

Autoharp Clearinghouse November 1995 – Julie Davis

As is often the case, I first became aware of the music of **Julie Davis** by way of the recordings which were reviewed in this publication. I had also ordered her Interaction Lesson tape from the January 1993 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine (*Give Me Back My Heart*).

Along the way, it was my pleasure to meet Julie, to see her perform and to participate in her workshops at several of the annual Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gatherings. At this time, it is with extreme pleasure that I dedicate this issue of *AC* in her honor. When Julie offered to write her own profile, I quickly took her up on the proposal...and present that story to you below. **ER**

“I never actually anticipated becoming a professional musician. I expected, at different times of my life, to be anything from a veterinarian to an alpine biologist to a college professor who played music, but never a musician itself. From the time I was young, music was like the air I breathed; something I loved doing for its own sake that I assumed I would be doing no matter what other options I pursued. So, it still occasionally surprises me, always with delight, that I teach, perform and share music as a career.

My parents always claimed that music was my first language. I think this is true for many of us. I do remember being endlessly scolded for singing at the table, and humming no matter what I was doing. I also recall routinely singing my siblings to sleep at the ripe old age of about four. My brother claims to this day that I have too much lullaby in my voice.

My parents were not themselves musicians, though they loved music. However, for generations before them, both family trees abound with musicians, artists and scholars. Very old family photographs are often filled with musical instruments and journals overflow with descriptions of musical activities.

When my family homesteaded in Colorado in the eighteen sixties and seventies, my great-grandfather, one of the first photographers in the Colorado territory, organized a marching band. My great-grandmother became the region's music teacher, a more certain financial prospect than her husband's photography. My mother's grandparents were the ones who sang at the gathering times of church meetings, weddings, Christenings and funerals. On my other grandfather's side, I was always told that the important thing to remember was that we Davises were Welsh, and we had always been musicians and storytellers. As a child, I recall listening to my father's family reciting long passages of poetry, telling stories, and playing music. At the time I felt like the Seventh Dragon of Chinese mythology...the one who is invisible and just listens.

My first recollection of playing an instrument was of the xylophone my grandmother gave me for Christmas when I was five. It came with an instruction book, obviously simple, that had songs written out by number. It didn't take me long to figure out that the toy piano we had inherited from a neighbor had the same numbers and, anything you learned on one instrument, you could play on the other. There are some moments of delight in your life that you remember forever, and that was one of them.

My parents wanted us to learn piano, so I took lessons. I think, even from the start, I knew it wasn't my instrument, and I never became a terribly accomplished pianist. However, I had a teacher who taught me much about teaching, and even more about music. I remember vividly the pleasure of getting up early to practice piano before anyone else was awake.

I recall equally well the joy of getting my first guitar. I had saved my money for almost a year, and then had to wait two unbearable weeks after placing the order for its arrival at our local Montgomery Ward store. I was inspired by a second cousin who was a cattle wrangler and sang those soulful and sweet old cowboy songs whenever the family gathered. I had sat at his feet for years listening and watching him play, all the while longing to be able to do that. After my guitar arrived, I plunged in with more determination than I had probably ever shown for anything. Another of those magic moments was when I was playing *Home on the Range* and realized that I knew when to change chords, and which chords to play, without looking at the music.

About that same time, our church choir master (my piano teacher) began building choirs. Having pushed our youth choir to good performing standards, he then started a bell choir, a recorder choir and a madrigal choir...all of which I joined. We toured the state for two to three weeks every year, and gave special concerts in Denver.

When Harry Tuft opened the Denver Folklore Center, I found my way down there the first month it was open. Six months later, I was teaching guitar at the establishment and, soon thereafter, working full time at the store. It was then that I rediscovered the autoharp. My first encounter had been in third grade when I got to play the instrument in a city-wide music concert. About thirty of us played the chords for *Waltzing Matilda* on old black Oscar Schmidt Autoharps while four hundred kids sang with angelic vigor about the preferability of suicide over surrender. I loved it. At the Folklore Center, I heard musicians playing melody on autoharp, and the sound captured my imagination immediately. I quickly became 'chief cook in charge of autoharps' and, influenced by the recordings and live performances of Mike Seeger, Sylvia Tyson and Alice Steward, played and practiced autoharp whenever there was a still moment.

In college, I majored in both music and history. I played recorder and piano for my major, focusing primarily on Early Music. Guitar and autoharp became, and continued to be for the next decade, something I played for my own comfort and pleasure.

I ended up in Charlottesville, Virginia for graduate and professional work, and then moved back to Colorado to teach at the University of Colorado School of Law. Upon coming back to my home state, I almost immediately became involved once again with my old friends in music. Somehow, in ways that were gradual, hard to put a finger on and probably not important enough to recount, I began to perform. Initially, it was with friends and then alone. I became Director of the Swallow Hill Music School in Denver and, years later, found myself involved in music on a full-time basis.

Early on, after returning to Colorado, I encountered Bonnie Phipps. Having been influenced by Bryan Bowers, she was playing a diatonic 'harp. Bonnie is a wonderfully creative musician

whose arrangements of songs and tunes on autoharp, cello, violin and guitar were so fresh that they inspired me to play in new ways and to take a delight in the instrument that has never left me. Autoharp is now a major part of any concert or program I give. I also play it often just for my own enjoyment. I am continually amazed by the instrument, the directions it takes in the hands of other players and the beauty of its voice.

Today, I travel nationally for concerts and festivals, work as an artist-in-residence as both musician and storyteller, teach classes and workshops on the subjects of autoharp, guitar and musicianship in general, and I work regularly with special needs populations. This year, I was honored by the state arts council and a television station for a twelve week series on storytelling and music that I did with Alzheimer's and stroke victims. I was also approached by the state folklorist to be part of the Master/Apprentice Program to pass on an understanding of the role of both music and storytelling on the frontier. One of the great honors of my career was being part of the 'Outstanding Colorado Artists' concert series a few years ago.

As briefly mentioned above, an important part of what I do is to work with children with disabilities, patients in hospice care where music provides obvious comfort, people with head trauma and those with Alzheimer's. Studies have shown that music is strong in centers of the brain that are resistant to Alzheimer's. Those of us who have worked with patients stricken with this debilitating disease know that it gives people access, for a time, to parts of the mind where there is still wholeness and joy. I cannot encourage new players strongly enough to take their talent and their growing skill to places like this where it genuinely matters.

I also occasionally play the role of troubadour and family musician. One family hired me to play for the birth of their first child. It was not so much for the baby as it was to soothe the mother. Later, I played and sang during the birth of their second child, as well as for family birthdays and other special occasions. Once, they even took me along on a family vacation to provide music for their friends during the evenings.

I have recorded two albums, the first of which (*Heart Full of Song*) is a compilation of songs I truly love and had always said, 'If I ever do a recording, this will be on it.' The second (*Traveling Light*) includes songs reflecting what I am doing today. There are two more projects in the beginning stages, including a children's album.

I feel as though I am one of the luckiest people in the world to be doing something that I love so much. To me, music is one of the places where our spirits gather...a place that expresses deep feeling and conviction that cannot be so easily or beautifully articulated in any other way. I love the fact that my role is to go places and not sing TO people, but to sing WITH them. This allows use to create together those safe, healing and joyful places that offer safe harbor, self expression and community. **JD**

October 2007 Update: Julie's recording *Traveling Light* is available in CD format for \$15.00 plus a \$4.00 packing and shipping fee. *Heart Full of Song* and a newer album *Journey to the Fluted Mountain* (storytelling with autoharp) are on audio cassettes only at this point in time. The price for those is \$10.00 each plus \$3.00 shipping. Orders should be sent to Julie Davis, P.O. Box 1302, Nederland, CO 80466. E-mail: jdavis@indra.com **ER**