

Autoharp Clearinghouse – November 1997 – Lee Vaccaro

At a point in time when, in many respects, the autoharp is abandoning its past in pursuit of its future, it is comforting to know that there are those among us who sincerely appreciate the historic significance of our instrument. With all due respects to the marvelous custom-made autoharps that we now have at our disposal, these instruments of antiquity need to be preserved--and in some cases restored--so that they are not lost to future generations of music aficionados. **Lee Vaccaro**, to whom this issue is dedicated, is doing just that--and in a most unique manner. Unlike my own collection which, for all practical purposes, is enshrined in a museum-like setting, Lee has been making the rounds of various musical festivals with her arsenal of autoharps and related instruments. There, she not only demonstrates how they were intended to be played but, more often than not, encourages the hands-on participation of her audiences. It is my earnest wish that you will enjoy “meeting” Lee and sharing her story. **ER**

Music has always been part of my life, whether singing harmony with my brothers in the car while on trips, taking violin lessons in grade school, or trying to teach myself to sight read from old songbooks in the attic. Many times, I would fall asleep listening to stories of the composers told by my Eastman School of Music brother, Bill. On other occasions, I'd aggravate my mother by opening the piano and banging on the strings with Tinker Toy mallets. (Our big dictionary worked well to hold down the damper pedal.) Perhaps that was the first sign that I was destined to eventually play the hammered dulcimer? In high school, I was soon caught up in the great folk era, and set aside my violin in favor of teaching myself to play the guitar so that I might better join the fun of “Hootenanny” and Song Fests. Like most kids I knew, I formed a group and sought out opportunities to sing and play at folk festivals, nursing homes and school-sponsored activities.

After high school and a few years in the work force, parenthood claimed my energies as my husband and I raised our two daughters, Lisa and Sherry. One of the benefits of being a parent was the opportunity to attend special music presentations at our children's school that were sponsored by the *Young Audiences* program. On one such occasion, the entertainment included an all-female folk group that called itself *Wildwood Flower*. At last I found out the name of the instrument I had wondered over, having heard it each week on *Crockett's Victory Garden*. Within short order, I managed to track down a hammered dulcimer and take it home. I was delighted to find that the instrument was so user-friendly and played it every day, quickly learning my way around the maze of strings.

About that same time, I discovered the Golden Link Folk Singing Society here in Rochester, New York. The folk club reopened the door to my first love, music. I discovered a new circle of friends who introduced me to the world of fiddle tunes, jigs, reels, hornpipes and schottisches, as well as an array of instruments to startle the eye. For Christmas that year, my husband gave me my first chorded zither. It was a 15-bar ChromAharp and, with 'harp in hand, I spent many hours strumming along with songs and Christmas carols with my kids. Then, the Golden Link group sponsored a series of autoharp lessons taught by Allen Hopkins. He gave us a solid launching that included the basics of finding the melody within the chords. What fun!

My repertoire grew apace, and I was soon to meet a talented Scottish fiddler by the name of Hazel Stewart who introduced me to the delights of traditional Scottish music. Together, we founded the band known as *Thistledown*, along with multi-instrumentalist Allen Hopkins and singer/songwriter/dance caller Jim Cain. Soon, we were busily presenting concerts all over New York State. In addition, we were thrilled to record a well-received album entitled *The Hills of Lorne* on the Sampler Records label, with Mitzie Collins providing a guiding hand.

During that same time, I was invited to join the *Flint Hill Folk*, which serves as a house band for the Genesee Country Museum. Allen and Mitzie were already charter members, and stressed the importance of finding **genuine** instruments from the Nineteenth Century in order to *not only play the tunes*, but also to recapture the *actual sound* of the times. I began to haunt flea markets and antique shops, and my first “finds” were autoharps. The initial instruments to follow me home were the “black boxes” with their wonderful gilded decals. But, Mitzi’s copy of Becky Blackley’s *Autoharp Book* soon informed me that these 'harps were not old enough. So, armed with my own copy of the publication, my search led me to seek out ads in autoharp publications and elsewhere for *Zimmermann* autoharps. My first was a feather-light three chord Philadelphia Model #1. The sweet thing even has a history--It was a wedding gift and traveled west with the young couple to their new home in Nebraska. I purchased it from the granddaughter of that bride and groom, who had fond memories of how her grandmother had played the instrument. It arrived via United Parcel Service and, to my horror, I discovered that the top had peeled back--not just at the seams--but up the grain of the soundboard. Fortunately, luthier Bernie Lehman was able to repair the 'harp for me, and I was soon playing it at the museum.

Being musically greedy, I continued to search for more of those sweet-voiced *Zimmermann* Autoharps. And, as I added 'harps to my collection, I also began to find a wide variety of many-stringed members of the zither family. By ones and by twos, my collection multiplied, even though it was unclear how some of them were meant to be played? Soon, it became somewhat of an addiction. Each new addition would be lovingly cleaned, fitted with replacement strings where needed, and otherwise “nursed back to health” by my ever-patient friend Bernie (a man of many clamps!).

Little by little, I began to figure out how to extract the music hidden in these unusual little and not-so-little gems of Zitherdom. Plucked, strummed and bowed, my mysterious little friends sang back to me from their vibrating soundboards in shades of red, gold, ebony, aqua and warm natural finishes. Folkie friends began to refer attic treasures to me, at what Mitzi affectionately refers to as my “home for wayward instruments.”

The Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival, held for a number of years in Lima, Ohio, was the first to issue me an invitation to come with my collection of strange string-things and share my discoveries. Not being one given to public speaking, I was extremely nervous. However, once I got going, I had the *best* time as I presented my collection of old 'harps and zithers, in order of their probable dates of production, and demonstrated how I played each one.

My next opportunity was at the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in Binghamton, New York. For that event, I decided to change my approach somewhat as I had noticed that, even before I had my treasures displayed on tables, people seemed so interested and began to examine them and ask questions. After what seemed like only a brief introduction, folks were selecting an instrument and settling into chairs or on sitting on the floor to try them out. (I should mention that all of my instruments have been restored to playable condition, and most are set up in the key of C.) So, I suddenly found myself sitting delightedly in the middle of what must have been one of the oddest jam sessions ever, as Jim Kimball handily ripped out melodies on the Ukelin in his lap, Ivan Stiles "test drove" one after another of the Zimmermann 'harps, and John Kleske stroked away on the Tremoloa. Harmonies and accompaniments rose around us--whether rolled, bowed, rocked or hammered out on the little strangers. That will always be one of my fondest memories of workshops at festivals!

The fun continued at the Southern Michigan Dulcimer Festival. As I unloaded my collection from the car, I suddenly found myself surrounded by helpers who exclaimed in shared delight as one after another zither-thing emerged from boxes and cases. I recall hearing one lady exclaim, "It's like Christmas morning in here!" as they helped place the instruments on a pair of tables. We chatted about the circumstances surrounding my acquisition of the instruments as we worked. It seems as though almost everyone has a story to tell about some unusual instrument in Grandma's attic, or tucked semi-forgotten in the back of someone's closet. It was the most *unstructured* "playshop" I had ever done. However, we enjoyed exploring the possibilities of each instrument so much that three hours had elapsed before we knew it. Some of us even missed supper! I'm certain that many of the folks I met that weekend went home to resurrect their own family heirlooms, as I had letters from several people saying that they planned to "try their hand" at Mom's old zither or autoharp.

The years have come and gone, and I've been lucky enough to have gotten acquainted with a lot of folks who either collect and/or play neat and unusual instruments. People like Eileen, with her specialized museum of autoharps, Alf Bashore, who actually *performs* on the zither (as well as being pretty handy with a mountain dulcimer) and my fellow addict Kelly Williams, who may actually have more "toys" than I do (and he plays them a lot better). It's nice to know that so many of these charming old instruments have been rescued and returned to their full voices. To all my friends and acquaintances that have come to share my fancy, I can only say with joy, "It's been a pleasure!" LV (At the time of publication, Lee could be contacted at: 23 Westway Drive, Rochester, NY 14624-4636.)