

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - March 1991 - Little Roy Lewis**

This issue of the Autoharp Clearinghouse is dedicated in honor of Little Roy Lewis. If I may borrow a phrase from the title of the current Randy Travis album, Little Roy is not only one of my heroes--he is my friend (or free-end as he would say). When this dynamic performer takes the stage, along with the other members of The Lewis Family, audiences are treated to the ultimate in entertainment. This three-generation "First Family of Bluegrass Gospel", with Little Roy at the reins, always goes the extra mile to please the crowd. Their upbeat approach to sacred music exudes spiritual optimism and projects religious joy. A wide variety of vocal arrangements interspersed with hard-driving instrumental selections characterize their performances, as well as their more than fifty recorded albums. Also worthy of mention is the Lewis Family's weekly television show from Augusta, Georgia which has been on the air continuously since 1958..

The youngest of eight children, Little Roy was born on 24 February 1942 in Lincoln County, Georgia. His only formal music training was on the piano with his father's sister in the role of teacher. He didn't like it, and quit as soon as he was able to gracefully escape the situation. At age six, Little Roy began playing banjo, and won his first contest two years later. Other than his brief encounter with the piano, he learned to play all of his instruments by watching and listening to members of his large musical family and, in some instances, other musicians.

Although he is primarily known as one of the world's most-accomplished bluegrass banjo pickers, Little Roy is also proficient on guitar, autoharp, bass and mandolin. The song *Good Time Get Together* was written by well-known songwriter Randall Hylton to provide Little Roy with appropriate lyrics through which he might demonstrate his versatility on all of these instruments. This, coupled with his flair for comedy, has won him SPBGMA's Bluegrass Entertainer of the Year award many times.

Little Roy incorporated the autoharp into the family act in the late nineteen sixties. However, he had owned one for some time prior to that which he kept on the tour bus and played for his own enjoyment. It was a 1953 Oscar Schmidt A-Model that had been given to him. Unfortunately, that instrument was stolen from the stage during a New Jersey performance about five years later. Little Roy thinks it is ironic that the autoharp was stolen from him only seven miles from the place where he first acquired it. That IS rather incredible when you take into consideration the fact that The Lewis Family travels some two hundred thousand bus miles annually. By and by, Rhythm Band Inc. provided him with two 15-bar ChromAharps in exchange for his endorsement of the product. They further "sweetened the pot" by giving him new chord bars whenever the felts became worn.

Little Roy uses LaBella strings and only replaces them when they break (OFTEN...the way that LRL plays). He prefers a mother-of-pearl thumb pick, called Golden Gate, that is made in Japan, and uses National metal picks on his index and middle fingers. In reference to technique, Little Roy attempts to duplicate banjo rolls on the autoharp and is adamant about being true to the melody. He plays several songs on the 'harp at nearly every concert and says that people are really disappointed if he doesn't include the instrument. Little Roy always makes an extra effort to bring our instrument front and center during The Lewis Family's stage shows if he knows there are autoharp fans in the audience. Likewise, he occasionally invites a fellow autoharper

onto the stage to play a duet with him. Dave Kilby has often been so honored when the group performs in his area in and around Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Although I had been familiar with the music of The Lewis Family for many years via radio station WAMU/88.5 FM in Washington, DC, my initial meeting with them was in October of 1986. The occasion was the first Bluegrass at Sea cruise to the Bahamas aboard the vessel ***Emerald Seas***. The event was so popular that the entire ship was sold out and repeated in February of 1985 aboard the ***Dolphin IV***. It was during the second cruise that I was able to make arrangements to interview Little Roy. Before all was said and done, we were to share six bluegrass music cruises. In addition to The Lewis Family, other pioneers of the genre included Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys, The Osborne Brothers, Jim and Jesse and the Virginia Boys, The Johnson Mountain Boys, Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver and a number of other stellar bands. I was also privileged to meet Judie and Carl Pagter of the Country Ham group as well as Florida autoharper and photographer Brian Symonds on these excursions.

If you'd like to read more about Little Roy and The Lewis Family, I refer you to the following publications:

The January/February 1983 issue of ***Bluegrass Breakdown***

The September 1984 issue of ***Banjo Newsletter***

The January 1988 issue of the ***Charlotte Folk Music Society Magazine*** (by Eileen Roys)

The Summer 1988 issue of ***The Autoharpoholic*** (also by Eileen Roys)

The March/April 1989 issue of ***Precious Memories***

Numerous issues of ***Bluegrass Unlimited***

September 2008 Update:

The Lewis Family's website includes a wide array of photographs as well as a complete discography, audio excerpts from more-recent recordings, family news and a schedule of upcoming performances. The URL is: <[www.thelewisfamilymusic.com](http://www.thelewisfamilymusic.com)>

A Google search for "Little Roy Lewis" will result in countless other resources.

Little Roy's Profile and Performance Dates may also be found in ***Autoharp Quarterly*** magazine and via that publication's website.

Little Roy has been playing a chromatic Orthey autoharp for some years now. ***ER***