

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - October 1993 - Keith Young**

The Autoharp Clearinghouse takes great pride in dedicating this issue to one of the nicest people on the planet...Keith Young. Since the stories of Keith the Musician and Keith the Luthier have already been expertly presented by Becky Blackley in *The Autoharpoholic*, the emphasis of the article that follows is about Keith the Restorer. This story was written by Tim Donovan of Burke, Virginia, who is a long-time friend of Keith's, as well as being the sound engineer for the Mill Run Dulcimer Band, and a regular columnist for Keith's newsletter, *Notes-a-la-Mode*. **ER**

### **Autoharp Restoration**

A fire is always a devastating experience. It invades your life, takes over and makes ashes out of more than your possessions. It can take away your perspective if you let it. Eileen Roys, however, was not about to let that happen. Yes, the propane-induced fire at her home in May of 1992 took away a number of things including her valuable collection of vintage autoharps. Twenty-three of her autoharps were completely destroyed. Thirteen sustained considerable damage and Eileen was worried. She rallied to the crisis, called her insurance company, then called Keith Young. Kathy Ferguson, a true friend to Eileen over the years, helped her clean the worst of the charred mess off of the salvageable harps and delivered them to Keith.

Keith has been dissecting, restoring and building autoharps for the better part of a quarter of a century. During that time, he has seen lots of autoharps in various stages of undress. Some are more attractive than others. After hearing about Eileen's unlucky 13, he felt challenged to go to work on this fire ravaged stack of rare autoharps.

Keith became interested in autoharps because he was interested in playing them. Like some other folks we probably know, he bought his wife an autoharp as a gift thinking that he might like to learn to play it. Later, he began to think that maybe he could make one. He looked into some old autoharps, taking them apart, seeing how they were built and thinking of how he might make improvements. He found autoharps in antique stores...but, soon, autoharps were finding him.

Is it worth fixing? Judgements must be made of the intrinsic value of the autoharp. You need to look for both common and serious problems and how much time and skill will be involved in making it playable again (the cost of the repair). Keith will take the time to carefully evaluate with the customer whether it is it worth repairing based on the value. He admits that sometimes he might be able to influence the decision by saying, "This is it a pretty common autoharp and I don't really believe it is all that valuable." However, if they remember Grandma playing some of the old songs on the 'harp, "Who am I," says Keith, "to say it's not worth it. Of course, it is worth it."

His approach is to first look the instrument over and, in his mind's eye, evaluate it as if it were repaired and playable. He doesn't exactly put a dollar value on it but, if it is old, rare and nicely built, he gets a feeling that it might be worth fixing up. First, he looks mainly at the structural integrity. Are any of the glue joints coming apart? A common problem is that the hitch pin block is tipped, and that in turn causes caved-in tops or cracks and splits. The reason is that,

when the strings are brought up to pitch, the pressure on the instrument ranges from about 700 pounds for the 21-string #1 Zimmermann to over 2,000 pounds for modern 36-string 'harps. This pressure is a function of the number and length of strings. Newer instruments often have more strings and/or longer strings than the older models.

If the pin block has pulled away from the frame, it must be glued back and the frame reinforced to hold the tension and lock the hitch pin block in place. Most often this is done with dowels or screws. Sometimes the back or top must be removed to realign the frame. When you get into this level of repair, it is truly a labor of love because of the time involved in making the repair.

One such repair was Eileen Roys' prototype of the #1 Zimmermann. "You wouldn't think of anything less than doing a first class job and making it as close to the original as possible. I even used the same kind of glue and the same kind of finish as the original. As a matter of fact, the glue used on those early 'harps is not a bad glue. Think. They still use the same glue...hot hide glu...to put together the finest of violins. That glue is non-creepy. It becomes crystalline and, in doing so, it becomes an integral part of the instrument. It then conducts sound waves completely throughout the instrument with no muting such as you might get with an aliphatic resin (yellow glue) or white glue. Those two glues really never crystallize. If they are under high pressures such as exist on an autoharp top or back (the top is under compression and the back is under tension) those glues tend to creep and allow the movement over time. The disadvantage of the hot hide glue is that extreme heat and moisture break the bond. This becomes an advantage if you need to remove a top or back. There are some modern glues which don't creep and are resistant to heat and moisture. I use those in the harps I build."

The finish on some of Eileen's autoharps was extremely blistered because the propane fire got so hot. The heat also melted the hide glue joining the autoharp together. On nine of the 'harps, Keith had to disassemble all or portions of the 'harp and then reglue the back and/or the top. Each of the 'harps required careful cleaning to get off all of the black residue from the fire. Then, he had to reconstitute the shellac. A lot of that shellac had completely bubbled. Keith used the alcohol and an artist's touch to redissolve the finish, remove the bubbles and lay it back down. He did not add any new shellac unless it was completely gone or burned.

Most of Eileen's 'harps had also suffered water damage and had streaks of white from either the ceiling material or foam used in fighting the fire. The difficulty was then to try to find cleaning solutions that would clean but not destroy the finish of those old 'harps. Murphy's Oil Soap and elbow grease worked well on the fragile shellac. Castle 2-22 Marine Cleaner worked well on metal parts and modern varnish.

The Bryan Bowers autoharp was another special case. It was water damaged and looked like the devil. But, even after exposure to the fire, it probably didn't look much different than when Bryan's manager sold it to Eileen (just kidding). It was a pretty battered looking autoharp in her display case before the fire. "Now," says Keith, "that one took special care. I didn't want to make it look better than it did before the fire. But, I did want to take off some of the grunge that had been left by the fire."

On other 'harps, the white buttons on some of the chord bars on the early models were discolored and no chemical would restore them to their whiteness and some of them were melted and deformed. In those instances, Keith decided to leave them as they were in their yellowed and almost brown condition.

Strings almost always need to be restored or replaced. If you find some original old wound strings, try to save them. The winding is shorter and can't be replaced by new ones and many of those strings were made quite well. They may be used if the windings are still very tight on the core and don't slip. Usually, they had a copper, brass or bronze winding. Old strings that once sounded bright sometimes get filled with finger oil and dirt and they don't sound good. To clean them, first remove the strings from the autoharp and coil them in the bottom of an old cottage cheese container and soak them overnight in Castle 2-22 or Fantastic. Shake them every once in a while when you pass by the container. Then pour out the soap or cleaner and rinse the strings. Then pour in some acetone (fingernail polish remover). Use a toothbrush to scrub out the remaining stubborn dirt. There is it really no reason to restore plain strings. Just replace them. A lot of the old 'harps had a very simple loop end winding rather than the ball end strings. If you want to keep it authentic, suggests Keith, just buy the musical wire and put your own loops in them. But, first use a micrometer to determine the string diameter and then replace with the same diameter new string.

Pins will become rusted and, in the case of fire damage, will be coated with black resin and you need to remove those and clean them up in Castle 2-22 and acetone similar to the string procedure.

Springs don't usually go bad. They may lose some of their spring with heavy use, but they can be pulled back to their original height. After all, their only purpose is to return the chord bar into its original position in the chord bar holder. So, Keith doesn't usually replace springs unless they are rusted and deformed. Some of the old 'harps had springs made of brass. Replacing those would detract from the authenticity of the instrument.

Keith will usually attempt to retain the old felts because some were very typical of certain instruments. Green or red felt on some, purple felt on others, and a lot of black felt. Often the felt is it simply out of place on the bar, and all that is required is to glue it down again. When you do need to replace colored felt, you can dye white felt or use a felt-tip marker to color it.

Labels are an important part of the instrument. Unfortunately they can tend to just fall apart into many pieces if you touch them. Again, turning to Keith Young for advice. "Save the pieces...wet them down with a thinned white glue like Elmers and carefully push them into place and let the glue dry. Hopefully, you will have much of the label retained." Without doing something like that the autoharp would end up completely label-less. And, that is quite a loss because the label and the logo determine when the autoharp was made. For example, with the #2 logo and the #2 label of a Zimmermann autoharp, you can tell that it was made close to 1895.

It seems a shame to let some of those old autoharps go. Some of them are in terrible shape, maybe in pieces and, if you haven't studied them, they look impossible to put together again. It seems a shame to just junk them. Try your hand at restoration, or find somebody who would

appreciate them to give them to. Many parts are useful in restoring other autoharps. Again, you need to think about the history of the instrument. The black ones from the 1950s and 1960s were so popular that it might not seem that they are worth restoring. But you never know just what will happen in 20 or 30 years. Some of those will become more valuable and worth fixing. I am sure that when our grandparents looked at some of those Zimmermanns and Phonoharps, they thought they were a dime a dozen and certainly not worth fixing. Now, we think they are.

There are a lot of luthiers who have made only one harp, and some of those could be valuable in the future. It's not just how rare they are, but it is also how well crafted they are, how well designed, and how they play.

Keith says, "There is one source which has made me and a lot of other people experts, and that source is *The Autoharp Book* by Becky Blackley. It really is the most definitive source. From it, you can determine the age of almost any autoharp that falls into your possession. It also lists a number of makers."

So, should you pick up an autoharp at a bargain price and repair it yourself or have it repaired? Would you have a better 'harp than you could probably afford to buy right now? Well, Keith would ask you to ask yourself one basic question. Is there historic value? The historic value can be because it is one of those really old Zimmermanns or American-Made Oscar Schmidts, or it could have belonged to a cherished member of your family. However, Keith suggests that you take into consideration the fact that you can buy some pretty inexpensive autoharps in pawn shops or yard sales...often for \$45.00 or so, that are already in playable condition. It could cost considerably more than that to repair and restore an old instrument.

If you are thinking of restoring an autoharp, here is a list of steps:

1. Remove bars and springs and place in container. Note order of bars before removing.
2. Remove strings. Determine which strings are "keepers" and worth cleaning, and discard others. Note which strings go where by labeling or determining diameter with a micrometer.
3. If needed, remove tuning pins for cleaning.
4. Repair frame. May require removal of back or top.
5. Repair splits.
6. Clean entire autoharp and repair finish as necessary.
7. Clean and replace pins if needed.
8. Clean and replace strings, adding new strings where necessary to replace faulty wound strings, and replacing all unwound strings.

9. Recondition chord bars and chord bar holders.
10. Refurbish chord bar holder top bumpers. Consider using Dr. Scholl's Foot and Shoe Padding (latex foam). Examine felts and repair or replace as necessary.
11. Tune the instrument and look for pin slippage. Repair pin slippage with a maple shim at right angles to the grain of the pin block.

Enjoy your newly refurbished and restored autoharp. You will have not only contributed to your own betterment, you may well have contributed to letting the memory of an old 'harp, and another time, ring on into the future. *Tim Donovan*

For further reading about Keith Young, AC refers you to:

*The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* - Vol. 6 - View From the Top - *The Mill Run Dulcimer Band* by Becky Blackley

*The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* - Vol. 8 - *Feature This! -A Visit with Luthier Keith Young* by Becky Blackley.

#### **October 2008 Update from Keith:**

I have taken a sabbatical from the autoharp building and just concentrate on mountain dulcimer, folk banjo and limberjack building. In addition, I stay busy with the Mill Run Dulcimer Band. We are still going after 32 years and have recorded 10 albums. The latest is it *Sing One Song For Me* with Kit Putnam, Kathleen Gotzmer, Judy Larrabee and me (album cover picture in *Autoharp Clearinghouse* album under Photos via the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo). Our band has welcomed a new member, Dave Caouette formerly owner of Stringfellows music store in Occoquan, VA. He is a wonderful guitar player and a songwriter as well. He has taken over the guitar duties and that allows me to play autoharp.

I am still conducting group lessons in mountain dulcimer, hammered dulcimer and guitar. You can learn more about it by going to my web page at <[www.AppalachianDulcimers.com](http://www.AppalachianDulcimers.com)>

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