

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - March 1995 - Kate Long**

I shudder to think of the people I most likely would never have met, and the friends I may not have made, if it weren't for my involvement with the autoharp. In particular, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the Augusta Heritage Center for providing an atmosphere wherein I have made hundreds of lasting friendships these past eleven years. Kate Long and I were fellow students in a large class there back in 1987. Having long since adopted West Virginia as my summer home, I recall having been very much interested in Kate's vast repertoire of songs about the Mountain State. She is presently a frequent staff member at Augusta, teaching Appalachian Music and Songwriting, and working with the Elderhostel program. It has been my pleasure to attend at least one of Kate's evening performances at that facility, and I recall that she held the audience in the palm of her hand as she told her stories, sang her songs and played her autoharp.

Unless you've been stranded on a desert island, you are most likely aware that the International Bluegrass Music Association's 1994 Song Of The Year was *Who Will Watch The Homeplace*. That nigh-unto-brilliant composition (recorded by Laurie Lewis on her Flying Fish 0300 *True Stories* album) was written by none other than this month's Autoharp Clearinghouse Cover Girl. I felt privileged to be in the audience to witness the presentation. With this award, Kate has finally come into her own in terms of recognition in music circles beyond the regional level.

Born in Oak Hill in the late 1940s, Kate has lived and worked almost all of her life in West Virginia. As a little girl, she was always singing her thoughts and making up songs. The ones that were committed to paper, Kate kept in her dresser drawer. So, in a sense, she apparently was born to be a songwriter. Kate believes that most people have music floating around in their heads, if only they would listen to it and then put that ingrained potential to good use.

In respect to education and employment, Kate has a degree in English from West Virginia University, and a Masters in Education from George Washington University. Following her schooling, she taught second grade for several years in Virginia before taking a position as Supervisor Of Special Education in Summers County, West Virginia.

Later, while serving as project coordinator of the Charleston Gazette's  *Holding On To Home*  series, she won a Scripps Howard Award for researching and writing  *Johnny's Such A Bright Boy/What A Shame He's Retarded* . She has been a home teacher (through the Infant Stimulation Program at Valley Mental Health Center in Morgantown) for families with handicapped babies, and wrote  *Parents Becoming Teachers* , a handbook for parents of handicapped pre-schoolers. Kate was a counselor at Patchwork, a shelter for runaway teenagers in Charleston. She acted in the capacity of Editor/Producer of  *Parents To Parents* , a four-part video series for West Virginia Advocates for the Developmentally Disabled, on the emotional reactions parents often have after the birth of a handicapped child. Kate was coordinator for the Appalachian Mental Health Center's Flood Recovery Project in 1985 and 1986. Since 1984, she has been a freelance writer and writing coach for The Charleston Gazette newspaper. In the latter-mentioned position, she works with reporters and writers to identify strengths in their writing, as well as any habits that might undermine effectiveness.

While all of this may not seem to be directly related to Kate's songwriting and performing, it is actually very much connected. Knowing a little more about who Kate is will go a long way toward helping you to know her music and to understand where she is coming from. As a child, Kate had a ukelele. However, her first encounter with the autoharp occurred in 1972 when she heard David Morris play the instrument. Kate immediately fell in love with the sound of the autoharp, and recorded David's performance that day. She bought a 'harp, and played that tape over and over, trying to copy the sound. Lacking an instructor, Kate ended up teaching herself to play in what she describes as "my own idiosyncratic style." Her first formal training on the instrument came fifteen years later at the aforementioned Intermediate/Advanced Class at Augusta under instructors Becky Blackley, Ivan Stiles and Charles Whitmer.

Kate says that she relies almost exclusively on the autoharp when she performs. "I'm what you might call an autoharp minimalist while I sing. I use the 'harp as a supplement to my voice, rather than having it carry every melody note. I am also a fiction writer, and often present a program that weaves my songs in with my stories. In performance, I neither require or want complicated instrumental arrangements. The autoharp is capable of such a wide variety of sounds (and sound effects) that it is a perfect instrument for some one like me. It helps me establish many moods. I'm much more of a songwriter and singer than an instrumentalist."

Kate's current instrument of choice is a "third-hand" chromatic Orthey, on which she accompanies herself at more than fifty annual gigs. Venues where Kate took her music in 1994 included numerous church retreats and universities, the Missouri Interfaith Disaster Recovery (floods), Head Start programs, a conference of the National Association of Social Workers, a number of coffeehouses, the Interfaith Coalition on Corporate Responsibility, the International Women's League For Peace and Freedom, various regional festivals and jubilees, the Lutheran Women's Conference, Mountain Stage syndicated radio program, Catholic Community Of Appalachia, Appalshop Songwriter Festival, and the Domestic Violence Caravan . . . just to name a few.

Kate Long is a multi-talented woman with strong commitments to her work, her people and her home state. She deals with issues and makes strong statements with her music. However, don't think for a moment that Kate is just one more folk singer protesting about all of life's injustices. This is a lady who gets actively involved in trying to improve the conditions and situations about which she writes and sings.

You might say that Kate captures human emotions and sets them to music. And, she does so with a vocal style that reaches down to the very heart of her songs. The added muscle in Kate's voice serves to further heighten the dramas and emotions that drive these songs. Her vision as a songwriter continues to set Kate apart. Kate's two albums (*Pieces Of Heart* and *Life Of My Own*) are both entirely comprised of her compositions. It is not often that you will find this caliber of original material performed as skillfully and tastefully. There are varied styles of musical expression presented on these two recordings including folk, country, blues and jazz.

Kate moves with ease between these musical forms with an impressive display of versatility. The blues and jazz songs seem particularly well suited to Kate's vocal quality and style. I would be hard pressed to recommend one of these albums over the other since they are both somewhat

outside of my field of expertise. Let's say that *Pieces Of Heart* gets the edge over *Life Of My Own* . . .but just barely.

Unfortunately, there is very little autoharp on either, but Kate assures me that she plans to feature the instrument more on her upcoming projects. She has, in the past, encountered some difficulty in recording the autoharp and then being satisfied with the resulting sound. Together with engineer Jim Martin, Kate is working on a remedy for that situation. Meanwhile, she is never without the instrument at her live performances, and has taken the autoharp before a vast and varied cross-section of audiences. The degree to which Kate has already developed her talent is evidenced by her recent success and recognition as a songwriter. She loves to hear other people sing the songs that she has written. It is obvious that Kate Long is going far and, wherever she goes, our instrument will go with her. **ER**

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The most-recent contact info I have for Kate is:

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