

AC Cover Story - August 1999 – Mary Gillihan

Let me begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to Karen Daniels for conducting the interview from which I composed the article that follows.

Mary Gillihan grew up in the town of Charleston, which is located in East Central Illinois. She sang in the church choir during all of her years as a schoolgirl. Her initial introduction to the autoharp came early on when a circuit music teacher brought one to Mary's first grade classroom. She recalls being allowed to take a turn strumming the instrument in the crossed-hands style while it lay on the teacher's desk. When Mary was around ten years old, she began piano lessons. That led to her taking up the organ as well. Mary remembers that as having been a wonderful opportunity because she had access to a big pipe organ at church with two keyboards as well as foot pedals. She says that it took her quite a few years to coordinate all of the actions necessary to play it properly. From the seventh grade on through to her graduation, Mary played French horn and Eb horn in her school's marching band, orchestra and jazz band. A turning point in her musical education occurred when Mary's high school music teacher emphasized to his students that, "Unless you can FEEL what you are playing, you will have missed the major point of what music is all about."

A second milestone took place when a girlfriend of Mary's read about the opening of the Ozark Folk Center in 1973 and suggested that the two of them journey to Mountain View, Arkansas to "check it out." Mary was impressed to the degree that she moved there the following winter, and began working at the Folk Center during the summer of 1974. It was upon her arrival in Mountain View that Mary became reunited with the autoharp.

In the beginning, she used the instrument only in a backup capacity to accompany her singing and to help her stay on pitch. Then, when the Folk Center commenced offering music instruction, Mary started taking weekly private lessons from Judy Klinkhammer. She relates that, while Mountain View has become somewhat of a Mecca for talented old-time musicians, Judy stands out from the crowd as a multi-instrumentalist because of her ability to teach what she knows. At the end of each week, all of her students were invited to a joint session during which she would give them instruction as to how to play the various instruments in an ensemble or band setting. Mary considers that to have been an "ultimate" learning experience. Judy also encouraged her pupils to play the lead and to take breaks, and it was then that Mary ventured into the realm of the melodic autoharp. She has subsequently participated in workshops taught by Ron Wall, Lindsay Haisley, Becky Blackley, Mike Fenton, Tom Schroeder and Charles Whitmer, and credits them all with having had an influence on her playing style.

The marriage between Mary and her husband Robert came as a result of intense matchmaking efforts by her future father-in-law. A fiddler and accomplished vocalist, Robert's father became a staff musician at the Folk Center after having retired from an earlier career in the timber industry. He and Mary had performed some together and were rehearsing for a ten-day road trip when their guitar player had to cancel due to the illness of his elderly mother. It just so happened that Robert had left a job in Clarksville, Arkansas and returned home to Mountain View at that same time. Since he played guitar and had experience as a song leader at church, Robert was recruited to fill the vacancy. Following that, he and Mary began doing shows billed as *Robert*

Gillihan and His Friend. Mary says that title came about because her family name was Bloomquist and announcers found it too difficult to pronounce. One thing led to another and--as of this month--the Gillihans have been married for twenty-three years.

Mary's position at the Ozark Folk Center is that of Historic Interpreter. Dressed in period attire, she portrays a "Living History" character inspired by three Ozark pioneer women--Almeda Riddle, Emma Dusenberry and Aunt Ollie Gilbert. Her various presentations range from a *Young Pioneers* program for seven to fourteen-year-old youngsters up to nine different topics for the week-long Elderhostel events. The Ozark Mountain culture and way of life is interpreted through music, storytelling, dance and crafts.

Not only is the autoharp incorporated into what Mary performs for her audiences, it is taught to those who exhibit a desire to learn the instrument. Using loaner 'harps, a program entitled *Those Singing Hills* teaches the basics of our instrument. In addition to the aforementioned Judy Klinkhammer, both Margie Earles and Lou Jones have made significant contributions to autoharp awareness at the Folk Center, as have Charles Whitmer and a number of others who teach at the facility's annual *Autoharp Jamboree*.

As is the case in many small towns, the Gillihans have found it necessary to diversify in order to earn a living in Mountain View. In the off season, both of them work at a friend's candle factory. Robert has a part-time handyman business, and Mary does household chores for a woman in a neighboring county.

Together with their long-time friend Dave Smith, the Gillihans have formed a band that is known as *Harmony*. Above and beyond their regional notoriety, the trio was selected to represent Arkansas during the summer of 1997 at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. (A live recording of that performance will be documented at the conclusion of this article.) Last spring, *Harmony* auditioned for a contest called *Talent From Towns Under Two Thousand*, sponsored by *A Prairie Home Companion*. They were chosen among the six finalists from over seven hundred entries and, on 4 April, were heard on a live broadcast from Town Hall in New York City. During the show, Garrison Keillor honored the Gillihans by singing bass with them on an a cappella gospel song. (The band was voted first runner up in the competition.)

In addition to the two albums described below, *Harmony* has recorded a third project which is scheduled for release sometime this fall. *Arkansas Stories* will be comprised entirely of the works of Mountain View songwriter Charlie Sandage, who is perhaps best known for his tune *Neighbors*. Watch these pages for an announcement of its availability. Meanwhile, *AC* is pleased to have had the opportunity to introduce its readers to Mary Gillihan--to whom this issue is dedicated. **ER**

Building Bridges - *Hideaway* • *Stepstone* • *On a Day Like Today* • *Wild Mountain Thyme* • *Kindergarten Wall* • *Airship* • *Blowin' in the Wind* • *What Will I Leave?* • *In the Garden* • *River* • *Loch Tae Boat Song* • *Whiskey Before Breakfast* • *Rebecca's Lament* • *Ghost Riders*

Live In Far Off Washington - *Arkansas Traveler* • *Neighbors* • *Our Town* • *Trails and Sails* • *Who Will Sing For Me?* • *Wild Woman of Stone County, Arkansas* • *Legend of the Ozarks* • *One Good Rain* • *Posted* • *Turkey in the Straw* • *They Sang On* • *Tennessee Stud* • *Song Beside Her Bed* • *Country Smile* • *Back to Arkansas* • *Amazing Grace*

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Building Bridges is available only as a cassette tape, but ***Live In Far Off Washington*** may be purchased in either cassette or CD format. Postpaid prices are \$10 and \$15 respectively. Make checks or money orders payable to Harmony, and send them to: HC 72, Box 219A, Mountain View, AR 72560.

December 2007 Note: It is recommended that anyone interested in purchasing either or both of these recordings send a letter of inquiry first as this article was written almost eight years ago.

ER