

Autoharp Clearinghouse - September 1993

Marty Schuman

For what this observer's opinion is worth, this month's cover personality, Marty Schuman, most likely gets as much or more music out of an autoharp as anyone who has ever picked up the instrument. It is also difficult to come up with the name of anyone else whose playing is so distinctive and yet so appropriate for the autoharp. Marty's prominence in autoharp circles since winning the very first International Championship in 1981 has earned him an enviable reputation. His July 1993 victory in the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship will most certainly serve to reinforce that status. On that occasion, it was Marty's insightful and moving renditions of *Faded Love*, *Yankee Doodle Boy*, *Summertime* and *Ragtime Annie* (a 3-part arrangement) that carried him to the top. Most of the story that follows was gleaned from a lengthy taped interview that I did with Marty a couple of months ago.

Marty's introduction to music was in the form of piano lessons as a small child in New York City. Then, when he was thirteen, his family moved to the rural community of Switzerland in Northern Florida, and the piano was left behind. Marty credits the schizoid childhood experience of moving from one of the world's largest cities to a place where most of the children didn't even wear shoes to school as contributing to the person that he is today. In Florida, Marty and his mother and stepfather stayed with some people who lived in a Greyhound bus. Marty slept in a jungle hammock in the yard while his folks resided in a tent.

Despite the circumstances of their existence, Marty's mother wanted him to continue with his music. Since a piano was out of the question, he was able to acquire a pawn shop guitar, and took some lessons in the classical style. But, Marty resented the discipline required in learning to read music, and just sort of "broke all the rules" by strumming things he picked up from a book of folk tunes.

It so happened that Woody Guthrie was a friend of the people who lived in the bus and would use their place as home base in between hitchhiking to Jacksonville where he tried to earn some money as a street musician while searching out possible gigs. The police in that city kept running Woody out of town, and he was later to write a song about his bad experiences there. The way that Marty fits into this picture is that, here he was, a thirteen year old kid sitting around playing guitar with Woody Guthrie.

During his high school years, Marty wasn't getting along with his stepfather and was feeling so geographically isolated that he often spent his summers back in New York. By around 1958, he had heard Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and got off into bluegrass for a while. He bought a banjo and took a few lessons from Roger Sprung on one of his northern jaunts. But, it didn't take Marty too long to realize that he had become too "southernized" for life in the big city, and he entered college at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

While there, he became aware of the autoharp via Pop Stoneman on the old Folkways records, and from Mike Seeger and the New Lost City Ramblers. As a graduation gift, his wife-to-be gave Marty an autoharp. He says he was always "fooling with it," but it still took a back seat to the banjo at that point in time. Then, around 1978 or 1979, Marty went to a Doc Watson concert

where Bryan Bowers opened the show. Having by this time already discovered on his own that the autoharp sounds best in only one or two keys, hearing Bryan play was all that was necessary to push Marty across the diatonic threshold. Since there were already a "zillion" guitar and banjo players around, the autoharp became Marty's main instrument from that point on.

In 1980, he got his first autoharp-related job playing for dinner guests at a Holiday Inn. Marty's music went over quite well there, and that inspired him to want to make music the focal point of his life. Since college, he had been employed full-time as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, but says he lacked sufficient motivation to want to move up the ladder into administration. Marty's musical flames were further fanned when he entered and won the "big one" at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas that next year.

When Marty's mother became ill in 1986, he quit his job and moved to St. Augustine to care for her and his stepfather until their respective deaths. While there, he worked part-time as a licensed street musician in St. Augustine's historic district. He expressed to me that it was possibly the best job that he ever had except that it was too seasonal to make a living doing it.

Marty sold the house that had belonged to his mother and moved back to Gainesville in 1988. By carefully managing his inheritance, he was able to semi-retire at that time and continue in his pursuit of a career in music. For ten months, he provided background music for the Sunday Cocktail Brunch at an elegant hotel restaurant (dressed in formal attire, I might add!). Then, he played four hours a week at another restaurant for about two years. He has also "paid his dues" on the nursing home and senior center circuit, and has done school programs as well.

For his professional engagements, Marty uses an Oscar Schmidt electronic pickup and plays a pedal bass with his feet in order to give his act a "bottom." Although the autoharp is a very full instrument in its own right, Marty feels as though its sound is enhanced by the addition of a guitar or bass. Since my mail indicates that "Inquiring minds want to know," I will tell you that Marty presently uses a Kelly Speed Pick on his thumb and Herco nylon finger picks.

From the beginning, Marty has been engaged in an unrelenting quest for the perfect-sounding autoharp. He took the Oscar Schmidt Centurion that he won at Winfield and, through extreme modification, it now has 43 strings. Likewise, he made a mono-key chromatic instrument from a used Oscar Schmidt harp. Marty firmly believes that each additional key added to an autoharp is a sacrifice, especially in terms of string spacing. Single-key instruments, in Marty's estimation, also lend themselves to the sweetest tunings.

Marty is responsible for the development of the ultra-tonic autoharp, from which he has access to 35 chords from 15 bars by depressing two, and sometimes three, bars at once. His mastery of left-hand technique is uncanny. This unique system enables him to explore a lot of musical outposts previously inaccessible to autoharpists. Marty wrote several articles about that system for *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine, and they are recommended reading for those ready to venture into the Twilight Zone of Autoharpdom (January 1989 issue - The 15-Bar, 30-Chord Ultratonic and July 1991 - Mystical Cults or Legitimate Avant-Garde?) Since those compositions were published, Marty feels that he has made a number of "potentially revolutionary" improvements, the most astonishing of which he refers to as "floating pentatonics." Keep an eye on the above-mentioned publication for a proposed updated article on the subject.

Marty's ingenuity has been further demonstrated through his having designed and put into use the "auto-hammer" and an autoharp mute bar. Both of these fall into the classification of gadgetry and really need to be seen and heard in order to be fully appreciated.

As an autoharp player, Marty has somewhat of a "maverick" reputation, and has never been shy about using the instrument to speak his piece. But, although experimentally minded, Marty's reach seldom exceeds his grasp. He might be described as an adventurer whose head is always in the right place. Marty borrows musical influences from various genres, and has an aptitude for playing music often associated with other instruments and making it sound perfectly natural on the autoharp. One gets the impression that this man has limitless depth as an artist.

When asked about other autoharp players to whom he enjoys listening, Marty mentioned the Original Carter Family, Bonnie Phipps' first album, Mark Fackeldey, Michael King, Will Smith, Lindsay Haisley, Bryan Powers, Mike Fenton and Drew Smith--in no particular order.

Finally making and releasing his recording, *Autoharpistry* (see review following this story), has been a big relief to Marty since it took him twelve years to get it accomplished. He is comfortable about the pacing and selections on the project. Marty refers to it as being "diverse without being jarring," and says he didn't want to jump from *Over The Waterfall* to *Over The Rainbow*. He hopes he has been successful in showing just the right amount of tension between the forces of creativity and tradition.

Although *Autoharpistry* is Marty's first solo recording, he has played banjo, guitar or autoharp on projects with other artists dating back to 1960. Several bands with which he played were Payne's Prairie Pickers, the Nasal Quasar String Band, the Hogtown Rounders, and Whitey Markle and the Swamp Rooters. In addition, Marty lent his talents to projects by individual artists such as Florida's renown songwriter Will McLean, Don Grooms, Frank and Ann Thomas, and Michael Beason. Most recently, he can be heard on *Home Is Where The Harp Is* by Mark and Linda Fackeldey.

The subject of music purism is one about which Marty is admittedly opinionated and outspoken. He feels that the fields of both bluegrass and old-time music are in danger of becoming fossilized because their respective followers think that all the rules have already been written. Marty advises all instrumentalists not to do themselves the injustice of getting pigeon-holed into just playing one type of music. Too much specialization, in his estimation, becomes boring and inhibits musical growth. "Don't get stuck in a rut of exclusivity" says Marty. "Be open to anything."

In respect to his playing style, the word innovative comes immediately to mind. Marty has always steered away from chromaticism, yet manages to squeeze many pieces of music heretofore considered chromatic onto his diatonic autoharps. Somehow, he has learned to do things that supposedly can't be done diatonically and to slip them past the ears of his listeners.

Marty says that his main gripe with a lot of otherwise good players is their lack of variety in terms of arrangement. During the course of any given performance, one of Marty's "trademarks"

is that he will make changes in range, tempo, volume, mode, vary his rhythm, change from one time signature to another, play a counter melody et cetera, in order to create an interesting arrangement. Marty loves to be stretched, and pushes himself constantly toward higher standards for his music.

Although I queried him on the subject, Marty was diplomatically hesitant to recommend any particular custom-made or factory-built autoharp because he says he hasn't found one yet that completely satisfies his expectations of the instrument's potential.

Jamming is one of Marty's favorite pastimes, and he really gets annoyed with groups that refuse to give an autoharp player a break because they seem to think it isn't a bonafide instrument, or isn't appropriate to the type of music they may be playing. "To have jumped to that conclusion before they

even hear me play is just plain ignorance" he says. Marty played bluegrass banjo for years but, now that he is minus the resonator and uses nylon strings, he is shunned by the same people who used to welcome him to their sessions. "The old-time contingent is as bad or worse in terms of inflexibility" he says. "They could all stand an attitude adjustment."

To elaborate just a bit about Marty's banjo, it is strung with nylon weed-eater cord that is available in colors from K-Mart. Marty plays it with picks, which is another blasphemy of sorts for the old-time, open-backed banjo. But then, he has always pretty much marched to a different drummer. However, Marty certainly seems to be in step with success as it applies to his music.

As of this writing, he is living a have-van-will-travel lifestyle, but receives mail at P.O. Box 140636, Gainesville, FL 32608. It is with the utmost pleasure that I dedicate this issue to Marty Schuman.

January 2009 Update:

As many of you are aware, Marty sadly left us on 15 September 1994 and was the Posthumous Inductee into the Autoharp Hall of Fame in 1995. His approach to playing our instrument was totally unique, and the beautiful music that rang forth from Marty's autoharps will remain in our collective memories forever. *ER*

Review of *Autoharpistry* from July 1993 issue of *Autoharp Clearinghouse*

Having been captivated by his musicianship from the moment I first heard him play, I was overjoyed to open my post office box recently and find this long-overdue first release by 1981 International Autoharp Champion Marty Schuman. *Autoharpistry* represents a sparkling collection of songs sung and tunes played, utilizing material gleaned from numerous fields of music. The selections also vary widely in tempo, message and mood, with Marty adapting his marvelously adroit and creative playing styles accordingly. His famous weed-eater-cord-strung banjo adds a facet to this recording that is not likely to be duplicated elsewhere. Marty capably supplies the guitar and bass accompaniment as well. One sure way to guarantee that no one else crowds out your tracks is to play them all yourself. There is just an extraordinary amount of

talent at work here, and it is evident that a high degree of preparation and attention to detail in the studio went into the making of this album.

The autoharp is an instrument that is still giving birth to distinctive derivative styles, and Marty's seemingly unlimited command of the chord bars puts him in a class by himself. His gratuitous super chords and multi-tonic riffs, coupled with astounding right hand gymnastics, at times almost convince the listener that they are hearing a hammered dulcimer, mandolin or honky tonk piano. Whether a blisteringly fast *Flop Eared Mule*, the lilting *Beautiful Dreamer* or his toe-tapping march medley, Marty's arrangements throughout this tape are well-suited to the needs of each song. In fact, one suspects that he could make almost anything worth listening to.

Cuts included on this cassette-only recording are *Simple Gifts*; *Sugar Bill*; *Lorena*; *Twelfth Street Rag*; *Dixie Darling*; *Stephen Foster Medley (Beautiful Dreamer, Old Folks At Home, Old Black Joe, Camptown Races)*; *Soul Of Man*; *Over The Waterfall*; *Empty Pockets Blues*; *Flop Eared Mule*; *One Meatball*; *Washington-Lee Swing/Our Director's March*; *Blind Mary* and *New River Train*.

As hard as it is to pick a standout from this project, I'd have to cast my ballot for *Twelfth Street Rag* because it showcases Marty's ability to draw musical lightning to earth. This one will knock your socks off! I wish he had included his dynamite renditions of *Orange Blossom Special* and *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*; maybe next time. In respect to the vocal numbers, Marty's voice grows on you with repeated listenings, but I'd still rather hear him play than sing. And, I would be tempted to sell my soul if I could play the autoharp even half as well as he does.

Without a doubt, the autoharp world is certainly richer for Marty Schuman's presence in it. *AC* highly recommends *Autoharpistry*, and hopes that we won't have to wait another twelve years for more of the same. *ER*