

Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1992 - John Hollandsworth

As the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* begins its fourth year of publication, we feel privileged to dedicate this issue to John Hollandsworth. A devoted family man, whose "day job" is that of postal carrier, John has made quite a name for himself the last few years in contest playing. He is also much in demand as an autoharp instructor, teaching workshops wherever autoharpists are likely to convene.

When it comes to playing warp-speed fiddle tunes on the autoharp, John Hollandsworth's legacy remains largely unchallenged. He has developed and refined a "thumb flutter" technique that sets him apart from his peers, and he delivers it with dead-on accuracy and remarkable consistency. He is, without a doubt, an instrumentalist of the highest caliber.

I first met John when he enrolled in the 1988 Augusta Intermediate 2/ Advanced autoharp class in Elkins, West Virginia. Mike Fenton was also in that class and, when the two of them got clickin' with the pickin', I wanted to take my 'harp and crawl under a chair! Since that time, I've had the opportunity not only to hear John's music on numerous occasions, but also to become his friend, and a friend of his lovely family.

Coming from a section of the country known for its rich musical heritage, like southwestern Virginia, you really need no other recommendation than being from that area. John reaches back into this culture and draws on his upbringing as a source of inspiration for his music. In the process, he uses his autoharp as a vehicle to express the rich vein of material that is part of the heritage of that region.

John was kind enough to share his story with us so, without further adieu, I'll turn you over to him. **ER**

I have played autoharp for about 31 years now. I first heard my grandmother play it when I was just a child. She played it the old-timey way, flat on the lap, with her right hand to the right of the chord bars. She could, and still can, play a few melodies. I have nice memories of my uncles playing and singing at family reunions late into the night. I feel fortunate to have taken part in these jam sessions when I was a boy. We never used music to play by, but needed to figure out the songs by what we knew about chord progressions. Occasionally, someone would shout out the chords when two or three of us looked lost. I now look back and feel grateful that I was able to learn to play music that way.

From listening to this early bluegrass and gospel, I tried my hand at playing many of the stringed instruments, including guitar, banjo, mandolin, dulcimer, bowed psaltery and steel guitar before finally settling on autoharp as my main interest. During my teenage years, the playing I did was either in churches or 4-H functions, et cetera. Although I didn't realize it then, it was a good experience for me to play in front of people other than my family.

My wife Kathie and I started playing in fiddler's conventions in 1982, when we finally got up nerve enough to enter the oldest and largest one, Galax. We had been awed by it for years, but had never entered. I was pleasantly surprised to get 4th place, and that enabled me to be invited to play in an Invitational Fiddler's Convention at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville at their

Folklife Center. Betty Waldron and Susan Francis were two other 'harpers that played there, and were two of the first players that I got to know.

Kathie and I play for schools, colleges, festivals, coffee houses, benefit concerts, and many private functions. We always try to incorporate interpretation of our music and of our native Appalachian region into our concerts, when it is appropriate, to celebrate our heritage. Kathie sings and plays acoustic bass and hammered dulcimer, and I play guitar and lap dulcimer in addition to autoharp on our shows.

Our area is strong in the old-time string band tradition, and we take part in that when we play as **Mountain Fling**. Ed Ogle adds harmonica, guitar, fiddle and male vocals to our sound, and Jim Lloyd plays lead guitar, banjo and sometimes other interesting instruments such as banjo-mandolin. In this way, we can have fun playing with friends and also add variety to our shows.

I have been modifying and repairing autoharps for the past three or four years. I also have tried building them, and hope to do more of that in the future. As an authorized dealer for Oscar Schmidt, I invite inquiries from anyone who needs instruments or parts.

It's fun to build, repair, and sell instruments and parts, but nothing can compare with playing. We do as much of that as we can. In the summer, we go to many festivals, fiddler's conventions, and gigs, and in the winter when the festivals slow down, friends drop by every week or two to sit around and pick. That's the most fun of all!

In our area, there are quite a few fiddler's conventions throughout the summer, most of them smaller and more intimate than Galax. This makes it more possible to meet and play with the friends we have met over the years. We have continued to play in the conventions for the past nine years, and I have been fortunate to recover some expenses by winning prizes at places like Independence, Fries, Dublin, and Elk Creek, Virginia. The most memorable times were winning first place awards at Fiddler's Grove in North Carolina, in 1988 and 1990, the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship in Newport, Pennsylvania in 1991, and Galax in 1991. In 1989, I managed a trip to Winfield, Kansas for the Walnut Valley Festival, and was pleased to be called back as a finalist.

In the last several years, I have had the chance to teach some autoharp classes through the New River Community College Continuing Education, to teach some private lessons, and to do workshops in Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Two of my favorite places to share autoharp information are the Augusta Heritage Workshops in Elkins, West Virginia, and the Mountain Laurel Gathering mentioned above. In July of 1992, I will be the featured autoharp entertainer and instructor at the Sixteenth Annual Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in Binghamton, New York.

It is with pride that I serve as an Advisory Board member of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine. I was also the **Interaction Lesson** instructor for the January 1990 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly*. That instructional tape, featuring *Home Sweet Home*, is still available from me at the address included with this article.

In 1988, we made our first cassette, *A Mountain Music Sampler*, drawing on the talents of several friends to help. Then, in 1991, we released a second cassette, *Pickin' Time*, once again having fun making it with friends. I am also featured on Volumes 3 and 4 of the *Winfield Winners! Autoharp* series of tapes, and was selected to be on the tape of the Galax Fiddler's Convention for 1989. If you'd like to get in touch with me, just write to 700 Tower Road, Christiansburg, Virginia 24073, or call 703-382-6550. Maybe we can get together and talk autoharps or, better yet, pick some!" **JH**

September 2008 Update:

John's autoharp performing and teaching career has continued to grow. He has enjoyed doing week-long workshops several times at the Augusta Heritage Workshops, and has taught a class at the John C. Campbell Folk School every year since 2000. He was an autoharp tutor at Sore Fingers Week in England in 2002, and has taught and performed at the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering and the Ozark Folk Center Autoharp Jamboree several times. He continues to perform and travel with wife Kathie as a duo, and with the four-piece band Mountain Fling with Jim Lloyd and Ed Ogle. Locally, he enjoys playing rhythm guitar with Katie and the Bubbatones, an old-time dance band. John was honored to be included on the *Autoharp Legacy* recording. He and Kathie and Mountain Fling have also produced several recordings. John became the first and only autoharp player to win the coveted "Outstanding Performer" award at the Galax Fiddlers Convention in 1992, and has taken that overall prize a total of three times.

In recent years, John launched his luthier autoharp business of building **Blue Ridge Autoharps**, instruments made to each customer's specifications. He keeps busy in the workshop when not working, performing, teaching, or spending time with his family.

See <www.blueridgeautoharps.com> for information on John's autoharps as well as his performing groups, schedule, and recordings.