

## **Judy Austin - Autoharp Clearinghouse July 1997**

**Judy Austin's** musical memories go back early. Her first recollections are of singing Christmas songs as a small child with her paternal grandmother. Grandma Peggy's home was adorned by a collection of music boxes, and she always seemed to be listening to, and singing along with, music on the radio. Even as an adult, Judy recalls taking a trip with her grandmother to Hilton Head--during which the two of them sang non-stop for twelve hours.

As a youngster growing up in Athens, Georgia, Judy (at her mother's urging) took piano lessons for four years or so. At the age of six, she began a decade of ballet and modern dance classes. While still in her teens, she performed with the Marietta Civic Ballet, the Carl Radcliff Dance Company and the Atlanta Ballet. Judy credits teacher and mentor Carl Radcliff with having been a major influence in respect to her education in both music and dance.

Other entries on her resume include some time studying at the North Carolina School of the Arts, work with the Academy Theater, and touring as a singer and dancer with the rock opera *Tommy* and the *Catch My Soul* version of *Othello*. Along the way, Judy went to cosmetology school, and still works in what she describes as an "upscale hair salon" as her day job.

In the interim, Judy went on to teach dancing to both children and adults, and had her own studio for a number of years. She served as ballet coach to a gymnastic team in Athens, as well as doing a lot of work in choreography. Judy relates that she was always very much at home with the theater and dance scene--and probably would have made it her life's work had that choice been financially plausible.

As a young adult, Judy bought a Gibson guitar, which she says she "played badly for too many years." In the nineteen seventies, Judy was the lead vocalist for a blues band, and performed additionally as part of a folk duo and later a trio. Instrumentally, she most often added percussion of one sort or another. In retrospect, Judy remembers the difficulty in trying to keep a band, which might have as many as nine members, together. There were times that she sang five sets, five nights a week and went on road trips as long as eight months in duration. That lifestyle eventually "got old" and, for a period of five or six years, Judy put her singing career on the back burner and worked again in the field of dance.

Then, in 1985, Judy took part in a Nicaraguan tour co-sponsored by a foundation called *Witness For Peace* and the *North Georgia United Methodist Woman*. The group was housed at the Oscar Romero Spiritual Center, which was decorated with beautiful Italian works of art. While there, Judy had "an incredible divine experience" which led her to resume her singing with a renewed spirit.

Three years later, Judy teamed up musically with long-time friend Beth Heidelberg to form an Atlanta-based duo that was to become known as **Harp and Soul**. It was multi-instrumentalist Beth who introduced Judy to the autoharp. For six years, the two women made the rounds of the concert circuit, and recorded an album together entitled *Pickles and Wine*. They also provided the music for a dance piece filmed for educational television. Judy and Beth came to my attention during this period through a mutual acquaintance. I was attending the International

Bluegrass Music Association's annual fall *World Of Bluegrass* event in Owensboro, Kentucky in 1990 when Helen Swanson spotted my autoharp pendant and struck up a conversation (it pays to advertise!). Helen, a journalist and radio personality from Atlanta, was also representing Harp and Soul as their agent. I recruited her to the ranks of *AC*'s readers, and she provided me with Harp and Soul's press kit. Beth eventually "moved on" to form a professional partnership with a man named Todd Mack--at which time Judy made the decision to "go it alone" as a solo act. Looking back, she says that Beth taught her a great deal about theory, arranging music and stage presence--and she is extremely grateful for the years they spent together.

During her tenure with Harp and Soul, Judy used the autoharp almost exclusively in a backup capacity. She says that, in terms of her abilities as an instrumentalist, she feels as though she had been in a "musical vacuum" until she became aware of the existence of a worldwide autoharp community. Her playing has since evolved to the point where she is an accomplished melody picker as the result of a lot of hard work and the help of her many friends-in-music.

Judy is especially grateful to George Foss, whom she describes as "my hero." Captain Pentatonic, as George likes to call himself, encouraged Judy to venture into the realm of diatonic and pentatonic autoharps--and then patiently answered her countless questions. Judy also expresses special gratitude to Gregg Averett for helping her to solve the "noisy chord bars" dilemma. Through these gentlemen and the autoharp publications, Judy learned of the various autoharp-inclusive clubs and events held around the country and began to take part in them. In 1997, she expects to be at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering for the third consecutive year. Judy traveled to the Walnut Valley Festival last September, where she competed in the International Autoharp Championship. She is also an active participant among the *Cyberpluckers*.

When asked about her personal preference in autoharps, Judy indicated that she favors single-key diatonic and pentatonic instruments. The seven 'harps in her current collection are all American-made Oscar Schmidt B-Model maple instruments circa 1968 through 1979. Each is a single-key instrument with six to nine chord bars, and they are in A, C, D, E, F and G (diatonic) and A (pentatonic).

Exciting recent music-related news in Judy's life has been the 1996 release of a compact disc recording that was nearly two years in the making. *Country Radio*, as its title would imply, contains fourteen cuts with a country-influenced (but not what I would call hard-core traditional country) sound. The album, which is full of strong songs and inspired arrangements, includes nine original numbers by Joyce Brookshire. Judy Austin harbors a genuine love for music and performing--but it is her voice with which she initially captures her listening audiences. And, while *Country Radio* is primarily a vocal project, it is infused with melodic instrumental passages as well as tasteful autoharp accompaniment. (Reviewed in the November 1996 issue of *AC*.)

Here lately, Judy has been performing before a lot of young audiences, but she is certainly not strictly a children's entertainer. Music, by her estimation, is a method of communication to people of all ages and in all walks of life. Judy maintains a flexible repertoire that fits almost any occasion. More often than not, Sunday morning will find her providing a song for the

Prelude or Offertory at any one of a number of places of worship. She is equally likely to bring a ray of sunshine into an area homeless shelter by way of her music. Last summer, Judy performed at Olympic City, USA during the Atlanta Games. A perceptive artist, she possesses an apparent sixth sense when it comes to choosing appropriate material for each unique setting. Perhaps Judy's most admirable musical trait is her continuing quest for artistic perfection. Not satisfied being just another good singer who strums along on the autoharp, Judy has progressed to the point instrumentally where her "chops" nearly match her vocal abilities--and that's saying something. The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* takes great pride in dedicating this issue in her honor.  
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Note: Judy Austin's recoding *Country Radio* (CD only) is available directly from her for \$15.00 plus a \$3.00 shipping charge. Make checks payable to JUDY AUSTIN, and send orders to 36 String Productions at: P.O. Box 49323, Atlanta, GA 30359. Songs included on the album are: *Love Crisis* • *World Of Fantasy* • *Second Fiddle* • *Precious Memories* • *Some Loves Are Better Left Undone* • *Through The Years* • *Johnny* • *Country Radio* • *Cold, Cold Heart* • *Dahlonga* • *Fishing Fever* • *Please Take This Love From My Heart* • *Overcome With Memories Of You* • *Sweet Hour Of Prayer*

July 2007 Update:

On 26 March of this year, Judy's second solo compact disc was recorded. Entitled *Live at Briarcliff Baptist Church*, the cuts included are: *In This Small Southern Town* (Missy Raines); *River of Jordan* (Hazel Houser); *Don't Let Your Deal Go Down* (Traditional); *The Winding Stream* (A.P. Carter); *I'm Getting Well* (James Hand); *Fishing Fever* (Joyce Brookshire); *She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain* (Traditional); *The Biscuit Song* (Arnold Watson); *The Sweetest Gift* (J.B. Coats); *Stardust* (Hoagy Carmichael); *San Antonio Rose* (Bob Wills); *While the Band is Playing Dixie* (A.P. Carter); *God Walks the Dark Hills* (Verna Goodman)

This CD is \$15.00 postpaid. Address same as for *Country Radio* above. Judy may also be contacted via e-mail at: [string37@mindspring.com](mailto:string37@mindspring.com) OR  
Visit her website at: <http://www.geocities.com/autoharpsinger05/>

Cover portrait that accompanied this article plus a picture of Judy are in the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo. Click on picture and then select Large for best viewing.