

Autoharp Clearinghouse – June 1997 – June Maugery

June Maugery, the current Mountain Laurel Autoharp Champion, is a person who spreads sunshine wherever she goes. Never without a smile, June radiates both beauty and grace. I tend to think of her as sort of a musical butterfly--with her fingers flitting about on the strings of her autoharps--causing a constant barrage of light and airy notes to emerge from the instruments. She also has the voice of an angel, with my personal favorite from among her vocal repertoire being *Who Will Sing For Me*. I can hardly wait for the release of June's debut recording. Meanwhile, I invite you to join me in enjoying the story behind the lovely and talented lady to whom this issue is dedicated. **ER**

I was born in Des Moines, Iowa a few days before Halloween in 1948. Since my family moved back to New England three years later, I can't claim to have much conscious connection to my Mid-Western roots (unless you can count a passion for corn on the cob, and a preference for the wide-open spaces).

I grew up in Massachusetts, where my parents proceeded to have six more children--all girls but one. That made for a lot of younger siblings to boss around, sing with and set a good example for. I was a natural at the first two. A fine chance to boss **and** sing came every Christmas and Easter when we kids would organize a "show" for our parents, grandmother and whoever else was around for the holidays. My Dad still has a reel-to-reel recording he made of most of those presentations, which I listened to several years ago during a visit.

At that time, it came back to me that one of my "rules" for our holiday shows was that the three eldest girls each had to sing a solo. Much to my amazement I discovered that, for seven straight performances, while my sisters were singing material like *Frosty The Snowman* and *Here Comes Peter Cottontail*, my chosen song was *Wayfaring Stranger*. Although I had almost zero exposure to rural mountain music, I apparently knew I loved it even way back then!

My father had high-fidelity speakers all over the house, through which we listened to a fairly wide range of music from *Madame Butterfly* to Burl Ives. I sang in the choir at church, the glee club at school, and took piano lessons for a few years. My teacher used to get on my case for not practicing and for playing with my eyes closed. I heard her tell my mother once that I had a nice touch. But she told **me** that I'd never learn to sight read if I just played by ear and by memory. She was right about that.

Even as a young child, I was fascinated by harmony. I called it "notes that go together," and was into experimenting with songs, phone dials--you name it. I think I even connected harmony with magic because I had a superstitious notion that, if I could get just the right note going along with my rock hammer, some rock would split open and be a geode. (I really wanted to find a geode, thought I don't think they're abundant in New England.)

I will now jump ahead twenty years to the first time I saw, heard and played an autoharp. It was all in the same moment, as I honestly don't remember ever previously seeing even an old black one on a teacher's shelf. I had gone west and was in a band singing with some friends. We did mostly bluegrass--a lot of Stanley Brothers material and such--and I played the washtub bass. As we performed, our group kept expanding until one day we acquired a stand-up bass player. My washtub was put out to pasture at that time. (In case anyone is curious, it was Seattle in the late nineteen seventies, and our group was **Mountain Oysters**.) Our "chief" said I should get an autoharp. He explained what it was, how it worked and how to hold it in the manner of Mother Maybelle. The idea sounded pretty good to me. I was aware, though, that I'd be going from one string that I never had to tune to 36 strings which would need regular tuning. With that in mind, I headed for the local music store with some misgivings.

At this point my story is going to become all too familiar, but I'll relate it anyway. The minute I held that autoharp in my arms, I was virtually enchanted. I knew that this was **it**--which the piano and guitar had never quite been. This instrument really seemed to be made for me and made to be played with closed eyes--all those strings and all those "notes that go together." I recall remarking to the store clerk that "this is harmony heaven." He looked bored and less than convinced that there was anything heavenly about an autoharp. Oddly, his reaction made me love it even more and, to this day, I remain enchanted.

The autoharp was a great addition to the Mountain Oysters but, before we could become world-famous and before I even had a chance to hear Bryan Bowers, my life took some unexpected turns and I went to Thailand to work in refugee camps. I'd been a case worker helping to "resettle" refugees from Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, and my boss in Seattle got transferred to Bangkok. He asked if I wanted to go? Although I had mixed feelings, I decided I couldn't pass up the opportunity. So, in 1979, I left Seattle, my dog and the Mountain Oysters behind. But I took my autoharp.

On Christmas Eve, at a big noisy American party in Bangkok, I was feeling out of my element and more than a little homesick. A guitar-playing Peace Corps volunteer and I took our instruments up to the roof and played and sang *O Holy Night*. It sounded lovely and special on a day that, for the rest of the city below, was just business and bustle as usual. I began to feel better, and we continued with *Joy To The World* and *What Child Is This?* I was surprised when I opened my eyes to see quite a few people standing there quietly with drinks in hand. The party had moved to the roof, and the music reminded us all why we were there and what we were doing--as music often does. I think it was in that moment that I perceived my autoharp in a new light. For me, it had become more than a fun and friendly accessory. I understood that, if I was going to thrive in foreign and difficult places, my 'harp would be a vital necessity.

Just a year later I fell in love with, and eventually married, a French doctor that I'd met in one of the camps. My life with Bernard has taken me to many a new and far-off place--including three years in Africa--and now France. I still get homesick sometimes, need my 'harp to keep me on track and the music to remind me of what I'm doing. But, in general, I feel really lucky. The following story will show, I hope, why I feel confident that I'm where I'm supposed to be.

I had been living in Niger, Africa for about a year when another guitar-playing Peace Corps volunteer showed up in our small town. He had with him a copy of a publication called *The Walnut Valley Occasional*. I read it with interest, noting that there was actually an autoharp magazine out there, cleverly named *The Autoharpoholic*. What **really** caught my eye was the mention of someone who made lovely all-wood custom autoharps. There was a photo of one that had been awarded for first prize in some hot-shot autoharp contest.

These revelations awakened in me a sense of yearning to be more connected with an autoharp community. Occasionally, under African skies, I'd wish upon a star that I might have one of those hand-crafted autoharps someday. But there I was in Zinder, Niger, Africa and, by the time I left two years later, I'd forgotten the name of the craftsman and I couldn't recall where the autoharp competition had taken place either?

The summer of 1988 found me back home in the United States to reconnect with family and friends. Of course, I had my autoharp along. It had survived the three years in Africa, but was in bad need of a new set of strings. While visiting my sister, Cindy, in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, I noticed a folksy-looking music store that seemed like a good bet for finding autoharp parts. I casually walked in--and I sometimes still get goose bumps when I remember this. The very first thing I saw, strings shining in the sun, was a beautiful all-wood handmade autoharp. My amazement grew as proprietor Leonard Reid explained that the luthier was a friend of his and that he lived close by. In other words, I had just walked in, by chance, to the one music store on the whole planet that had the very kind of autoharp I'd been wishing for. (Strike the word "chance" actually--something more had to be going on.)

That experience more than made up for my never finding a geode--and especially so since, along with the purchase of my new Orthey 21-chord 'harp, I got invited to attend the Dulci-Harp Gathering a few weeks later. Leonard had casually mentioned that I would meet some good autoharp players there. Yikes, that was the understatement of the year! Drew Smith, Marty Schuman, Mark Fackeldey and Ivan Stiles were the four that stood out for me that first trip. And, those electronic tuners--I couldn't believe or understand how everyone could be so well in tune with one another?

As most of you know, the Dulci-Harp Gathering later became the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. I've been back, traveling all the way from France, every year since 1988. I'd need this entire magazine to talk about all I have learned there and all the friends I first met there, so I'm going to leave a lot unsaid. But I **will** talk about Marty Schuman because he was so essential to my musical evolution.

Even more than hearing his specific ideas about chord bars, thumb picks, partials, pentatonics and all the other elements with which he was always experimenting, I would say my most valuable lesson from Marty was his encouragement for me to adopt a certain freestyle approach. A number of times I would find myself slinking out of some workshop feeling like I had a learning disability because my brain wouldn't register the notes or tablature. Trying to read something from paper seems to short circuit my hearing. Marty would shrug at my troubles, say "listen to this" and, next thing I knew, we would be playing some old song or tune he had just thought of. I got it through my head that we all have different ways of **learning** as well as

different ways of **playing** the autoharp. I had already developed a certain style during all those years of isolation, but nothing I did--or didn't do--shocked Marty. He felt that there was no **one** way to play, so he was the perfect mentor for me. We got to be better and better friends, spending more and more time together each July.

One year I purchased a set of Orthey Bars, which enable you to explore the world of lock-bar diatonic playing without a huge additional financial investment. (They slip in and out of the chord bar assembly on the Orthey chromatic 'harps.) It didn't take me long to decide that this open, fluid way of playing was right up my alley. The next summer, Marty was the second place winner in the initial Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship. He and Mark Fackeldey overhauled the Oscar Schmidt Autoharp that Marty won and converted it to a single-key "D" diatonic. Marty then presented it to me--complete with the pentatonic bar and suspended chords of which I had been so envious. I remember that next year back in France as a time rich in experimentation and discovery. I guess you could say that I became a *Born Again* diatonic autoharp player.

Though I never had an actual hands-on lesson from Marty Schuman, two things he told me have greatly influenced the manner in which I play. On one occasion, he said, "You've got all those strings, use 'em!" And I do. I play pretty much all over the 'harp--sometimes way out by the tuning pins, other times way in by the chord bars. The sound is totally different in one place than in another. The other comment Marty made was to say, "You have such a great ear for harmony but you don't incorporate it into your playing." It took me quite some time to figure out what he meant by that because everyone seem so focused on playing melody. Then one night around a campfire, Neal Walters was singing a beautiful song. I was hearing a nice harmony but was too shy to sing--and didn't know all the lyrics. So, I quietly played it on my 'harp. Neal, being a fellow harmony freak, picked right up on it and smiled. That was when it dawned on me that I could get that harmony rush from playing as well as from singing.

To this day, if I'm in a jam session with hot shot musicians with whom I am not very well acquainted, I don't necessarily seek out a melody break. I **will** assert myself, however, with some counter-melody--just above the banjo or just below the fiddle. And so far, so good--I haven't been asked to leave. Jamming is one of my favorite things to do (especially at night) and, when I circulate in scenes where there's still a lot of stigma attached to the autoharp, I feel almost like a missionary or something--gradually and discreetly trying to open people's minds (and ears!) to the beauty of the instrument.

Here in France, I don't have that problem. I play traditional music with a dance band and they think the autoharp is great. The French insist on calling it a zither. I think the word "auto" throws them, but that's fine. I've learned a lot about Beurées, Polkas, Mazurkas and Schottisches--how to play them anyway--my dancing hasn't evolved all that much!

A long time fantasy is in the process of coming true as I write this. My first recording is about to go to press (I'm working on the liner notes now). I could fill still another issue talking about **that** experience. It has been interesting and intense, to say the least. And, in the process of writing this story for *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, I think I have come up with a title for the album.

For weeks, I've been tossing titles back and forth, collecting feedback from Connecticut all the way to California. But nothing really clicked. *Shining Bright Like Gold* is a favorite line from one of the songs on my tape. It is also a nice reference to that autoharp shining in the sun when I walked into Leonard Reid's music store. Not everyone will get the connection--but **I** will and **you** will. Last, but not least, it brings to mind the shining golden moments shared in the past, and hopefully in the future, making music with so many of you who are reading this. And, that seems like a pretty good note on which to end my story. Besides, I just received word from Eileen reminding me that it's time to get this to her! I've appreciated this opportunity to recall and document the highlights of my musical journey. I sign off in anticipation of seeing many of you this summer. **JM**