places to play are churches and Christian schools. During the summer when school is out, I work at special children's events in parks as well as at summer camps and various festivals. I really don't get to do that much for adults. Although I entertain at a few retirement homes and senior centers annually, that market has not really hit for me because I haven't had the time to adequately pursue it. Naturally, I stick to a more traditional repertoire when performing for mature audiences, but will occasionally liven things up by doing a song that the children have written.

I played diatonic autoharp exclusively for about three years but, since about 1992, I've gone back to the chromatic style because it is more practical and because I wasn't able to play blues progressions on a diatonic 'harp. Due to the fact that I play an electric instrument, the difference in volume is not a problem.

One thing I wish I could overcome is fatigue in my left hand, especially when playing melody. The Keith Young 'harp doesn't have "flanges" on top of the buttons...in other words, they are only as wide as the chord bar itself. I think that a wider button might deliver more of the finger's pressure to the strings, thereby saving some muscle effort, but I'm not sure? You folks out there who play 21-chord Schmidts, Orthey and Fladmark 'harps would know...Do your hands get tired?

I have recorded four cassette tapes of my music, which I duplicate in small batches and sell primarily at my gigs. This saves me a lot of hassle because I don't have to consign them nor do all that leg work. Because I do not market myself at the present time to venues that need a slick-looking demo, there is no need to invest thousands of dollars on duplication and packaging. I create my own J-cards and don't bother with shrink wrapping, using a little sticker instead to hold the boxes shut. While it may look a bit less professional, the sound quality is good and my profit is maximized. I really don't place a huge emphasis on selling recordings because I am always paid a set fee by the venue and never perform for a portion of the admission receipts.

I am a musician and a teacher, so the administrative part of my business is not strong. I find that if I get too wrapped up in it I have nothing left to devote to the product itself--which is the creative end. In my way of thinking, it needs to be the other way around. If I put all my energy into packaging myself, there's "all fluff and no stuff"--and my clients are disappointed. Somehow, I've managed to squeeze out a living from my autoharp, even if I seem to exist on bread crumbs now and then. *'Tis a gift to be simple.* **HW**