

Autoharp Clearinghouse – October 1996

Karen Mueller

Although I had “met” **Karen Mueller** through the pages of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine, our paths didn’t finally cross until the summer of 1987 when she was one of the instructors for a class in which I was enrolled at the Augusta Heritage Center. Actually, I met Karen’s autoharp before I met her, when its creator, Bob Taylor, displayed (and played) it during a 1986 Augusta class. To this day, I maintain that it was **the** most beautiful-sounding ‘harp that I have ever heard.

The idea of having Karen grace the cover of the *Clearinghouse* has been in the works for several years. But, due to the illness of her mother, it remained on the back burner for some time--until now! I’m certain that you will find her story well worth the wait. *AC* is privileged to dedicate this issue in honor of Karen. **ER**

Karen Mueller: A Clear Vision Comes Into Focus

by Katryn Conlin

Karen was born and raised in Winfield, Kansas. She studied piano from the age of eight, and her teachers gave her a good grounding in music theory and exposed her to a variety of styles, encouraging her to select popular as well as classical pieces. In piano recitals and competitions in the region, Mueller was trained in the rituals of formal performance.

“We’d practice how to stand, how to announce your piece, exactly how to start with your hands in your lap, collect yourself, and then lift them to the piano,” she remembers. This training has served her well in the years of competition and performance since childhood.

Karen first attended the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield when she was a sophomore in high school. At about that same time, her interest in guitar took precedence over piano. She had started taking guitar lessons at the age of fourteen. Her first guitar had nylon strings and, from the outset, she studied classical style, note reading, theory and melodic playing. Within a year, her guitar teacher was referring his beginning students to her, and she taught guitar throughout her high school career.

On her own, she figured out the folk-rock and country songs of the day. “I’d just sit in front of the radio with my guitar, try to find the key, figure out the chords, and pick out the breaks.” She later changed over to steel strings and bought a Mossman guitar, which was handmade in Winfield.

In the fall of her junior year, Karen heard Bryan Bowers play autoharp at the festival in Winfield. “I knew about autoharps from a Sunday School teacher but, when I heard Bryan playing, it just blew me away. I fell in love immediately with the sound.”

She adopted her mother's old autoharp and set to work with one of Bowers' records. There were no instructors for melodic autoharp in the area, so she taught herself by trial and error. She worked out the fiddle tunes and folk songs she already knew on the guitar by ear.

The next summer Karen connected with Bonnie Phipps, an autoharp player from Denver who came to Winfield for a June folk festival. By sheer coincidence, the Mueller family encountered Bonnie a few weeks later when they took a vacation to Colorado and ran into her at a Renaissance festival. Bonnie was enormously helpful to Karen, giving her tips, feedback and direction in her playing. She explained the diatonic, double-strung system of tuning which gives the autoharp such a resonant sound. On the same trip, Karen picked up a professional-quality mountain dulcimer kit and began work at building, and then learning, still another traditional acoustic instrument.

During the fall of her senior year, Karen discovered a crucial element of bluegrass and old-time music; a deep sense of community in the jam sessions at the Winfield festival. "I had been preparing myself to jam without realizing it by following along with records and the radio, so I could hang with the chord changes. And the people were so nice. That was the thing - no one was critical. I started by standing in the back, and folks would say, 'Hey, you're doing great, come on in,' and invite me into the circle. I was so touched, finding a home with other people who loved music as much as I did." Despite her success as a solo artist, it's the connection with other musicians which makes music so important in Karen's life even today.

In the summer of 1980, Bonnie Phipps sent Karen a two-page flier from a woman in California named Becky Blackley, who was starting a magazine for autoharp players called *The Autoharpoholic*. Karen responded enthusiastically to Becky and began submitting occasional reviews, tunes and articles for the publication as it began its steady growth. Through *The Autoharpoholic*, Mueller found yet another connection with a kindred group of musicians. She later served on the Advisory Board of *The Autoharpoholic* and contributed to Blackley's book, *Winning Ways on the Autoharp, Volume One*.

Coming from an academic family (her father was a college professor), it was natural for Mueller to go off to college and earn her bachelor's degree in Art History and English at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. She didn't choose a music major because of her love for "folk" rather than "classical" music, but states, "If there had been a degree in autoharp, I would have gotten one." Her college social life included the KU folk dance club, and potlucks and jam sessions with musicians in town.

In Lawrence, she connected with the musicians with whom she founded two successful bands in the mid-1980s -- *Full Circle*, an eclectic vocal and instrumental group, and *Newgrange* ("New Midwestern Celtic Music").

During her college years, Karen set two long-term goals for herself as an individual musician: to win the International Autoharp Championship in Winfield, and to make an album of her own.

Karen entered the contest in its first year, 1981, and didn't place. "I was disappointed," she says, "But I understood how it happened. People had been playing professionally for twenty years, and I had been playing for three.

Undaunted, Mueller continued to work up tunes, and entered the contest again and again. She had lots of time to practice at her summer job as an assistant music therapist at Winfield State Hospital. Her hard work paid off when she was a finalist in 1983 and '84, took third place in '85 and finally won the title in 1986. She also competed on the mountain dulcimer, and was a two-time Kansas state champion, and a finalist at Winfield in '85.

By 1985, Karen had realized she would like some time away from academic life and figured she'd wait a bit before going to graduate school. (She's still waiting.) Karen worked as a jeweler in Lawrence and continued playing with *Full Circle* and *Newgrange*. She took up the mandolin and bouzouki as she became more involved with playing in bands.

Of her notable skills on so many different stringed instruments, Karen explains, "Each instrument has its own voice and its own capabilities. Say, on the guitar, you can create interesting new chords. On the autoharp, you only have access to the chords which are on it--there's no way to come up with new chords on the autoharp, short of making a new chord bar. I feel freer, in some ways, to experiment with different sounds on the guitar. But the autoharp has a wonderful bright, full, joyous sound that I find very expressive."

Karen enjoys listening to a wide variety of musical styles, including Appalachian, folk, pop, Celtic, jazz, classical, bluegrass and French Canadian. But, if she had to choose her favorite styles to play on the autoharp, the scales would tip in favor of old-time/bluegrass fiddle tunes and Irish jigs. These tunes serve as the raw material she develops into her hallmark arrangements, noted for their dynamic variations and rhythms.

While she first learned Ron Wall's "open chording" style of diatonic playing by 1980, she uses it sparingly. Karen still prefers the fullness of diatonic 'harps, and her present collection of a dozen autoharps includes several one-, two- and three-key instruments. These range from her prized Bob Taylor 'harp to several mid-80's Schmidt *Centurions*, a *Festival* diatonic (signed by Bob Taylor when he worked at Oscar Schmidt), a *Phoenix*, and an antique black five-chord model called *The Favorite*.

In February of 1989, Karen moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. She found the larger acoustic music community there exciting, and adapted surprisingly well to the notorious winters. Karen performed with a number of Twin Cities bands, and continued developing her solo repertoire as well as teaching and recording. She's been a full-time musician since 1993.

Giving lessons and workshops provides financial support to Mueller's career as a performer, but it's a vocation she genuinely loves. "I enjoy all my students, wherever they are in the learning process," she says. "I always get back more than I give." She teaches autoharp, dulcimer, mandolin and guitar at the Homestead Pickin' Parlor and the West Bank School of Music in Minneapolis.

Besides performing solo and with her band, *The Karen Mueller Trio*, Karen has a group which books through Young Audiences of Minnesota. *Strawberry Jam--Bluegrass Music for Kids* brings Karen's talents to school assembly programs and special events for children. "It's important for kids to see these instruments and hear this style of music in an enjoyable situation," she says.

Mueller has been performing at an increasing number of festivals across the country in recent years, including the aforementioned Walnut Valley Festival, California's Summer Solstice Festival, the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops in West Virginia and the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Pennsylvania.

Autoharp Gourmet, a tablature book and cassette project, was developed in 1992 to support Karen's teaching. A year later, she released her first CD, *Clarity*. It is the realization of her second long-term goal, one which took ten years to develop. Along the way, Karen recorded four albums with *Full Circle*, a demo project called *Upbeat* and *Autoharp Gourmet*, but she says *Clarity* is the recording which meets the goal set in 1983.

Clarity was named for the description a music reviewer applied to Karen's precise playing style. But the name also represents the clear vision Mueller had for her music, which has come into focus over a lifetime of performing, teaching and creating music. The album is the culmination of what she's learned playing in bands and developing her solo material. Its arrangements demonstrate the community she's found in her current trio, and with nationally-known artists like Timothy Britton and Tony Trischka.

The album was recorded during an intense four week period. "We had a lot of fifteen and eighteen hour days," Mueller says. "Much of the recording was done 'live' because we wanted to capture that kind of energy. Listeners to *Clarity* might notice that Karen never over-dubbed herself on this recording and, among the wide range of instruments represented, guitar and mandolin are absent.

Clarity was reviewed very favorably in a number of national publications, including *Bluegrass Unlimited*, *Dirty Linen* and *Sing Out!* Karen was a finalist in two categories in the Minnesota Music Academy Awards, for the CD *Clarity*, and as a Folk Music Performer.

Karen Mueller's vision for the future includes recording and releasing a new instrumental album next summer, as well as a Christmas album. She's also working on two new autoharp books. Look for Karen's vision of the autoharp to continue influencing her work in the years to come.

Karen's 1996 Statement:

I am happy to be a part of this issue of *Autoharp Clearinghouse*. I would like to take the opportunity to thank Eileen and so many of you in the Autoharp community for your friendship and support over the years. It has always been my desire to share my music in hopes of bringing a little bit of joy to another. That is the gift of music given to me and it comes back doubled when it is shared. This year has been challenging for me, having lost my mother to cancer last fall. She was a remarkable woman, and a big supporter of my music. But I've felt encouraged to know of my "extended family" across the country, which includes this autoharp community. So I thank you, and look forward to much more music in the future! **KM**

January 2008 Update:

Since this piece was published in 1996, Karen has continued to crusade for our instrument, traveling coast to coast and overseas performing and instructing. She has released two more critically acclaimed CDs, "Still Point" and the new "Landscape of the Heart," and authored the

Mel Bay book “Celtic Autoharp.” Karen is also featured on the “Autoharp Legacy” collection, as well as two volumes of the “Masters of the Mountain Dulcimer” anthology series. She performs in Minnesota with the Celtic group Piper’s Crow, named top acoustic act in the Twin Cities in 2006, and also with Katie McMahon, original lead singer of “Riverdance,” and has recorded CDs with both. Her biggest honor came in being inducted into the Autoharp Hall of Fame in 2006. Karen is music specialist one day a week at a school in the Twin Cities, and teaches around 40 private students as well. She has a website at www.karenmueller.com, with information about performances, CDs and more. You can email Karen at karen@karenmueller.com.