

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - December 1993/January 1994 - Italene Gaddis**

AC reader and friend **Sarah Andree** of Mukilteo, Washington sent me a newspaper article some months back about this issue's cover personality, **Italene Gaddis**. The story intrigued me but, being some 3,000 miles removed, a follow-up seemed out of the question. When I expressed that sentiment to Sarah, she offered to contact Italene and to conduct the interview for me. I have written the feature story that follows from the resulting audio tape and from listening to Italene's recorded songs and recitations. I offer my most-sincere thanks to Sarah Andree, without whose help this article would not have been possible.

The youngest of four children, Italene Gaddis was born sixty-eight years ago in Sioux City, Iowa. Two years later, her Daddy abandoned his family and Italene's mother was forced to move them to her parents' farm in Arkansas. Since, for all practical purposes, they didn't have a father here on earth, Italene's mother instilled in her children the fact that they would always have a Heavenly Father. (Later in life, one of Italene's most-beautiful compositions was to be called *My Heavenly Father*.)

Italene's grandmother, like many women of her generation, had never learned to read or write, but her grandfather was "a man of education." Her siblings were all of school age when the family relocated to Arkansas, but toddler Italene became her grandfather's special pupil. In those days, many Christian families considered it a sin to have a deck of playing cards in the house. However, Italene's grandfather used them to teach the child her numbers. A free thinker, grandfather's philosophy was that "There's no sin in anything--it's what you do with it." He also bought books for Italene and taught her to read at a very early age. When it was time for her to start school, she was advanced to the third grade within a few days as a result of that home schooling. Another thing that she learned from her maternal grandparents was an appreciation of music. They had a wind-up Victrola and, ironically, Italene's favorite song was Maybelle Carter singing *Wildwood Flower*.

After spending seven years at the family home place, Italene's mother landed a nursing job in a Marine hospital in Chicago and moved her children to that city. When Italene was thirteen, her mother bought her a guitar. As a show of her appreciation, Italene composed her first song, appropriately entitled *A Song For Mother*. Since that time, she has written hundreds of lyrics, melodies and poems, but it was to be many years before she would actually realize the full potential of her talent.

One of Italene's brothers could pick out tunes on the guitar by ear, but she recalls that she had to memorize where to put every finger. It became such a tedious chore that Italene decided she could be satisfied playing rhythm accompaniment. At fourteen, she won a school talent contest singing a funny song called *I've Got But Fifty Cents*.

Following high school, Italene met and married a young man who had come to "the windy city" to sing and play guitar and bass on WJJD Radio. About a year later, they migrated to Waterloo, Iowa where Italene's husband was on the radio with Ike Everly. When he went on-the-road with his music, she traveled with him until she became pregnant with their first child. At that point in time, it was "frowned upon" for women to have careers, especially in music.

Reluctantly, Italene yielded to her husband's request that she be a full-time homemaker--moving back to his native Kentucky. For the time being, she says she was content in the role of wife and mother.

Then, her husband became chronically ill at which time Italene found herself very suddenly thrust into the position of family breadwinner. A quiet, shy individual, Italene didn't know where to begin to look for a job? One day, she saw an ad in the paper for a door-to-door salesperson for a firm called Parents' Institute. She applied, was hired, and spent the next twenty years driving from 50-300 miles per day over a three-state area. She says that it was extremely difficult being away from her family so much, but she managed to put both of her sons through college, maintain her household, and pay her husband's medical expenses. Italene's mother, herself the head of a family, had raised her in an atmosphere of optimism and survival. Italene remembers hearing, over and over, adages like "Can't means won't" and "If there's a will, there's a way."

Italene says her work was very rewarding because she was selling, primarily to mothers, a program of guidelines on raising a family. Her career spanned a generation, and she ended up eventually selling to the children of her initial customers. Italene took a personal interest in all of them and tried to keep in touch. Over the years, she received thousands of letters from families she had helped expressing their gratitude.

Italene made use of her long hours on the highway by continuing to "make up" songs and poetry. She would keep them in her head until the next stop, when she could put her thoughts onto paper. Although she says she had just about given up hope of ever performing them herself, she did entertain a secret ambition that she might one day hear someone else sing her compositions on the radio.

When Italene's husband died in 1982, she and her younger son, Steven, moved to Seattle where her eldest son, Carl, had resided for seven years. From childhood, Steven had always told Italene how much he liked her songs and poems. He was, in fact, just about the only one from whom she received support in respect to her songwriting and singing. As much as Italene had loved her husband, he repeatedly discouraged any pursuit of her musical ambitions. It was at Steven's urging that she secured legal copyrights for her works, just as it had been Steven's belief in her talent that kept her writing over the years.

After her move to the Seattle area, Italene was jobless once again and in need of a place to live. She took a position at the Madison Hotel as supervisor of housekeeping. But when the occupancy rate dropped in the winter, she was laid off and told to come back in the spring. However, Italene says, "I don't go back--I go forward," and that was the end of that. Meanwhile, she became aware of an opening as a live-in housekeeper for a Medina-area woman who had a successful career as an interior designer, no husband, and a ten year old son. Italene moved into her upstairs apartment, took care of the boy and the house, did some paperwork for the woman's business, and still lives there today--although the "youngster" is now in college. A devoted animal lover, Italene also "house sits" for people's pets when they go on vacation.

Right after moving to the Pacific Northwest, Italene's music became a more integral part of her life. She says that it served as a therapy of sorts for her. Her songwriting, as a form of

expression, comforted her and relieved some of the emotional pain she felt after having lost her husband. More than once over the years, Italene had taken the negative aspects of her life and "turned them around" to her advantage.

Italene changed instruments, as well as locales, in 1982. When Carl's guitar was stolen from his home, Italene let him have hers. She had heard someone playing an autoharp and, from that moment on, knew that it was meant to be her instrument as well. Her wish was granted when her sons pooled their money and bought her a 21-chord Oscar Schmidt Autoharp for Christmas that year.

On New Year's Day in 1987, when Steven was writing his own resolutions, he told his mother that, if she didn't soon take action, she might leave this world without ever having done anything with her songs. Italene promised him that she would see to it before the year was out. Being a person of her word, Italene knew that she was committed. She was sixty-two at the time, and had it in her mind to teach the songs to a younger performer.

In one of those strange twists of fate that so often accompany the most compelling success stories, Italene saw an announcement for a songwriting contest to be held at an establishment called The Beanery right there in nearby Seattle. Thinking that it might "get her off of the hook" with her son, she entered the competition. Imagine her surprise when she won not only the preliminary round, but also the finals, over eighty-three other songwriters. It was to be the beginning of a whole new life for Italene. Her employer encouraged her to pursue this new-found opportunity while still working part-time for her.

Soon, Italene was receiving requests to perform before civic groups, at community functions, in churches, schools, nursing homes and senior centers and for private birthdays & anniversaries. Italene feels that the positive attitude that she is able to convey through the uplifting lyrics of her songs makes up for the fact that she is neither a great singer or an accomplished instrumentalist. Furthermore, it is the motivational commentary between songs that has become her trademark. Italene is convinced that, from the cradle to the grave, people of all ages need encouragement. She intends to do her part to see that they get it.

Having entertained at 243 retirement homes and senior centers, the mind set of the elderly is a prime target for Italene's optimism and enthusiasm. She believes that the word "retire" should be stricken from the English language because it tells people that it's okay to quit. Italene has observed, time and time again that, when folks leave their occupations, they retire from life as well. She feels like these valuable members of our society need to be given a reason to go on with their lives and not just vegetate. "I tell them that age is no barrier to continuing to follow your dreams. Unless I look in the mirror, I don't know how old I am. There is no such thing as Over The Hill; only different plateaus in life."

Italene is also much-in-demand to speak before women's groups. She is appalled by sayings such as "Behind every great man there is a great woman." In her estimation, it should be "**Beside** every great man there is a great woman." Italene cautions parents not to raise their daughters to settle for subservient or dependent status. Too often, the proverbial head-of-the-household skips town, runs off with another woman, becomes incapacitated, or even dies. And then what are single mothers supposed to do if they haven't learned sufficient career skills? "No one should be

above, below, in front of or behind anyone else, and I feel fully qualified to make that statement because I have walked both roads." With Italene's autoharp ever poised for action, a strum across its strings adds a period to that pronouncement!

As word got around about Italene's songs, recitations and lectures, she began to get media attention. In addition to having had numerous newspaper articles written about her, Italene has been a guest on thirteen radio programs and has appeared on seven television stations. For the last year and a half, she has hosted her own show on cable television. "There is so much negative programming and bad news presented to the public that people are starved to death to hear something positive" says Italene. "At the end of each of my telecasts, my phone number is given so that I might get feedback from the people who are watching. I get calls from all age groups--including teenagers and rock musicians--telling me how uplifting my program has been for them." It would seem that, in a world so filled with turmoil, the simplicity and sincerity of Italene's songs and words of encouragement strike a responsive chord with her audiences. She urges people in other areas to call their local newspapers and radio and television stations and networks and tell them that you want to read and hear about the good things that are happening and the people who are making them happen.

Italene's late-in-life career as a singer and speaker has her appearing publicly as often as four times a day. She is a Five-Foot-Two bundle of musical and motivational energy, and her buoyant philosophy is infectious. It should come as no surprise that her date book is always full. When asked how she comes by all of these venues at which to perform, Italene replies assertively. "Positive thinking is only half of the formula. It needs to be coupled with positive action. The Good Lord gave me lots of grit. If they don't call me, I call them. I don't ask if I can appear--just when it would be convenient."

Italene has recorded several cassettes, and two of her songs with a local flavor have received considerable air play on Seattle's stations. One is called *The Weather Has No Bearing on My Day* and one simply *Traffic*. She also wrote a song about the postal service, and was invited to perform it at one of their functions. (There probably haven't been all that many songs of praise written about the USPS!)

She has made up for lost time by accumulating a lot of musical mileage since winning that songwriting contest just six years ago. Italene, in addition to appearing at the facilities already mentioned, also lists on her resume performances at the Northwest Folk Life Festival, the Evergreen State Fair, the Puyallup Fair, Murphy's Pub, The Beanery, the University Bistro and the Ronald McDonald House--to name a few. Her one as yet unrealized aspiration is to appear on ***Good Morning America***. Her poems have been published in the ***Journal American, Woman's World*** and ***Pacific Northwest Magazine***. Italene relates that one of the greatest joys of her life has been the fact that her mother lived long enough to see her success and to hear her on radio and television.

In listening to Italene's recorded music, one quickly recognizes the fact that she is a superb lyricist who has elevated the words of her songs to the level of poetry, subtly choosing just the right phrases to tell each story. These are meaningful, inspirational songs and recitations performed by Italene in a very pleasing manner. She plays the autoharp without picks--her

instrumental work being secondary to, and supportive of, her vocals. However, Italene is more than capable of interjecting an effective melodic break or turn-around when the need arises. And, what a shot-in-the-arm it is for our instrument to be getting so much media exposure. What other autoharp player do you know who has their own television program? Or four gigs per day?

I feel confident that Italene's success story is going to touch the hearts and souls of many of the people who read it, as it has mine. More often than not, the mail and telephone calls that I receive here at *AC* Headquarters are from folks who have come to our music late in life. Italene's message is that it is never too late--for the autoharp or almost anything else. Italene always performs with a fresh flower in her hair. She wears it to remind her audiences that various flowers bloom at different times--and so do people. Amen to that. It is with the utmost respect and admiration that this issue of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is dedicated to Italene Gaddis. May God continue to bless her life in the manner in which she has blessed the lives so many others.

July 2008 Postscript:

I attempted to contact Italene for updated information regarding the availability of her recordings only to learn that her phone has been disconnected. If anyone in the area of Mukilteo or Medina, Washington has word of her whereabouts, please contact me at <esroys@verizon.net> **ER**