

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1996 - Michael Stanwood

This issue marks the beginning of AC's eighth year of publication. In honor of that occasion, I should like to dedicate the issue to this month's cover personality, **Michael Stanwood**.

Michael was born in East Haven, Connecticut. As a youngster, his earliest musical adventure was in getting himself "expelled" from piano lessons. Then, severe knee problems necessitated multiple surgeries and a year of his life spent in a wheelchair. During his recuperation, Michael was given a ukulele to help keep him occupied. His grandmother bought the family a television set during that period, and Michael specifically remembers following the early career of Elvis. He further recalls having **always** loved both singing and acting, and he accepted every opportunity to be involved in choruses, choirs and plays during his high school and college years.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he spent a season in summer stock theater at the John Drew Playhouse in Easthampton, Long Island. From there, it was off to Hollywood where Michael went under contract to Universal Studios and began a serious acting career. It led to his appearing in more than twenty television programs including *The Virginian*, *Mannix*, *Medical Center* and *Night Gallery*. With his added skills as a songwriter and performer on several acoustic instruments, Michael also played clubs and concerts throughout the U.S.A. and abroad. More on that as we progress.

Michael relates that he first heard the autoharp in the hands of David Dawson, who played in a late Sixties group known as *Hearts And Flowers*. This was during his time in Los Angeles where Michael was fortunate to have, as a neighbor, a talented singer/songwriter/guitarist by the name of Rick Cunha. He says that he used to spend long evenings in wonder and awe at the music those two made, along with Phil Freed (guitar) and Bill Cunningham (fiddle). They all had tremendous "heart" and "feel" for their music. In fact, Michael was so deeply touched by their musicianship that he cites it as having been a major contributing factor to his decision to change careers. He recalls that David Dawson was a marvelous autoharp player who kept his instrument in perfect tune by extracting just one note from a tuning fork, and doing the rest by ear.

A few years later, out of acting for the time being and relocated in Denver, Michael was once again introduced to the autoharp. In the intervening years, he had been learning to play both the guitar and banjo, and had also become active in a circle of songwriters. A friend gave him an autoharp, and Michael was so taken by its sound and application to the music he was playing that he says he went back to California and spent nine months in a rented room finding "his voice" on the instrument. His prior musical influences had been Bach and Elton John, so Michael didn't exactly come to the autoharp by traditional means.

He recalls being in love with the sound off the back of the instrument, as well as all the many different "colors" of sound it could bring to many musical styles--and especially to the compositions of his songwriter friends. The vibrations of the instrument against his heart as he played affected Michael on still another level.

Michael remembers Buddy Holly's *I'm a Gonna Love You Too* as one of the earliest songs he tried on autoharp. He approached it as a minuet--before it "crashed" into a very fast 2/4 number. However, since lyrics were always of the utmost important to Michael as a songwriter and performer, he tended to adapt the 'harp to the song rather than vice versa. He adds that, generally speaking, he much prefers the sound of the autoharp woven in with other instruments--as a texture or a paint stroke--rather than as a solo instrument.

In addition to Michael's solo gigs back in the seventies, he frequently played with several other writer/performers, and says that their music contributed to his finding new voices for the autoharp. He particularly enjoyed making music with other stringed instruments such as cello (Jeff Gilkinson) and violin (Bruce Bowers). The latter-mentioned musician became Michael's partner in *Fingers Akimbo*--a group that enjoyed some success during that decade. In fact, their recording *Cowtowns and Other Planets* received rave reviews in a number of newspapers and music trade journals. Unfortunately, it is no longer available.

Although Michael considers himself "not of the disposition to compete," he placed among the top five (out of a field of thirty-one) in the 1981 International Autoharp Championship at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. One of the judges later told him that "he'd have to play in a more traditional manner if he wanted to win contests." Michael further recalls that the diatonic style of playing had started to "take hold" by that time. While he loved the full sound of the diatonic instruments, he never could adapt to it because he was so accustomed to his own "tricks" and to having the ability to modulate and change keys. To this day, he plays chromatic autoharps exclusively.

In 1985, our instrument literally took Michael around the world, as he did shows sponsored by the United States Information Agency in such faraway places as Thailand, Sri Lanka and Nepal. (He credits Bryan Bowers with recommending him to that agency.) The idea behind the tour had been to **export** American music played on traditional American instruments. However, Michael found that he brought back as much or more than he took in terms of culture, music and instruments.

A year later, and back in this country, Michael became acquainted with Corky Siegel, who was beginning to put together a chamber blues consortium. That inspired him to start dreaming of one day using the autoharp with an orchestra. For the next four years, Michael traveled with *Mimic Sole*, a clown theater show in which he played everything from autoharp to percussion to synthesizer. All the while though, he kept his dream alive--and worked on it when time and circumstances allowed.

In 1989, Michael released his first collection of original children's songs, *Something Awful Can Be Wonderful*, which included some of the formative stages of two orchestral pieces. Finally, with the help of collaborators and orchestrators like Corky Siegel, Bruce Bowers, Chris Hewitt and Thomas Blomster, he premiered *Concertino for Autoharp and Orchestra* in Denver for the Colorado New Music Series during March of 1992. The next year, it was performed once again with the *Mostly Strauss Orchestra* in that same city. Despite the fact that the project won

critical acclaim, it has been more or less “on the back burner” since that time due primarily to budget cuts governing orchestras. Other significant accomplishments include:

Composer and Sound Designer for Denver Children’s Museum production of *The Happy Prince*.

Architect and Director of *Animal Communique*--performances combined animal and environmental sounds with music, dance and stories. Presented with Michael’s group *Gitanjali* at the Denver Zoo and the Denver Museum of Natural History--as well as for school productions.

Artist in Residencies in Colorado and Tennessee.

Featured actor in *Keeper of the Light*--original musical at Big Top Chautaugua, and on tour.

Included in *Winning Ways on the Autoharp Volume One* with arrangement of *Over the Waterfall*.

Winner of National Association of Arts and Sciences grant with *Gitanjali* for creating music in various city spaces.

Winner of Westword’s “Best Of Denver” for recording *Something Awful Can Be Wonderful*.

Co-composer of live three-hour public radio broadcast *Terra Infirma*.

Composer and performer for French puppet production of *In Search Of Giants*.

Co-composer and narrator of *The Boatman* at the Arvada Center and in Colorado schools.

Composer for *Superficial Dissolve*, multi-media dance piece with Polly Motley (choreographer) and Molly Davies (visual artist).

Architect and composer for multi-media production of *The Circle of Life* in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Denver Museum of Natural History.

*Two Men Looking at the Stars*, concert with Mike Vargas, presented by the Colorado New Music Association.

Composer for *Haiku: The Poems of Alexis Rutella*, a public radio broadcast.

Performer on *Leaving Eden*, Bruce Odland compact disc.

Composer/performer for *The Boy Who Wanted to Talk to Whales*--at Denver Museum Of Natural History, the Denver Zoo and the Denver Children's Museum.

Most recently, Michael's musical path has led him toward other forms and instruments--especially those that have an inherent buzz to them such as the Thai Khaen, Australian didgeridoo, tabla, berimbau, jaw harp and the human vice. Michael, and the other musicians who make up this unusual ensemble, call themselves *The Buzz Band*. The low-frequency hum, or buzz, is a sound common to all cultures. It is believed that the primal frequency sets up a sympathetic reverberation in the soul enabling body and spirit to come together. Michael relates that one of the group's members has created a "magical piece" by removing the chord bars from an autoharp and sounding its strings with sticks--much as one would play a hammered dulcimer.

On other fronts, Michael has a regular gig at a classical restaurant/bar in Denver where he plays a lot of pentatonic, Japanese and Chinese music that he has found to be so conducive to the autoharp. In addition, he uses the instrument in conjunction with historical musicals at the Big Top Chautaugua in Wisconsin.

In terms of modification, Michael enlisted the talents of luthier Mitch Pingel to try and make his chord bar action as silent as possible. He uses an LXPS and a blender in order to integrate a microphone sound on the front of his 'harps with a condenser pickup off the back to recreate and amplify the sound that he has always loved so much from the back of the instrument.

In retrospect, Michael reflects that most of the music he plays on his 'harps has been "pretty upbeat." He is reminded of an old Sears, Roebuck advertisement championing the autoharp as "The Good-Natured Instrument." In closing, he says: "After all is said and done, and I'm left on a porch at ninety years old with one instrument to play, it will probably be an autoharp." **ER**

Two of Michael's children's recordings, *The Sneeze* and *Something Awful Can Be Wonderful* are still available from him for \$11.00 each postpaid. While both projects include some autoharp, neither **features** the instrument. You may contact Michael Stanwood at: 1643 Adams Street, Denver, CO 80206 - (303) 333-4579.