

Autoharp Clearinghouse – July 1996 – Mary Umbarger

As an introduction to the information provided for the story that follows, **Mary Umbarger** had this to say: “I’m not certain just how to make an extremely ordinary person like me sound interesting in an article. I’ve thought about it for a while now, and still don’t have the answer? Realizing, however, that autoharp folks are open-minded, forbearing, understanding and a bit on the ordinary side also (except for their undying devotion to **the** instrument), I’ll press on and share more than you can possibly want of my journey into the autoharp world.” **MU**

For starters, Mary Umbarger is anything **but** ordinary. (And for that matter, so are the rest of us!) After reading of her many accomplishments, following only seven years of playing our instrument, I’m certain that you will agree.

Born in Tazwell, in the beautiful mountains of Southwestern Virginia, Mary is unable to recall a time when music was absent from her home. The church and its music played an important role in Mary’s family life and, by the age of thirteen, she was the pianist for her congregation.

Her father and her Uncle Henry were both talented musicians, each being proficient on several stringed instruments. In fact, Uncle Henry turned down an offer to join a well-known Grand Ole Opry performer’s band. Mary says she will never understand why they didn’t encourage her to take up the guitar, banjo or fiddle--unless, of course, it was due to the fact that anyone who had to take formal music lessons was considered to be tone deaf and hopeless!

In 1957, Mary’s family moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where her parents opened a drapery/interior design shop. Although Mary was married and had several children by that time, she also relocated to the Tar Heel State and continued working alongside her Mom and Dad. During the years that followed, she finished her education and earned a degree in Interior Design. Like so many of us, her non-working hours were spent “paying her dues” to Scouting, Little League sports, PTA, et cetera. Mary has also always been an active member of the local Methodist Church, and has served a lengthy tenure as its pianist/organist.

Sometime during all of that, Mary’s brother shipped her parents a number of items that he had purchased at an estate auction. Among them was one of the old black A-Model Oscar Schmidt Autoharps, which Mary’s father gave to her. Prior to that, she had never seen, or even heard, an autoharp. Her Dad tuned the instrument and showed her how he thought it was meant to be played. So, with the ‘harp in her lap and a felt pick in hand, she strummed the accompaniment to a few Christmas carols--and then put the instrument aside.

In 1987, the Umbargers moved to Harmony, which is only about four miles from the site of the annual Fiddlers’ Grove Memorial Day festival at Union Grove, North Carolina. Two years later, Mary finally attended that event and heard John Hollandsworth (and others) play melody on the autoharp. It was also there that she observed the instrument being played *Appalachian Style* for the first time. Through the experiences of that day, Mary became aware that there was far more to the autoharp than she had ever imagined. And the rest, as we so often say, is history! (Time and time again, people have related to me that they experienced a distinct “calling” to the autoharp.)

Mary and I became acquainted through mutual friends in the Charlotte Folk Music Society. In June of 1990, I attended that organization's annual festival at the Latta Plantation, and it was there that we actually met for the first time. In conjunction with a workshop given by Ivan Stiles, the *Clearinghouse* held a drawing for a Main Street autoharp case which, coincidentally, was won by Mary's Aunt Ruth. It was at that same festival that Mary took delivery on her first custom-made instrument--an Orthey G-D-A diatonic autoharp (she now has three).

A month or so later, our paths crossed again when we were fellow students in a week-long autoharp session at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia. I vividly recall that, when we did our "musical introductions" in front of the class, Mary accompanied herself while singing the Dolly Parton song *Wildflowers*. Mary remembers-- that meeting and studying under such autoharp notables as Becky Blackley, Tom Schroeder and Ron Wall was a tremendous source of inspiration and motivation to her. She also jovially confesses that life hasn't been the same around the Umbarger homestead since she was bitten with "the autoharp bug!"

Mary attended the final Dulci-Harp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania (which has since evolved into the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering). The first weekend in July every year, you can count on Mary being among the throngs of autoharpers who convene in Perry County for a four-day festival of which there is no equal. Not only has Mary become a strong contender in the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship, but she is also a highly-respected workshop leader there. Although she may have been a little late in getting introduced to the autoharp--make no mistake about it--Mary Umbarger has made up for lost time.

In 1992, she demonstrated her prowess on our instrument by placing second in the autoharp competition at Fiddlers' Grove, and fourth at Galax. The next year, she won the contest at Mt. Airy, North Carolina. Then, in 1994, Mary and Betty Waldron traveled to Winfield, Kansas for the Walnut Valley Festival, where Mary made the final cut in the International Autoharp Championship. This past year, she placed third at Fiddlers' Grove--and then won a prestigious (and often elusive) victory at the Galax, Virginia Old Fiddlers' Convention.

A picker of seemingly great potential, Mary has the ability to meld musical styles into a sound that is uniquely hers. Overflowing with creative energy, this artist's talents and techniques especially shine through when she performs slower songs where precise articulation is so very important. Her poise, stage demeanor and emotionalized delivery always demonstrate the utmost in good taste.

Back home in Harmony (Isn't that a great name for a town?), Mary is a member of *The Front Porch Strings*. That five-member unit features Appalachian and hammered dulcimers, fiddle and guitar in addition to the autoharp. Her versatility as a musician enables Mary to also play cats paws, washboard and bodhran with the band. In 1995, the group released their debut recording, *As You Like It* and, at the present time, they are working on an album of Christmas music. It should be noted that *The Front Porch Strings* has been the subject of several feature articles in local newspapers.

Mary also performs solo concerts within a 100-mile radius of home. On those occasions, she complements her chromatic and diatonic autoharps with the addition of recorder, bowed psaltery and voice.

In 1992, Mary organized the first of what was to become an annual event known as the *Ground Hog Jam*. Taking place each year on the Saturday preceding Ground Hog Day, this mid-winter musical get-together is held at an area Community Center. Drawing participants from the fields of old-time, bluegrass and folk music, the *Ground Hog Jam* has become an eagerly-anticipated prelude to the festival season. All of the members of *The Front Porch Strings* contribute to the event's sponsorship.

Last October, Mary was invited to take part in a segment of *Music in the Mountains*. These made-for-video productions are edited from live performances in the Boone/Blowing Rock area of North Carolina. The particular episode in which Mary performed was billed as *Harp & Autoharp*, and she shared the spotlight with a classically-trained harpist. The video tapes in the *Music in the Mountains* series are offered for sale, in addition to being distributed for Public Television syndication. Mary was sufficiently enthralled by her exposure to the harp that she is presently enrolled in a series of lessons on that instrument at Salem College. It is Mary's desire to eventually add the folk/Celtic harp to her solo concert programs.

Songwriting is still another of Mary's talents, and her compositions have appeared in several music trade journals including this publication and *Autoharp Quarterly*. Mary is currently a staff member of the latter-mentioned magazine, where she writes the *AQ Postscripts from Harpland* column. She relates that she especially appreciates the opportunity it affords her to keep in touch with her autoharp peers, and also to establish contact with those 'harpers whom she has not yet met.

Paul Umbarger, Mary's husband of nearly forty-four years, has always been supportive of her "obsession" with the autoharp. He also helps in Mary's drapery shop, and "keeps things going" when she straps on her 'harp, climbs into the couple's motor home and hits the road. Mary says, "If you pass a Winnebago on the highway driven by a Geritol Gypsy, just honk and lead the way to wherever the music is being played." She continues, "We'll put on the coffee pot and share a couple of tunes."

On that pleasant note, I'll conclude this piece by stating that *AC* takes extreme pleasure in dedicating its July 1996 issue in honor of our friend and colleague **Mary Umbarger**. ER

Note: You may contact Mary at: 144 Umbarger Road, Harmony, NC 28634