

Autoharp Clearinghouse - February 1995 - Harvey Reid

I don't recall exactly how the subject came up, but Harvey Reid and I discovered, during the course of a conversation some years back, that we had lived just a couple of blocks from one another in Adelphi, Maryland, but had never met at that time. Harvey's name, face and music first came to my attention through the pages of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine. Our paths finally crossed at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia and then, later, also at the International Bluegrass Music Association Trade Show in Owensboro, Kentucky.

I could spend a few lines going over how well Harvey plays, but his credentials will tell you that better than I could. He won the National Finger-Picking Guitar Championship in 1981 at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. A year later, Harvey returned to that event and took second place honors in the International Autoharp Championship. He has also mastered several other instruments, and is an accomplished songwriter.

Harvey's live shows impress audiences, as do his highly-acclaimed recordings. He projects a solid artistic identity, and I say without reservation that the concerts I have been privileged to attend were among the best one person performances that I've ever witnessed. Just about the time that one thinks they've caught up to what Harvey is doing musically, he's off exploring new territory. I was totally captivated by his musicianship as well as by the heartfelt, soulful presentation of his talents.

Although he is probably best known as a 6 and 12-string guitar virtuoso, Harvey has very nearly elevated our instrument to the role of equal partner. Always striving for excellence in everything he does, Harvey continues his ascent toward the coveted status occupied by the autoharp's finest ranks. The Autoharp Clearinghouse proudly dedicates this issue in his honor, and now invites Harvey to share his story with you. *ER*

I am almost living proof that the music gene is a mutation, since no other members of my immediate family, my neighbors, or any of my friends played music when I was growing up. My passion for music was well-established before I had any musical friends, or direct cultural influences. I first began to play folk guitar recreationally in Maryland in the mid-sixties and, when I went to college in 1971, I was immersed in a world full of concerts, interesting radio, coffeehouses, and people who played music and went to bluegrass festivals.

Within a rather short time I had been exposed to a vast amount of traditional music, largely because of what was then known as 'underground' FM radio. WHFS in Bethesda, Maryland played all sorts of music, and my friends and I would sit up all night sometimes listening to hours of old time dance music some nights, or Cajun, bluegrass, rockabilly or blues songs. The disc jockeys apparently were very knowledgeable about American music, and they had a large record collection which I soaked up like a sponge. There was also a lot of local music, and Jack Stoneman, Buzz Busby, Billy Baker, Lamar Grier (David's father) and Don Reno were hanging around in the street some nights when we kids were playing on the street corners for the bikers and hangers-on. The whole District of Columbia area was famous for bluegrass parties, and it was normal to go to someone's house and there would be 100 or more musicians jamming in every room in the house and all over the yard, for most of the night. I have always been

interested in a lot of kinds of music, but the community of bluegrass fans and musicians have always been the nicest people, so I learned a lot of bluegrass music early on for social reasons as much as anything.

My aunt was a school teacher who owned an autoharp, and I knew about Maybelle Carter and the instrument's history, though it did not really beckon to me. In the summer of 1972, my roommate Rob Myhre actually bought a new autoharp because he was apparently jealous that I played guitar and seemed to meet more girls, and he read somewhere that if someone with no particular musical background or aptitude wanted to make some music without expending vast amounts of energy learning, they should get an autoharp. So I guess he is the reason I play one now. I ended up borrowing that instrument for several years, and got a real spark when I went to see my guitar hero Leo Kottke around 1973 or so and this guy named Bryan, who played slide guitar blues and autoharp, opened the show.

Since 1972 or 1973, I have carried an autoharp with me, and it is an essential part of my show. As a street musician, I found I made more money with autoharp than guitar, even though guitar was louder and I thought I was better at it. I have made my living for twenty years now as a folk musician, playing bars, street corners, concerts, festivals, weddings, having never had a real job. Though the focus of my art is the acoustic guitar, I have never been able to put the autoharp down. I have only owned one instrument in my life, and it is a 1973 or 1974 21-chord Appalachian that I traded a slightly warped guitar for in 1975. It always takes me almost immediately and totally to that place where autoharps take us and, though I have struggled and wrestled with my guitars and practiced and studied, I have always just picked up the 'harp and played. It is a welcome relief from the male, competitive, testosterone-laced world of guitar and, though I have never done a whole show of autoharp, it is an important ingredient in my performances.

I am the only serious guitar picker I know who also plays serious autoharp. I don't know why Mark O'Connor, Ricky Skaggs, and the guys who can play all the instruments don't play autoharp? Even though it is obviously a more-limited instrument than guitar or violin for example, in terms of the types of sounds and chords and melodies you can play, it has its own power, and is very communicative. There is a body of music that I play on the 'harp that only feels right on it, and that I could not play on guitar, for example, and apparently my audiences feel the same way because I get more comments, questions, and more requests at the end of a show for autoharp recordings than anything else.

I rearranged the chord bars on my 21-chord 'harp twenty years ago, putting the majors in the middle row, and I have never looked back. It is much faster for the chording hand for scale work. In 1985, I turned two of the chords I never used on the 21-chord into lock bars for C and F keys and, since I usually play the 'harp on two to four songs a set, and because I rarely sing or play guitar in those keys, it adds a nice change of pace to my show. I do not have to carry around extra autoharps to keep from sounding the same. I love the sound of a diatonic 'harp, but I need some of the chords in chromatic tuning for many songs, and I could not be happy unless I had both types of 'harp. I have too many instruments on stage already (6, 12-string, slide guitar, bouzouki, sometimes mandolin or banjo...) and the last thing I need is to have another instrument on stage. I have a really good wiring system in my 'harp, involving two pickups and a mike run

through the Fishman Blender system, and it sounds really rich and full on stage, so I have less need of the extra strings ringing that a diatonic 'harp gives you. I also know instinctively where all the melody notes are now and, with a diatonic 'harp, some of the notes are moved from where I am used to finding them, and I cannot play precisely enough when I play some body else's diatonic. Some day I will get a diatonic 'harp, since I do love the sound.

It seems as though I am always tuning my guitar and, unless I am in direct sunlight or in some severe weather condition, I rarely ever tune the autoharp before a show. Twice now it has stayed in perfect tune for an entire month long tour across America, through snowstorms and 90 degree weather and, I am picky about tuning. I can't explain it? I tune it with a system I devised years ago. It sounds dreadful if you tune it exactly to a tuner, and I have also found that it sounds "off" when I tune it to a piano or a guitar. What I did was spend a whole day tuning and fussing with it until I had every note and every chord just where I wanted it. I sweeten the keys I play in a lot, and try to make sure all the chords I use sound right. (Mostly this means flattening the 3rds of some chords.) Then I used the tuner to measure what I had done, and I can then use the tuner to recreate my own tempering whenever I want, and it does not matter if I can hear or not, since I just remember the settings. I have recorded it enough to know that I like the sound in that tempering, and it sounds in tune to me. If I had another 'harp that was set to play in other keys, or with other combinations of chord bars, I would most likely end up making another tempering for that instrument. The only problems I have is that I like to flat my 3rd-E on the C chord and, when I play with guitar, it sounds flat. So I sometimes have to sharp them up a little, especially if the guitar player is playing in open position. I have never used fine tuners.

I use three stiff National metal fingerpicks and a Dobro thumbpick, and I bend them in an odd way. Most people curve the picks somewhat but, on autoharp, I like them sticking almost straight out. I hold my right hand more like a bird of prey, with fingers curved, rather than bent back. This allows me to pluck the strings, sort of reach down and then right up again, rather than brushing and sweeping across them the way many people do. I don't really have any autoharp heroes. I met Kilby Snow and jammed with him when I was eighteen, and I loved his sound. He was a big man, with huge hands, and I liked the strong sound he got. He played on the other side of the chord carriage from us modern people, and it gave him a really scratching, trebly sound. That influenced me to move my right hand up and down vertically when I play, so I maintain a more constant distance from where I strike the string relative to its end. Most people brush across the middle, and they are near the end of the treble strings, and in the middle of the bass strings. I like to play up high (toward the tuning pegs) on the bass strings so I don't get too flabby a sound. It's more like playing guitar, where you would rarely pluck the string in the middle.

I am a really serious guitar fingerstyle player, and I have pretty sophisticated separation of thumb and fingers. I think my autoharp style is more guitar influenced than anything. Some day I need to make an autoharp album, since I have a lot of things I play on it really well that I never play on stage and have never recorded. Problem is that I don't think the 'harp is inherently as interesting as guitar as a solo instrument, and I would need to use guitar, bass and some keyboards to give a fuller sound. Since I don't like to multi-track, it would take a lot of money and energy to round up a band and rehearse and record. I would also like to get some other 'harps for that project, and that takes time and energy and money, too. I make my living playing

music, and I need my albums to make money, and I am not sure there are enough people who would want to buy an autoharp album to justify my doing it? I just moved to a nice big house, and I am working on getting a studio built in. Maybe I can snag some traveling bands when they come through and give them pancakes and shelter in exchange for recording an autoharp tune with me?

I don't really play the autoharp consciously, and I have never really practiced it. I think I learned everything I know in about a year, and I might have even lost ground from when I was a street musician. I have really worked hard to learn guitar, and I play autoharp instinctively. If I was more cosmic and believed in things like previous lifetimes, I might believe I had played an autoharp before since it is so natural and effortless to me, except that the instrument and the Appalachian playing style are so new it is unlikely that I would have ever had the chance!

Lately, I am getting more interested in traditional music, partly because I love the music itself, and partly because the audience for it is such a wonderful and loyal group of people (in contrast to the fickle--love you today, forget about you tomorrow popular music audience). I am getting worried now about the future of traditional music because the large entertainment corporations have figured out that the long-term money in the music business is not from record sales and concert tickets, but from ownership of copyright and royalties that result from this. So, only people who write music are getting the attention and promotion. This creates the artificial image that original music is better than non-original music, and it obscures what audiences have known for perhaps tens of thousands of years...that the best entertainment comes from skilled musicians who know a lot of songs. Now, it is the writers, and not the players, of the songs who make the money. I want to do what I can to help balance that out, and to keep working to be a better player, to keep learning new songs, and to keep playing the old songs that we all love, even though nobody can make a killing off of them by profiting from ownership.

I am earning a good living playing honest music for good people, and I intend to keep things that way. I don't have much fascination or respect for the music industry mentality. I have now made it twenty years with my love of music intact, and I am not jaded, burned out and bitter, nor do I feel that I have played music that was not what I wanted to play in order to earn a living. What made me do this in the first place was that I love playing music for people who will listen, and that is still what I like to do. There are enough people out there who listen that I can keep going. The kind of audiences I want to play for seem to want to see artists play from their hearts and souls, and I don't think it is necessary to do the showbiz thing. The minstrel life is a good life. I prefer not to take sides in conflicts, much like the harpers of old who played in the tents of both sides the night before the battle. I don't have a limousine, and I work hard and travel hard. My life is not an endless party, but I chose this life and it feels good to me. The fewer things, such as agents, promoters, sound men, record companies, et cetera, that get in between me and my audience, the happier I am. So far, so good. Thanks to all of you who have helped me get this far, and I hope to keep going. *HR*

Recommended additional reading:

The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp Vol. 8 - Ask The Experts - "Amplifying The Autoharp" by Harvey Reid*

The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp Vol. 9 - Ask The Experts "Recording The Autoharp" by Harvey Reid*

The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp Vol. 9 - View From The Top -"Harvey Reid" - interview by Becky Blackley*

*(Out of print, but they occasionally turn up on Amazon or eBay.)

Harvey Reid has eight critically-acclaimed, quality recordings on Woodpecker Records, featuring intimate, direct-to-digital, audiophile recording without edits, splices or overdubs. All titles are double-album length. Woodpecker Records, P.O. Box 815, York, ME 03909 - (207) 363-1886 (24-hour Phone/FAX)

November 2008 Update:

Harvey invites members of both the Cyberpluckers and Autoharp Enthusiasts groups to visit his website at: <<http://www.woodpecker.com/sales/orderform119.html>>