

Autoharp Clearinghouse – November 1996 – Lucille Reilly

Whether it be autoharp, hammered dulcimer, recorder or tiny harmonica, **any** musical instrument in the hands of the indefatigable **Lucille Reilly** seems to literally burst into blossoms of sound. She brings an extraordinary degree of both skill and energy to her music, more often than not playing at full throttle and full volume. Lucille (not unlike Little Roy Lewis) is one of those performers who seem to have been vaccinated with a 78 rpm needle. I get exhausted just watching her! Now that she has won the two “crown jewels” of autoharpsdom, perhaps a recording is on the horizon? Meanwhile, the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is honored to dedicate this issue in honor of Lucille. The article that follows is autobiographical. **ER**

If anyone had told me ten years ago that I was going to play the autoharp seriously and win the two most prestigious contests for the instrument, I would have laughed. Autoharp was definitely **not** part of my agenda. Funny how things change!

My love affair with the autoharp is really too brief (since 1990) to deserve attention. From 1980 to 1990, I played a 12-chord chromatic ‘harp just enough to demonstrate it in music programs for schools, clubs and church groups. (My repertoire was *This Land Is Your Land* and *Jingle Bells*. That was it!) I heard diatonic ‘harps a few times during those years and loved their resonance, but the dulcimer player in me (also a published author of two instruction books for that instrument), declared **really** playing the autoharp taboo.

That attitude changed at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas in September of 1990, during a low point in my life. Dazed, I stood at George Orthey’s booth and pondered a GDA diatonic autoharp. It sounded wonderful, but...My husband David liked it, too, and encouraged me to buy it. I did, but not without fear and trembling. (What was my **dulcimer** going to think?) Once home from Winfield, I began playing all the hymns I could think of. The music---and hugging an instrument instead of beating it---slowly restored my soul. What a wonderful way to pick oneself back up!

A year later, at the 1991 Walnut Valley Festival, I entered the International Autoharp Championship. Having drawn Number One in the competition line-up (something I have an unfortunate knack for), my **only** distraction that year was being the very first contestant to compete in all the contests at the 20th annual festival! After Number Four played, I forgot about winning and sat back to enjoy all the other great players. (I **did** take second place in the National Hammered Dulcimer Championship two days later.)

On the last morning of the festival, I watched my friend Bob Lewis play his autoharp. What was his left hand doing? He gave me a 30-second demonstration: He sometimes “pumped” the chord bars, a technique he called “melodic style.” The musician in me understood what to do; it would just take time to train my fingers.

That afternoon, David and I hopped in the car for a week's vacation in New Mexico. Radio stations were scarce in Oklahoma's panhandle so, after dinner, I pulled out my 'harp to practice Bob's technique for the rest of the drive. I **painfully** picked out five-note scales and an even more wrenching *Petronella* while David basked in live music behind the wheel. (Bless his heart; he was so tone-deaf!) That humbling beginning led to second place at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship in 1992 and 1993, third place at the International Championship in 1994 (a gig kept me away from Mountain Laurel--and, by the way, I drew #1 for the line-up **again** in Winfield!), and then becoming the first person to become Champion of both contests in the same year in 1995.

People wonder how everything fell together so fast. I bring a rich background of musical experience to the autoharp. It starts with the dulcimer, which I've been playing since 1978, and performing on full time since 1980. I love making jigs and reels sound "three-dimensional" by milking the dulcimer's sustain for all it is worth. I've carried this over to the autoharp, with the advantage of damping strings by changing chords. On the teaching side, my dulcimer students unwittingly got me thinking about what makes music musical. I actively looked for and translated all those "whats" to the autoharp over a lot of lunch hours.

I've been playing dulcimer for contra dances since 1980. A memorized list of about 500 dance tunes provides a wealth of music for the autoharp, too. And I've been fortunate to play with some inventive dance pianists who explore well beyond I, IV and V chords to back up tunes. Collectively, they have expanded how I approach harmony. Now that one of my autoharps is a Bb "ultratonic," created by the late Marty Schuman, my ear is stretching to include harmonies I've never dabbled in before. What fun!

There's my music training at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ. There I got good theory and sight-singing training, but it wasn't until I began playing melodies on the autoharp that music theory burst alive. (Try as I did, I am hopelessly allergic to keyboard.) Coupling a good ear, gained through years of playing folk guitar, with practical theory instruction has been handy when arranging a tune with the "ultimate" chord progression.

All Westminster students sing in choirs, and it was only after talking with a college chum recently that I understood my passion for big, lush chords on the autoharp: I love the music of Giovanni Gabrielli (1557-1612), who composed for up to 16 parts of voices, brass, or both. It also helps that several of my friends are incredible church organists who know how to make their instruments talk. Listeners at my concerts often catch the "organic" element in some of my hymn arrangements.

Of course, I took voice lessons, plus classes in vocal pedagogy. Both focused on how to produce a round, full tone, the fundamental element of any instrument. When I teach, I first help a student find the instrument's voice because, once it's found, it's there forever. After this, the rest is gravy.

At the beginning of my freshman year at Westminster, I began playing alto recorder. Its fingering is the same as the soprano recorder, which I taught myself to play in high school, but the note name assigned to each fingering is different. "Translating" fingerings was frustrating

until I began singing the music in my head while playing it. My inner voice soon connected with the fingerings I knew so well and freed me to communicate **anything** I heard in my head, then through the recorder, now through whatever I happen to be playing. (This includes jamming with the “dial tones” on one of those old electronic tuners.) This, plus performing sonatas in four movements by Bach, Handel, Telemann, etc., for church preludes and on-campus recitals, paved the way to interpreting jigs and reels on the dulcimer, and now on the autoharp, too.

In high school, I played clarinet, flute, guitar, piano, tympani and glockenspiel, and was a member of the football and concert band plus school and church choirs. During that time, I began extemporizing (creating variations) on melodies off the cuff. I consider extemporization and arranging to be my strongest skills.

In junior high school, I decided to major in music in college and learn all kinds of instruments. My father said I could play as many as I wanted--as long as he didn't have to pay for them all! (He didn't, and neither have I. Three of my four autoharps, and one of my two dulcimers, are contest prizes.) And, during this time, I took up my first stringed instrument--the ukulele!

Although my father was a professional electrical engineer and my mother an executive secretary, they didn't influence or discourage my desire to be a musician. Perhaps my biggest influence was my grandfather, who sang in a barbershop quartet most of his life. He would sing songs like *Down by the Old Mill Stream*, which is probably why I still swoon over the real old songs. He and my grandmother were vaudevillian acrobats long before I was thought of. (Could this explain my affinity for show biz?!) My sister taught me to sing rounds and a descant to *I've Been Workin' on the Railroad* when I was in second grade. Later she and I duetted on those white flutophones so many of us tooted on in third grade. However, my earliest musical inclinations emerged at age 18 months when I sang *Happy Birthday* to my father, the day after his birthday, with perfect intonation--and 18-month-old pronunciation!

What do I like about playing the diatonic autoharp? I'm fascinated with orchestrating all kinds of music and building resonance into notey jigs and reels, including the surprising chords it sometimes takes to make a tune happen. My biggest challenge isn't a clear melody as much as creating an interesting bass line to complement it. Currently, I'm tweaking some of my arrangements with chord changes that don't sound like chord changes for a smooth sound.

The keys of my four autoharps are GDA, EB, FC and Bb; key-wise, I'm alphabetical A through H! In addition to the usual major, minor and seventh chords, two of my 'harps have suspended fourth chords. I use seventh chords sparingly, usually when the seventh is in the melody (although these days I'm getting a little more daring). I focus mostly on my right hand because, for me, that's where the music is.

The autoharp comes easily to me. I do work at it, but it's hard to tell because I enjoy it so much. Chord progressions seem to happen; I readily associate harmonic sound to chord button, and can jam almost without thinking. I play by ear as readily as from written music, and feel lucky to have a balance of both skills. My favorite tunes are reels, jigs, English dance tunes, waltzes (which I love to play **very** slowly), hymns, and anything Scottish--with a couple classical pieces rounding out the list.

After my husband's death from cancer in October 1993 (I often played the autoharp for him in the hospital; everyone wondered what TV station he had on), I inevitably reflected on my life, both musically and personally. While the personal side's great lesson is to live life to the fullest at the moment (these days I'm having entirely too much fun), the musical side comprises two closely intertwined parts: First, I really am a classical musician despite the instruments, and some of the music, being folk. Sometimes this tears me in two. (Face it, we all know people who don't consider the autoharp and dulcimer to be "real" instruments. What do **they** know?!) But imagine my joy in seeing these folks "convert." That brings me to the second part: The two autoharps attached to my 1995 wins are God's doing. (Oh, the conversations we had about contests...) So, these days, I worry a lot less about interpreting music on "unreal" instruments, because He chose them! As a result, touching souls through the music is my Number One Priority. It's generated a new sense of purpose, contentment and peace.

My favorite venues are classical concert series. The audiences don't know what to expect, but the presenters know they've never seen an audience tap its toes and enjoy themselves so much. In addition, I've played The Academy of Music in Philadelphia; City Stages in Birmingham, AL; Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, PA; The Philadelphia Folk Festival; the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering; the Ozark Folk Center; Westminster Choir College and, in 1982, my New York City debut at the Port Authority Bus Terminal! I also love house concerts for their intimacy--and let's not forget an occasional bagel bakery for fun!

My most rewarding "gig" is autoharping at the local adult day care center once a month. Performing as a volunteer, when music is my living, was a conflict initially. But my "Harmonica Buddy," Marj Tyndall (she and I play those 4-holed, inch-long harmonicas), gently nudged me to come to the center with her one day, then another day, and another. Pretty soon I got hooked playing for (and schmoozing with) these sweet folks stricken with Alzheimer's, strokes, Parkinson's or old age. What great blessings they have given in return. I love them.

As for the future: I'll always perform. Now that I'm retired from competition until the next century (awesome, isn't it?), I'd also like to nurture budding autoharpists who want to reach higher. My dream is to spend a week coaching diatonic 'harpists on arranging their favorite tunes from start to finish. As a step in that direction, I'm currently writing two monographs, each one an in-depth look at one tune and its possibilities for chords, fingering and arranging. Meanwhile, a musical "bed & board" is taking shape here at home. Last summer a dulcimatix (!) from Seattle came out to take two lessons a day, practice, see the local sights, relax and feast on home cooking (pizza from scratch, etc.). We had a great time! I look forward to more of the same--especially with autoharpists! (Autoharps take up so much less room in my wee house!)

The only other things I can say are: I've lived in New Jersey all my life, currently in Millington in a carriage house on six acres surrounded by trees, deer, hummingbirds, wild turkeys and butterflies. Of course, I still play the dulcimer (my latest project is Bach's A minor Violin Concerto, my favorite concerto in the whole world!) and remain unchallenged as Everybody's Favorite Second-Place Hammered Dulcimer Champion. My "other life" includes cooking (especially baking bread), weaving, spinning, biking, gardening, hiking and, of course, jamming on a few (hundred) tunes.

June 2008 Update:

I moved to Denver, Colorado in 1997, won the National Hammered Dulcimer Championship in Winfield, Kansas, USA in September of that year, and then released the CD “Thus Sings My Soul in November 1998. I returned to the Winfield contest stage to win the International Autoharp Championship once again in 2003. I have had the privilege of returning to perform at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering (1996, 1998, 2007), teaching at Sore Fingers Summer School in Kingham, England (2001, 2002) as the first American autoharp tutor at the school, plus appearing for the first time the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering (2006; still “the performance of my life”, for those who happened to be there) and the California Autoharp Gathering (2008). My “Autoharp Quarterly” column, “The Diatonic Corner”, was launched in August 2002 and features a new “pumping-felt” tune each issue. Composer David Poole and I collaborated in 2006 on an arrangement of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” for men’s choir and D diatonic autoharp (guess who composed what!).

Perhaps the biggest joy of my life autoharp-wise is teaching advanced diatonic autoharp classes in arranging tunes and more to those aspiring towards the next level, something I would like to do much more of to pass the ear skills on. One such class occurred at the John C. Campbell Folk School in 2006, with the others being set up privately by interested autoharpists. A class is coming up in Winfield the three days before the Walnut Valley Festival.) I continue to teach privately at home and on the road and ponder about how best to teach all the various facets of diatonic autoharp. In the background, I train and study Body Mapping via Andover Educators, researching autoharp ergonomics and body mechanics to help us all play safely. As far as teaching materials go, “The Pumping Felt Monograph Series”, a set of booklets that each dive deeply into one facet of diatonic autoharping, now numbers two, with one on the way and more to come. Plus, a diatonic, pumping-felt how-to book has been in process for some time (a new dulcimer book is grabbing my attention and needs to clear the way first—hurry up!). Everything can be viewed at my web site: www.thedulcimerlady.com.

Perhaps my most astonishing autoharp moment thus far was playing “Under the Double Eagle” atop the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, when I took a hiatus to work there for the entire 2000 season! (Or was it playing at the gas station in Hot Coffee, Mississippi in 2004?) In my spare time (what?!), I met a wonderful guy who finally stopped me long enough so that we could get married in September 2007. We have five cats who...well, you know how cats are. I still have the weaving loom and continue to make bread and pizza dough in the food processor. I knit socks to while away the hours flying to and from gigs on airplanes. Oh, my, time flies when you’re having fun! **LR**