

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse – October/November 1999**

### **Joe Marlin Riggs**

My association with Joe Riggs dates back to our initial meeting in the summer of 1987 at the second Dulci-Harp Gathering on the Orthey farm in Newport, Pennsylvania. In those days, the event was a much smaller and more intimate affair than MLAG has become, and it lent itself to getting better acquainted with all the participants. During the course of a conversation there, Joe and I discovered our mutual involvement in music journalism. I had been doing freelance work for publications that, among others, included *Banjo Newsletter*, *The Autoharpoholic* and *Country Heritage*., and he was about to assume editorship of the *Charlotte Folk Music Society Magazine*. We exchanged addresses, kept in touch, and I subsequently had five feature stories published in Joe's periodical.

Not too many of today's readers of *AC* are aware that it was actually Joe who gave the publication its birth back in April of 1989. The two of us worked together on what was then a newsletter for the first year. Then, when the demands of Joe's career and family necessitated his stepping aside, he "handed the reins" over to me with the May 1990 issue.

In the autobiographical sketch that follows, Joe has been far too modest in respect to his qualifications and accomplishments. In addition to having been a Green Beret in Vietnam, he is held in high regard teaching ESL (English as a Second Language), and received Charlotte, North Carolina's Teacher of the Year award not too long ago. Joe has also been actively involved with the Charlotte Autoharp Club, as well as with the functions of that city's Folk Music Society.

His unique manner of playing our instrument not only sets him apart from the typical autoharpist, but also serves to perpetuate that style for the benefit of future generations of 'harpers. I feel as though the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* has come full circle with the dedication of this issue to its founder, Joe Marlin Riggs. *ER*

#### **My Odyssey with Autoharp by Joe Riggs**

"Autoharp" is a brand name of Oscar Schmidt instruments, like "Dobro" in the resonator guitar business; however the word has commonly generalized itself to refer to any of the members of the zither family having bars that create chords when pressed while the strings are strummed or plucked.

As I learned it, Charles F. Zimmermann claimed to have invented the autoharp in Philadelphia over one hundred years ago, but it is not an instrument that most people know as well as a guitar or banjo, for example. In fact, I didn't see an autoharp until 1978, when I was 34, and heard one played for the first time by the choir director at a school where I worked. He laid it flat on his lap for one of those songs like Joan Baez used to sing, strumming a few chords as he sang along--not doing either very well, as I recall. I had forgotten the entire incident until I saw one of those instruments hanging in the show window of a Charlotte, North Carolina music store one December morning in 1981. Before I knew it, I was inside the store asking a too-smiley, puffy-faced proprietor the price. I thought that, even though I had flunked guitar and piano, I could sit in a chair with the autoharp and strum chords as I pushed down a button. I handed

Smiley one hundred forty-nine dollars, and he put a new fifteen-chord ChromAharp (made in Korea) in a case for me and told me to be sure and come back, as he was going to have a big sale on kazoos, pennywhistles and guitars right before Christmas.

As I rode Bus Number Two home, self-consciously carrying a musical instrument for the first time in public, I thought about how I planned to baptize my four-year-old daughter, Jessica, with the autoharp so she wouldn't grow up music-pagan and note-illiterate like me. I was also worried on the bus, because I was afraid that someone might mistake me for a real musician and ask me to play something. I carefully hid the Mel Bay/Meg Peterson instruction book under my jacket.

Looking through the book, Jes and I saw how the instrument was held, and how to strum chords by holding the autoharp flat on your lap and crossing your right hand over your left wrist in order to engage the strings with the right hand while pushing down the chord bars to sound the chords. After about fifty times, Jes and I got tired of *She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain* but, by then, I had learned where the three chords were that I needed. (I didn't know then that all the songs I would ever play would have just three chords!)

After about a week of coming around that same ol' mountain, the song began to sound a little sour, and I thought that I must be getting worse instead of better. But there was something about the autoharp that sounded different. I finally concluded that the breaking-in period must have loosened up something critical, so I got out the book and read about how autoharps go out of tune. I had no idea of how to tune anything more delicate than the Allis-Chalmers WD-45 I grew up on, but I found an ad in the Meg Peterson book for something called a tuning tape, and I ordered one the same day.

When the tape arrived some days later, Jes helped me tune the autoharp. She giggled when I would get the "bong" or "bing" on the strings to match that same tone on the tape. A couple of months later, I was doing some experimenting with the 'harp, holding it up against my chest with the strings facing out and playing. I used to do that in front of a mirror, too, and practiced the "autoharp musician's pose," but I never quite felt satisfied with it. Nevertheless, I started learning to play the autoharp in that position, and I got so I could knock out the chord progressions to several tunes. However, I was getting saturated with the same songs over and over again, and I needed some new material.

With that objective in mind, I set out one day for the nearest music store (not the one with the smiling doughboy) in order to try and find some steel picks like the real players wore in pictures I'd seen. None of them used a felt triangle, I noticed. I went into the store, past guitars that didn't even look like guitars, and had never seen a tree, all hanging like cold sides of stringy beef. The shopkeeper sat on a tall stool behind a display case strewn with harmonicas, wires that looked like they had come from a telephone receiver, microphones, chrome knobs reminiscent of the dashboard knobs on my '49 Ford, and piles of other electronic stuff. He had a beard that looked like black wiry springs and, on the top of his head, was a baseball cap that bore the store name and logo. Coils of hair leapt out from beneath the cap down to the shoulders of a fuming black tee shirt with a bloody skull on the front. Last night's (or that morning's?) Budweiser was on his breath as he rang up my new autoharp and the steel picks. He urged me to have a nice day, and inquired as to whether I was sure I didn't need an amplifier?

The new book talked about melody picking, not chord strumming, but I couldn't imagine how a picker could get single notes out of thirty-six strings and fifteen chord bars on the autoharp. The instrument seemed to me more like a hot gun for shooting low-flying ducks than a rifle for punching out X's at fifty meters but, at the main library, I soon found some evidence. The entry on the card in the subject index said *Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp*, and the artists listed were Pop Stoneman, Kilby Snow, and Neriah and Kenneth Benfield. Mike Seeger's name was under that, so I knew I had stumbled onto something significant. I checked out the disc (which is what the librarian called it) and took it home. I put it on our J.C. Penney eighty-nine dollar stereo and cranked it up even before I took my tie loose. (Editor's note: Only JMR would wear a necktie to the library!) When I heard the music I could tell it was an autoharp sometimes, but the notes and melodies flew from the record as I sat, elbows on my knees and mouth open, for a long time. One tune, *Flop-Eared Mule*, was my favorite, although I had not ever heard it before. I also recognized *She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain* and so did Jes, who said, "It doesn't sound like that when you play it, Daddy" (thereby forfeiting her allowance for the week). That inspired me to try and play some melody notes on the autoharp.

After hours and hours of pushing bars and picking strings, hundreds of wrong combinations and false starts and forgetting how I had just played the previous passages when I finally did get it to sound right, I could--on a good day--knock out part of one tune by notes. I swore again to make certain that Jes learned how to read music.

Little by little, I began to get the hang of melody picking, after about a year with the 'harp. One day, as I was looking through some of the papers that had come with the instrument, I saw an advertisement for an autoharp record done by a person called Bryan Bowers--a "professional autoharp player." I remember wondering what that would be like, ordered one of the records and began to learn to play his repertoire. I wrote down the words and memorized them, and practiced the melody lines note-by-note on many of his songs. Then, I would sit around and fancy myself playing on stage with Bryan (whom I called by his first name in my head). It was almost Easter into the second year of the autoharp.

After some months, I wrote and ordered another record that Bryan had released. I was getting to be a real Bryan Bowers groupie, but I didn't know anyone else in the autoharp community at that time. Then one day another event occurred that bore directly on me and the autoharp.

One morning in the newspaper, I read that there was to be a music festival at the nearby Latta Plantation sponsored by the Charlotte Folk Music Society. Along with my wife, Ellie, Jes and I attended the event and saw people playing autoharps, dulcimers, guitars and banjos--and there wasn't a single amplifier on the whole site except for the microphones on the stage. We joined the CFMS, and spent the rest of the day wandering about listening to the music and enjoying the atmosphere. Lots of families with children were there and, not long after that, we received the first of our monthly CFMS newsletters. Ellie noticed, in the calendar of events included in that issue, that my fantasy stage partner, Bryan Bowers, was coming to Rock Hill, South Carolina. The very next day we drove to Rock Hill to buy advance tickets for his show. On the night of Bryan's performance, when he came in with five autoharps and started hooking up the microphones and tuning up, I said to Ellie, "Gee, he looks just like himself, doesn't he?" It

sounded as silly to me when I said it as it had when Hubert Sanford made a similar statement at my Dad's funeral.

But there he was, Bryan Bowers in person. That night I heard many of the songs I knew by heart and some I had never heard before. Ellie was patient with me, enjoying watching me, she said, as much as the show. I didn't call him "Bryan" that night at all, nor did I go up to him like I wanted to and say, "Dadgummit, Bryan, thanks for all the music!" I just bought his new record, took it home, and commenced learning from it. I marveled at the way he had just stood up there and played and sang both at the same time. (I always had to choose one or the other.)

In my dogged pursuit for more information, I found pictures of, and text about, many of the people in both this country and abroad who played the autoharp. Among them was Mike Seeger, whom I first saw in 1985 at the Black Mountain Festival here in North Carolina. I had the opportunity to chat with him one day when he made a later appearance in Charlotte and, over the years, have come to fully realize the enormity of the contribution Mike has made in the preservation and recording of traditional, old-time music in the United States. He remains a hero of mine. Along the way, I re-discovered how Mike was responsible for recording "The Old Masters" on the albums I had found in the local library.

At about that same time, I enrolled in a course at Central Piedmont Community College which was simply called **Autoharp**. It was taught at first by Peggy Robberts, then later by Martha Kiker. Among the many class handouts, I found more and more sources of autoharp-inclusive recordings, and I ordered Kilby Snow's album, *Country Songs and Tunes with Autoharp*, followed by the purchase of several albums by Ernest "Pop" Stoneman, and *Mountain State Music* by Andy Boarman. I started learning some of the selections from Pop Stoneman's records. Then, I became aware of the fact that Neriah "Mr. Cub" Benfield and his son, Kenneth, lived on a farm only forty miles from me. The Benfields, as mentioned previously, participated on the first album I had found at the library. Soon, I began to be able to distinguish their respective playing styles and even the sounds of the different autoharps. Although I had to drop out of the aforementioned autoharp class, it had added another facet to the gem of my involvement with the autoharp. I continued to play, listening and learning from the records, and reflecting. I came to realize that, although I really admired and loved Bryan Bowers' playing and singing, the music to which I felt closest was that of The Old Masters.

Suddenly one day, during one of my pensive times, it occurred to me that the people I listened to most on autoharp all played in the old style, strumming and picking below the chord bar assembly with the instrument flat down. And there I was trying to imitate their sound while holding the 'harp Appalachian Style and picking above the chord bars. I had tried playing on the big end a few times, but it had felt strange. I had worked so hard to learn what I did know that I couldn't bear to give it up and start anew from scratch. So, for a while, I continued to try and duplicate their sound while playing in the more conventional style. I worked on *Flop-Eared Mule* and *Molly Hare* for almost two years before I knew which one it was that I was playing. I could get most of the melody in each one, but I had never heard either of them except on Kilby Snow's record. I couldn't keep the titles straight although I was able to keep the tunes separate. It was during that time that I somehow made the transition to playing below the chord bars. Later

yet, I began to play my third or fourth Orthey 'harp, a left-handed model, in a manner reminiscent of Kilby Snow's playing style.

By and by, seeking out more music, I saw and heard John McCutcheon, Jean Ritchie, David Holt, The Briarhoppers, Snuffy Jenkins with Pappy Sherrill and the Hired Hands, Claude Casey, Harry and Jeannie West, Si Kahn, The Carters, Frank Profitt, Jr., Cathy Fink--and more than I cannot recall right now. I always bought their records and tapes, and listened and listened to them. One day, after I had been playing a while and years after Randy Van Warmer had made *Just When I Needed You Most* popular, I heard that song again and, for the first time, heard the autoharp break on it. I love the inclusion of the autoharp on some of Mac Wiseman's songs, too, and all the other recordings where the 'harp appears from time to time with its friendly, unexpected notes. To me, it is just like the voice of an old friend calling in through the kitchen door. I even heard Little Roy Lewis tear up a few hot tunes on his autoharp. (I think he was trying to impress me because I had told him his friend Eileen Roys sent me.)

Along the way, I enjoyed several workshops and performances by Mike Seeger as well as a wonderful house concert by Ivan Stiles. Mostly I just drifted along, happy to keep trying to get the right combination to *Molly Hare* in my serious moments, and playing some popular and seasonal numbers at school performances and other small events. Not yet confident enough to perform with "real musicians," I always played solo on these occasions. One year I even signed up to enter the autoharp competition at the Galax, Virginia Old Fiddlers' Convention and was all set to play my signature piece Molly Hare. But, doggone if I could stay awake through all the fiddles, mandolins, dobros and so forth that were scheduled before the autoharp contest so I left around 11:00 PM and headed back to Charlotte. As it was, that was way past my usual curfew (not that it would have mattered, for among the competitors were such notables as Mike Fenton, Drew Smith, John Hollandsworth, JoAnn Redd and many others--some of whom even used more than three chord bars).

More and more, music got to be a regular part of my life. Before I picked up that ChromAharp shortly before Christmas of 1981, the only thing I played was records. Now, here I was signing up for a Sunday evening community college Old-Time Jam class with Marilyn Price. I stayed in that class for several years, and must not have ever graduated because I kept having to repeat! It was there that I first had the opportunity to play along with other musicians on their various instruments. I owe a great debt to Marilyn, who plays a fine traditional 'harp herself, and to all the members of that class for their help and support. Lifelong friendships were formed there. I even started a local railroad song group for a while, but I needed so much practice time that it came to the point where I was either going to have to quit the group or quit my job.

Jes got a violin and started lessons, and then she also took up the flute. I traded off my last good rifle for a banjo. (Darned if that thing wasn't made in Korea, too, but I didn't know it until it was too late to bail out of the deal.) I took banjo lessons from Neil Griffin, author of about a dozen books on the subject. Neil, along with his brother, Steve, runs a music store in Charlotte. Unfortunately, Neil recognizes musical talent when he sees it or doesn't, and he used to joke with me (I thought he was joking!), telling me when I came in to be sure and shut the door--something about "bad advertising." A little later, I traded that banjo for an American-made dulcimer. I also purchased a real mountain fretless banjo with a genuine groundhog-skin head from Ellis Wolfe

in Eastern Tennessee a couple of years later. The Dobro was another instrument I tried, but it didn't "take" either. However, my brief association with that instrument served to introduce me to some really good Dobro people such as Bev King (who publishes Country Heritage magazine) and Speedy Krise (an old-time Dobro virtuoso from Akron, Ohio). I also renewed my acquaintance with a Dobro-playing childhood schoolmate and hometown friend, Gale Lovellette. Other undertakings included spending a year as editor of the newsletter for the Charlotte Folk Music Society.

By that time, I had left the ChromAharp behind in favor of the first in a series of custom-made 'harps by George Orthey. I had seen George's advertisement in *The Autoharpoholic*, after which I sent for information, saved enough money, and then ordered one sight-unseen. I recall that I took it apart as soon as it was delivered and noticed "LV" burnt on the inside of the string-pin cover on the big end. At the time, I thought it was the brand of a luthier or some cryptic invocation to those master autoharpists who had gone on to that festival in the sky. It was not until I attended my first Dulci-Harp Gathering at the Ortheys' home that I discovered the meaning of that brand. George asked if he could borrow my 'harp for a few minutes to check the serial number. Turns out I had number 55, or "LV" in Roman numerals.

The annual Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering has become the one event I most look forward to each year. There I have met most of the best players, performers, recording artists and competitors in the world. As a matter of fact, I myself won MLAG's very first watermelon seed-spitting contest--hitting a tin pie plate at a distance of 21 feet. (Back in the old days, accuracy and detail were more important than distance.) George and Mary Lou Orthey became my close friends, and encouraged and inspired me on the autoharp. In addition, they attended the annual CFMS festival in 1990, as well as paying a visit to the Elizabeth School Autoharp Club that I helped to establish. MLAG has been an important event for me since its beginning.

The autoharp brought me to the CFMS, and it was through editing and writing for that organization's newsletter that I began to make a wider circle of music acquaintances. I met with and interviewed Kenneth Benfield (from *Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp*) one sweaty August day, and did likewise with Alice Gerrard in the much cooler office of *The Old-Time Herald*. Concurrently, I began to research the life of Kilby Snow. Through that undertaking, I struck up acquaintances, many through correspondence only, with a handful of the finest people I have ever worked with through the music network. Among them was the aforementioned Eileen Roys, whom I first met at the Orthey's years ago. I have also already made mention of Speedy Krise and Bev King. Then, there was Bev's performing and recording partner, Joe Knight, as well as Stephanie Ledgin, editor and publisher of the *Traditional MusicLine*, an events calendar/newsletter originating in New Jersey.

Mary Lou and George helped me a great deal in respect to contacts as I worked on the Kilby Snow biography. Through them, I met Mike and Marti Hudak. Mike was a close friend and playing partner of Kilby and, along with Marti, he became a close friend to me. Through them, in turn, I was introduced to the late Ellen Hudak, who played a major part in Kilby's performing career and remained close to Kilby's wife and daughter throughout her life. Upon completion, my biography of Kilby Snow was published in *Autoharp Quarterly* some years ago. I subsequently tracked down Kilby's son, Jim Snow, thanks again to the help of the Ortheys. That

resulted in the first of many visits to Jim at his home and I do believe it motivated him to take his father's autoharp out of the closet and began playing once more. Jim attended MLAG on a couple of occasions, and won the prestigious Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship playing none other than *Molly Hare*. Incidentally, that was the first tune Kilby had ever played on the autoharp--when he was only five years old.

In summary, had I not seen that single performance of one autoharp player at age 34, I most likely would never have recognized the ChromAharp years later in the music store window. All these yarns that I have spun here came from the autoharp wool I have gathered since seeing that shiny new music store 'harp in 1981. As I look back, I marvel in disbelief at the paths I have meandered down as direct result of finding the autoharp. A modified line from one of Bryan's songs, Dog, relates: "Looking back now I always forget, How I filled up my time before the 'harp was around." Yet, I feel certain that my own odyssey with the instrument is not so very different from that of many other players. Once I heard a well-educated and musically-talented gentleman say, after hearing me play, "The autoharp is the only instrument where the player can achieve instant mediocrity." The remark was meant as a compliment to the instrument, I believe, rather than a barb at the player, because anyone who tells you that the autoharp is really not such an important instrument just hasn't heard our stories.

June 2008 Update from Joe:

Not much has changed over the years with me. Jim Snow and I went to the California Autoharp Gathering a couple of years ago, just as his Dad had gone to California some decades ago. Mike Seeger was there for both of those trips. Jim loved the festival and all the people he met there. His death has left an emptiness in my music. I still play frequently, and over the years Jim gave me some coaching on drag notes and corrected some conclusions I had drawn from audio and video of his Dad with respect to playing the harp. Jim and I have had long conversations a few times a month for years, right up until the last time he was hospitalized. I miss him, and I am thankful that I was able to share so much time with him since the time we first met a year or so before he attended MLAG and won first place in the contest. I will continue to emulate the Snow playing style, and remember him each time I play. I may be reached at: [jmriggs@att.net](mailto:jmriggs@att.net) **JMR**