

Autoharp Clearinghouse - June 1995 - Michael King

Because he is unable to travel widely on a regular basis due to job-related commitments and some health concerns, Michael King may well be one of the most under-recognized autoharpists on the scene today. However, make no mistake about the fact that his name should be added to the roster of our instrument's most accomplished practitioners. Michael first came to my attention through the pages of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine and, in particular, his column, *In The Beginning*. He also wrote reviews of recordings for that publication from an informed point of view, as well as having had any number of his song arrangements printed over the years. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe Michael and I met for the first time at a 1985 gathering of the infamous Dulcimer Disorganization Of Greater Washington. By that time, he was well on his way to achieving the level of autoharp excellence for which he is known today.

Michael is capable of playing a wide spectrum of music, with nods in the direction of both traditionalism and modernism. He is equally at ease with an old-time fiddle tune, a Celtic piece, a song from a Broadway play, the theme from a television show or the melody from a commercial jingle. A few years back, Michael composed the music and performed on autoharp for the six-week run of a play called *Little Victories* at the Round House Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland. In 1989, he gave two solo performances in the Grand Foyer of Washington's prestigious Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (the only autoharp player to ever be so invited).

Michael is a splendid player with a lot of savvy for material. I would describe him as an articulate, melody-oriented picker. He is tastefully inventive, and possesses an adventuresome willingness to experiment. Early on, I was impressed by the manner in which Michael plays with such bright musical color and flowery musical fragrance.

Yet, the most unique of this man's many prodigious talents just might be his remarkable gift for arranging music. Michael is blessed with an ability that enables him to explore and exploit the harmonic qualities of the songs and tunes he arranges. He seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to chord progressions, as well as a knack for incorporating notes, chords and ideas from a wide range of musical influences. He also has a gift for innovative turn-arounds and tag endings. Whenever one of Michael's autoharp arrangements appears in the Clearinghouse, I can always count on my post office box being stuffed with requests for more of the same.

An experienced and successful autoharp instructor, Michael teaches regular semi-annual sessions in northern Virginia to both beginners and intermediate-level autoharp players. Because he changes his repertoire and the class handouts each semester, many advanced students enroll in the classes over and over again. Michael has also been on the teaching staff (and performed as a guest artist in some instances) at such highly-regarded venues as the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops (WV), the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering (NY), the Memphis Dulcimer Festival (TN), the Summer Solstice Festival (CA) and the Washington Folk Festival (DC).

Michael and I spent the better part of a Sunday afternoon together late in April at Tyson's Corner, Virginia. The story that follows is presented almost exactly as he related it to me either on that occasion, or via several follow-up FAX transmissions. *ER*

I was born on 16 January 1943 in the District Of Columbia, and attended elementary through high school in Alexandria, Virginia. I achieved second chair status as baritone horn player in my high school marching band (and still maintain that I should have been first chair because I could play better than the other guy). But, he could read both treble and bass clef, and I was only comfortable with bass clef.

One of my earliest experiences in musical performance occurred when I was in the second grade, and the traumatic consequences haunt me to this very day. Our class was to participate in the annual school Christmas pageant and Miss Hamner, our teacher, decided that we would perform an acted-out version of *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer*. It seems that it was decided that I possessed the clearest singing voice in the class, and I was given the coveted role of Rudolph. My mother and my aunt were delighted, and they made for me a reindeer costume (actually it was a modified bunny costume) complete with cardboard antlers and a red rubber ball nose. Alas, it was the nose which presented the problem. During my performance, the flesh-colored Band Aids holding the nose in place failed and off came the nose, much to the audience's delight and to my mortification. Now noseless and humiliated, I nearly ran screaming from the stage, but Miss Hamner sternly prodded me to finish the song and, by so doing, I learned my first important lesson in showmanship...always check your nose! Over the years I have met and talked with many fine performers and musicians who are reluctant to perform publicly, and I wonder just how many of them have Rudolph stories?

I first started "fooling around" with the autoharp in the mid-sixties when I was working as Assistant Manager and Guitar Instructor at Marina Music in San Francisco. That facility was a bustling acoustic music shop with a large inventory of world-class classical and steel-string guitars, mandolins, banjos, dulcimers, vintage instruments and autoharps. Part of my job description included keeping the instruments tuned, adjusted and ready for sale, and I spent countless hours with tuning hammer and pitch pipe. (At that time, affordable electronic tuners were still a decade in the future.) My boss encouraged the hands on approach to selling instruments, and exhorted his sales staff to learn as much about each instrument as possible in order to properly demonstrate them to the prospective buyers. I managed, over time, to learn to play at least one tune on each different instrument--with varying degrees of skill (such as the first four bars of *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* on the five-string banjo!).

The store also carried a lot of the Folkways records, and I became particularly fascinated with the Kilby Snow tracks on *Mountain Music Played On The Autoharp*. If the truth be told, I confess that, until I really started listening to what Kilby, Mother, Maybelle Carter, Mike Seeger and a few others could do with the instrument, I had always considered the autoharp to be a somewhat dorky non-instrument, or musical novelty, best left in the hands of primary-level school teachers. That view changed instantly when I heard *Flop-Eared Mule* and *Old Molly Hare* on that Kilby Snow recording.

My guitar finger-picking skills were pretty well developed by that time, and I found that I could apply a lot of similar right-hand techniques to the autoharp for rhythm accompaniment, and especially melody picking with alternating bass/chord thumb and two or three fingers in the treble (melody). I soon could play a version of *Old Molly Hare* and *Victory Rag*, which I had

just learned on guitar. It was right around that time that I first started teaching autoharp. The store's resident bluegrass maven (Jim Carr), who taught banjo, guitar and autoharp, had to transfer his students to other teachers due to a change in his Navy assignment. Jim had a couple of autoharp students who wished to continue, and he referred them to me. At that point, I didn't even own an autoharp, so I bought an Oscar Schmidt 45BH Autoharp--which I have to this day, although I have converted it to a G diatonic. My autoharp teaching career was off and crawling. Actually, I worked very hard over the next few months to hone my autoharp chops in order to stay at least one lesson ahead of my students. I found that one of the best ways to learn is by teaching.

In spite of the previously mentioned autoharp players who have inspired and influenced me, no one has had a greater effect on the direction my playing has taken than Becky Blackley. Becky and I met through an old girlfriend of mine who was a guitar teacher at Serranonte Music in south San Francisco, a store which Becky frequented. My friend heard Becky and a store salesman discussing autoharps and suggested that she contact me as a fellow 'harp devotee. What followed was many wonderful Gordon Blackley home-cooked meals and fruitful evenings of autoharp and guitar playing. I was immediately and profoundly impressed with Becky's energy and enthusiasm, and her ability to creatively implement so many ideas which, of course, resulted in *The Autoharpoholic* magazine. I am very pleased that I was on hand and able to contribute to the creation of that fine publication.

Once *The Autoharpoholic* began circulating, it seemed that there were pockets of autoharp activity everywhere, and a real autoharp network started to take shape. I went to the Walnut Valley Festival at Winfield, Kansas in 1981 with Becky and some Oscar Schmidt executives to help promote the Autoharp Activities Center, and to conduct performance workshops. On that occasion, I had the opportunity to meet and to play with some of the instrument's movers and shakers including Bonnie Phipps, Karen Mueller, Bryan Bowers and Ron Wall among others. It was the dynamic and innovative diatonic-style playing of Ron which turned my head around the most. I'm sure you know the feeling of being alternately depressed and inspired!

As a consequence, I now have (in addition to several slightly modified chromatic 'harps) two single-key diatonic instruments, the previously mentioned converted Schmidt in G Major, and a D Major 'harp beautifully hand-crafted for me by my friend Keith Young. I'm fascinated with the full, bright sonority and the richness of chord voicings afforded by diatonic stringing. The open chord playing style allows a fluidity and precision in melody picking quite unobtainable on the standard chromatic instrument. There are serious limitations, however, in that you can't play blues or ragtime progressions on a diatonic 'harp. I'm quite fond of pointing out that, if I were stranded on a desert island with but one autoharp, it would have to be chromatic. I firmly believe that man was not intended to live without dominant seventh chord progressions.

In 1983, after nineteen years in San Francisco, I moved back to my hometown of Alexandria, Virginia. During my years on the west coast, my primary employment was music store work and teaching (conga/bongos, guitar and autoharp). Although I never pursued performing on a full-time basis, many varied working gigs found their way to me. I played congas and percussion with the house quartet atop a barge in an indoor man-made lagoon at the Tonga Room in the posh Fairmont Hotel. It was strictly a union-and-tux gig. At the Ghirardelli Wine Cellar

Cafe, I played piano-bar guitar, and I occasionally took along my autoharp. Whenever I played the 'harp, the fondue pots would stop clinking momentarily as people stopped to get a look at what instrument could be producing such a sound. I did some recording studio work on congas, guitar and autoharp with the Jeff Wyman group and with the Paul Nash Jazz Ensemble, and was a studio sideman at Fantasy Records with singer/songwriter Jim Post.

Since my return to northern Virginia, I've become much more active with the autoharp, both as performer and teacher. Through my acquaintance with Keith Young and the Mill Run Dulcimer Band I have, since 1986, been teaching multi-level group classes for autoharp which are generally held in two sessions per year...in the fall and again in the spring. My advancing-level group, many of whom repeat the class, never to graduate, has earned the sobriquet, *The Motel 6 Autoharp Lounge Lizards*...and we may take our act on tour! My continuing experiences with teaching autoharp underscore what I learned earlier in that a great deal of introspective focus and true learning can be achieved through the act of teaching. It is my wish to continue to do so. I am presently working and teaching at Olde Towne Music in Alexandria. It seems that I just can't stay out of music stores. This summer, I will again be a guest artist/instructor at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops during Week 1, and will be teaching workshops at the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in Binghamton, New York as well. In August, I plan to return to the Galax (VA) Old Fiddlers' Convention.

My feelings about contests and musical competitions are oddly mixed in that those events can provide an opportunity for players to refine and perfect their playing skills as well as to develop stage presence. But, in a competitive situation, what seems to happen all too often is that the player uses the tune to showcase his or her talents rather than marshaling his or her talents to showcase the tune...and something important is lost. I remember once playing a recording session with a super harmonica player whose technique and musicianship were nothing short of astounding. Yet, he was a model of taste and understatement. He told me that the unplayed notes were every bit as important as the played ones in communicating a musical idea. In his words, "Son, I'd rather steal their hearts than blow their minds." Still, I may enter the competition at Galax again this year, and I plan to "knock their socks off."

I'm also looking forward to doing a lot more workshops and classes in the coming year. The direction my teaching seems to be taking with group lessons is emphasizing parts-playing with the aim of achieving a cohesive ensemble effect. This allows student players of quite different levels of development to fully participate in a group concert, and also allows for the orchestration of music of greater complexity than can be played solo.

On the solo front, I've been planning for some time to do a recording of some sort. I remember talking to Marty Schuman the year before he died about his long-awaited tape (which was well worth the wait). We were at Galax and, when I bought a copy of his tape, he told me it had taken him twelve years to get around to recording it. Well now, I've been planning to do one for about ten years, so I'm not too far behind. And, when I finally get to the recording studio, you can be sure that, before I play a single note, I'll check my nose! **MK**

September 2008 Update:

Michael King has gone to be with the Lord now, but the legacy he left the autoharp community is immense. He was a charter member of the Capital 'Harpers Autoharp Club that continues to this day in the Metropolitan Washington, DC area. For many years, the group's monthly meetings were held in the homes of members. A bountiful potluck meal was always part of the festivities, with the host or hosts announcing in advance a theme for the musical portion of the gathering. This exposed club members to a far greater variety of music than I have ever encountered elsewhere. As a result, we never fell into the rut of sitting around month after month playing the same tired old workhorse tunes. Although everyone went the extra mile to do their part, no one contributed more in terms of shared music than Michael King. He left the group with more than one hundred exquisitely-arranged songs and tunes for melodic autoharp. Michael's gift of music is ongoing because, on his passing, he left all of his instruments to the autoharp club that he loved and that loved him. As if that were not more than enough, Michael also bequeathed a monetary gift to the club which continues to be used to fund workshops and concerts by guest instructors and performers. In closing, I would like to share a funny story about Michael. One year, at the club's annual December holiday party, it was decided that we would have a cookie exchange and bring enough copies of the recipe for everyone. Not being a baker, Michael purchased his cookies at the Giant Food store bakery. In place of a recipe, he passed around a map he had drawn of directions to the store! Miss you, Michael. *ER*