

Autoharp Clearinghouse - May 1992 - Mike Fenton

It is indeed an honor to dedicate this issue of the newsletter to renowned autoharpist Mike Fenton. His credentials, which have been documented in detail elsewhere, include winning the 1987 International Autoharp Championship at Winfield, Kansas, three blue ribbons from the prestigious Galax, Virginia Old Fiddler's Convention, teaching at both the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia and the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas, multiple recording projects--and the list goes on and on. I refer you to Volumes 5, 8 and 10 of *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* (or the corresponding back issues of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine), to Volume Two of *Winning Ways on the Autoharp*, and to the January 1990 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly* for a more in-depth look at those accomplishments.

Although Mike plays an arsenal of other instruments including piano, lap dulcimer, guitar, old-time banjo, mandolin, harmonica and jaw harp, he "stuck with" the autoharp as his primary instrument because he found that he could play it better than anything else. Mike was "keen to be creative" on the instrument from the beginning, at the same time being careful not to let his reach exceed his grasp. He developed a three-finger roll akin to that done on the bluegrass banjo and adapted it to the autoharp during one of his periodic forays into more experimental areas. Mike enjoys playing all types of music, tastefully balancing modernity and tradition in the process. He seems to have mastered the knack of using techniques that match the nature of his songs, and this has served him well on his musical journey.

Hear now what author George Foss has to say about the autoharp playing of Mike Fenton in his book *Going Diatonic*:

"The British autoharper, Mike Fenton, is one of the most inventive and technically adventuresome players around. He uses and demonstrates two advanced and refined extensions of the 'open chording' technique. One is used on exceptionally fast tunes in the mountain fiddle repertoire, in which he uses a quick alternation of the thumb playing the tune with a finger alternating on the rapid 'after-beats'. Combined with rhythmic pressing and opening of the chord bars this is a virtuoso style which is strongly melodic with a hint of sustained harmony through the 'open chording' technique. Another of Mike's adaptations is effective in slow melodic pieces--whenever a long sustained note in the melody is reached, the chord bars are released to open the strings which are then plucked by thumb and fingers, the effect being a gently 'walking' counterpoint to the melody. The overall sound of this style is very reminiscent of a slow air being played on Irish or Celtic harp."

When I asked Mike about the highlights of his musical life, he replied that there had been many--citing opportunities to have met and played with Maybelle Carter and Kilby Snow--pioneer artists who paved the way for what autoharp music is today. More recently, Mike says that he was as "high as a kite" when, during his 1991 visit to the United States, he played on stage and

in concert with Bryan Bowers at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, the Perry (PA) Grange Hall, and at Winfield. It turns out that the two men have a lot of mutual admiration and respect for each other's talents.

Making a living playing music is deceptively difficult. However, Mike took that plunge, leaving a career as a primary school teacher and principal, after being inspired by hearing Bryan Bowers say "I'm holding my dream in my hands". Mike now travels to as many as 175 schools a year, with a collection of autoharps that rivals my own (it takes him four hours to tune them!). When I invited Mike to be an AC cover personality, I suggested that he place the emphasis of his story on the programs that he does for, and with, school children all over his native England. Here it is, with the British spelling and terminology having been preserved for authenticity. **ER**

"My story as an autoharp player dates back to the 1967-68 period. I was a keen enthusiast for early country music, and owned several Carter Family records, which were easily available in England on RCA and the budget label Decca Ace of Hearts. However, much as I loved the music, I didn't associate the Carters with the autoharp at this stage, as the photos of the family on the album liners showed Maybelle and Sara with two guitars. It wasn't until I bought a Bill Clifton LP *Mountain Ramblings*, still one of my favourite records, that I began to be interested in the sound of the autoharp. Mike Seeger played 'harp on several cuts on the Clifton album, and the instrument first registered with me when I saw Mike feature it on *Gold Watch and Chain* on a televised New Lost City Ramblers concert, which must have been not too long before I obtained the Clifton record.

However, the date which I do recall clearly is November 3, 1968. I'd long been a devotee of the Sam Phillips recordings on the Memphis-based Sun label, and was a keen fan of Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins, who toured England together several times in the late 1960s. At the Birmingham Theatre that night in '68, I heard and met Mother Maybelle Carter. She was a late addition to the bill in place of her daughter, June, who had to return to the U.S.A. at short notice. It was a great show that night, but of course it was meeting Maybelle that left the greatest impression. She invited me to visit Maces **Springs** if I should ever make it to the U.S.A., and indeed I've since visited with the Carters in Scott County, Virginia many times through the years. I remember that she was most talkative and friendly, and on the second house later that evening, I recall her breaking a string on her autoharp on *Liberty Dance*. She also introduced me to a tune that's been an important part of my life ever since--*Bells of St. Mary's*. It was the whole experience of meeting Mother Maybelle and her playing of this tune in particular that convinced me that I **had** to play the autoharp.

Getting a good autoharp in England in the '60s wasn't easy. But, I knew that I could find a new musical direction with this instrument although, as I recall, I didn't know at that time how the instrument actually worked. I could play a little guitar and mandolin, but knew that I wasn't going to shake the world on

either instrument. I was in college training to be a teacher at the time of the meeting with Mother Maybelle. Several weeks later, home in the northern town of Middlesbrough, I ventured 'round the music shops in the area looking for an autoharp. In Hamilton's Music Store (December 1968), I found a black German autoharp. It was known as the "Rosen" on account of the rose transfer on the black body behind the strings. It cost me the equivalent of about twenty five American dollars, and came in a cardboard box with a hopeless little manual and a steel thumb pick guaranteed to shear off the end of one's thumb during playing! It had 12 chords and played in the keys of C, D and G. As I had a good ear and a little knowledge of the piano keyboard, it didn't take me long to tune it and right from the start employ a pinch style and effect *Gold Watch and Chain* in the manner I'd heard Mike Seeger play it.

I remember that it took me a little while to figure out the technique of melody chording, so I must've sounded a bit rough at that stage! Of course, this was way before the advent of diatonic tunings, re-arranging chord bars, and cutting one's own felts. As I recall, the only modification I ever made in those early days was as a result of deciding that I didn't like the rose transfer on the soundboard. There is a photo of me in existence showing me playing the 'harp at the college folk club with a photo of the Carter Family stuck over the rose!

The Rosens were curious autoharps in that the chord bar arrangement was quite strange. The C chord was miles away from the F, and it never occurred to me to alter it. The construction was quite primitive, with the bar holders nailed on and the bar action high and noisy. I guess I just didn't know enough about music at that time to attempt any modifications to the instrument. It wasn't until two decades later, with the opening up of the Eastern Bloc, that I began to understand more about why German autoharps were so basic. With the Communists coming to power in 1950, and eventual nationalisation, contact with the West was outlawed. So, the autoharps produced in East Germany simply stood still. Even in the late '80s, the German Musima 'harps were still being produced with the same basic design of the old Rosens. They had 12 chords in a silly arrangement and, although they graduated to plastic chord bar covers and put a guard over the string end pins, they still found their way into British music shops in a cardboard box--still with the lethal thumb pick and the prehistoric instruction manual.

During Christmas 1969, I made some recordings using that first 'harp with my partner, Mike Preston, an old-time country and bluegrass enthusiast whom I met whilst in college. One of those cuts survives on the double-album set I made for Heritage Records that was released in 1989. *Galax International* was a collection of recordings featuring international musicians who had visited the Galax Old Fiddler's Convention in Virginia (HCR 067). On it you can hear me supporting Mike Preston, playing pinch style autoharp with swooping flourishes across the strings on *When the Band Is Playing Dixie*. It is a real vault master if ever there was one!

That early 'harp quickly began to be a source of frustration to me as I improved my technique. The Rosen autoharps were designed for lap playing, with more room down at the bridge end. But, at this stage, I knew little of the history and had only seen Mother Maybelle and Mike Seeger play, both in the upright position. Therefore, this is what I did, although there exists a photo which shows me playing 'semi-upright' but below the chord bars. It was less than comfortable in the 'cuddle' style, but I just had to be like Mike and Maybelle. Early problems were encountered when I wanted to learn *Victory Rag* and found, to my chagrin, that no key on the instrument would provide me with a 1117 chord. The Rosens had no g# and d#, as well as no Bb, so even if I'd known how to make an E7 chord, the necessary g# was missing.

On my first trip to the U.S.A. in 1972, I traded that 'harp in, giving it and twenty five dollars for my first Oscar Schmidt instrument. It was a 15-chord Silvertone, and I remember how great was my delight that I could now play *Victory Rag*. I made a lot of friends on that trip, contacts which have continued to this day. Also, I made some treasured recordings at Maces Springs with Sara and Janette Carter. It was on this trip that I first met Kilby Snow, and the great thing was I didn't have to go looking for him. The local paper had run a story about my being there, and Kilby hunted me down! When I heard him play *Yakety Sax*, the old Boots Randolph tune, I knew then that there was much more music to come from the autoharp, and that I just had to be part of the process. Now, twenty years on from that meeting in Independence, Virginia, how true was that observation. I just wish Kilby had lived long enough to see the autoharp movement now. I recorded Kilby, too, and have a tape of the two of us playing the *Star Spangled Banner*. I remember him grinning and telling me that he would not compete at Galax that year so as to give me a chance to win.

Back then, there was no specific contest for autoharp, and autoharp players had to take their chances in the Folk Song category. The early 1980s were memorable for the autoharp, beginning with the birth of Becky Blackley's *Autoharpoholic* magazine, Drew Smith's being responsible for the initiation of a separate contest for autoharp at Galax, and the International Autoharp Competition at the Walnut Valley Festival in 1981. But, getting back to the contest in 1972, I came away with a fourth prize ribbon in the folk song category. I recall meeting two others at Galax that year with autoharps--Richard Badu from New Jersey, and Betty Waldron from nearby Copper Hill, Virginia. Betty, who has since become a good friend, is still part of the autoharp community today, and undoubtedly one of the finest singers with the instrument anywhere in America.

During the remainder of the 1970s, I worked on developing my career as a teacher, making further visits to the U.S.A. whenever I could afford it. I continued to play a smooth melodic style on the autoharp--mostly old-time country songs and tunes (predominantly Carter Family) and tried to play faster pieces, such as some of the fiddle tunes I'd learned at Galax. I found that, when I played tunes like *Liberty* and *Cripple Creek*, the physical nature of the 'harp just would not allow me to reproduce fast pieces effectively. I couldn't pinch rapidly enough and couldn't change chord bars fast enough, and the results were messy. It was to be some years before I was to experiment with diatonic tunings and thumb-lead styles which began to open up the new frontiers. Writing in the *Folk Review* magazine in June of 1978, I expressed the following opinion:

'..the autoharp requires playing at a smooth sedate pace to bring the best out of it, rather than at speed...where the music is primarily directed towards featuring the instrument it can really come into its own...filling in the background or sharing breaks with a guitar, as in the New Lost City Ramblers' renditions of Carter Family songs...the bluegrass genre, with its emphasis on slick improvised playing, often at high speed, is not totally suitable for the autoharp. It is difficult for the autoharp to compete with the volume of sound in a normal bluegrass situation, unless special provision for it is made...'

During the period 1977-1981, being busy with my career, I was financially unable to visit the U.S.A. For a time, I taught school in the dockland of Southampton, at St. Mary's Primary School. This was very close to St. Mary's Church, which contained the bells immortalised in the *Bells of St. Mary's*--the very tune with which Mother Maybelle had converted me to the autoharp in 1968. The song was apparently penned by an American serviceman during World War I. As the story goes, he was inspired by hearing the bells as his ship came into port along Southampton Water. During this time, the tune came to be very important to me, and it duly was included on my first album for Heritage in 1985.

As the '80s dawned, it became obvious to me that there were things happening in America with 'my' instrument. Letters from friends in Galax informed me of the introduction of an autoharp contest to the fiddler's convention there. And, I'd bought an album in a London folk music shop by a guy called **Bryan Bowers**. Listening to the record, I was struck by the fullness of the sound he achieved, and wondered why my autoharp didn't sound like that? (Didn't we all? **ER**) I was, of course, hearing a single-key diatonic autoharp for the first time. I returned to the states in August of 1982, after a five-year absence, determined to win the autoharp contest at Galax; however, once there, I found I had more work to do than I had imagined! I met Drew Smith and Marty Schuman, guys who remain great friends to this day.

I also became aware of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine, and quickly realised that things had moved on since my previous trip. I didn't even place in the contest, and was thus stung into action. I returned home to England armed with a great deal of new information, and also now realising that electronic tuning was bringing in autoharp players from the cold. Now, one could go to a festival and jam--and, thanks to the lead given by Bryan Bowers, I felt like really admitting that the autoharp was my main instrument. If you read *The Autoharpoholic* and *Autoharp Quarterly*, I guess you know most of the rest of my story--1982 certainly was a turning point for me.

Two other major turning points occurred in 1984. That year, after winning the Galax title for the first time, I cut my debut album at Heritage Records. Working with me were Bobby Patterson, James Lindsey and Willard Gayheart--friends who have given me great musical support and friendship over the years. The arrival of this album convinced me that I should be doing more with my life and more with my autoharp. I knew that I had to find a way to make a living with

music. By this time, I was, experiencing many personal difficulties, and I had become a school principal (headteacher in England). Although, at times, I felt that I did the job very well, I returned from that '84 trip with my heart no longer in the job.

If I could play the autoharp so well and if I was getting all of this recognition Stateside, then I had to be able to make my music pay. But how? It was a big step to take. Teaching had security if nothing else. But, even for a headteacher, it was a very poorly-paying job. Teachers in England earn far, far less than their American counterparts. The answer came to me later that fall when a classical guitar player came and did a concert in my school. I found myself watching him and thinking that I could do that with my autoharp. Thus a new career was born--autoharp concerts for school children! Early trial runs went so well that I duly resigned my post and spent the last few months in my school arranging bookings for my new program. Even as I was doing so, there was a new development taking place. Teachers in England, realising that the autoharp was fairly easy to play in a basic way, saw its potential for themselves and the children. Many would come to me after a concert and say 'It's a shame the children can't have a go'. From those early reactions, my **Autoharp Workshop Day** was born, whereby the children could have a priceless hands-on experience--as well as a fun concert. I'd performed my first concert with two autoharps, a guitar and a blackboard. With the help of my wife, Tric, an understanding bank manager, and an Oscar Schmidt consultancy, I was able to begin expanding the stock. Today, I tour some 175 schools a year with nearly 50 autoharps. In addition to the student 'harps, I carry many hand-crafted and antique autoharps, a variety of other instruments, pictures and other display materials.

The program received a great boost from my Winfield win in 1987. It's so successful now that I am booked up to two years in advance. And, I am able to travel to the U.S.A. to be with the music and the friends that I love more or less whenever I choose. I visit schools in America too. Of course, I can't carry all my workshop stock, so I present a slightly different program there. I do a concert with whatever instruments I have along, and then present a slide show of the British Isles. These are very popular because, if you're a ten year old in an Appalachian Mountain school, or in the middle of a Kansas prairie, it blows your mind to see a slide of traffic driving on the left side of the road, with a commentary in an English accent!

My school program is extremely fully-booked throughout England and Scotland. At the time of this writing, in early 1992, there is a full diary of 170+ schools for 1992 and nearly 100 already for 1993. A typical week on the road can begin with a start on a Monday morning as early as 3:30 A.M. That is followed by up to a four-hour drive to ensure I am on site in a school by 7:45 A.M. Then, I set up a large display of autoharps and other instruments, words, pictures etc. in the school hall. This display has a strong visual impact which sets the tone for the day--capturing the immediate attention of both students and teachers. Primary

schools are accustomed to attractive displays in their classrooms, so it's important to give care and attention to the organisation and layout of this feature.

My thirty two workshop 'harps are color-coded for easy recognition by the children. This is especially important when working with non-readers or Special Education groups. As for my concert harps, there are a variety of them. I have an Oscar Schmidt Wildwood Flower model tuned to F diatonic, a Centurion in Bb, a converted Festival in C#, an old Silvertone in pentatonic G, and my notorious 'clawtoharp'. My three chromatic instruments include a Japanese Centurion 21-chord, a Keith Young, and a harp made by George Orthey. Among the antiques are two Zimmermann's from the 1880s, and some 1890s German 'monsters'. (The history of German autoharp production is deserving of serious research and study, and this may indeed become easier with the collapse of the Communist bloc.)

A typical school day begins with a concert, usually for the whole school. I will first play some 'listening tunes'. Then, two children are taught to play a tune (usually beating with a tablespoon) right there in front of the audience. I draw the audience into the demonstration with plenty of clapping and singing along. Then, the youngsters will be introduced to the jaw harp, mouthbow and limberjack in order to fire up their anticipation of the workshops sessions in which they will be playing the autoharps. Popular songs in this introductory period are *International Brother John* (a multi-language version of *Frere Jacques*), *Apples and Bananas*, *Baby Gorilla*, *Bounce Kangaroo Bounce* etc. Among the children's favourite listening songs are *Endearing Young Charms* and *Irish Washerwoman*. These titles may be heard on my recording of children's songs *Kangaroos and Pussycats* (Heritage HCR 1219).

Throughout the day, the youngsters come in groups varying in size from around 20 to 70 to have a 'hands on'. They work in pairs and, with one pressing color-coded chord bar buttons and the other beating the strings with a teaspoon, they produce instant and attractive music. We experiment with rhythms, try out the three-button stop technique, and they learn to play along with my jaw harp. (I use only Whitlow jaw harps, tuned to standard pitch. Hence, if I play in G, the children can play chords which harmonise with it. Chords which are especially effective are G, C and Em.) By wearing coloured socks on my wrists and signaling the appropriate arm to the children, we can play and sing together on such fun things as *What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?* (now *Grumpy Teacher* in England) and *Clementine*. The students are encouraged to look at how the instrument works and to remember its appearance in case their teacher later asks them to draw it. The session usually ends with some questions around the display. At this time, great interest is usually shown in my harmonicas, five-string banjo and guitaro. There will ordinarily be a workshop for the teachers, either during the lunch break or after school. The day concludes with another concert for the whole school, in which I will give a Pop Stoneman demonstration by playing a 'harp flat on its case with a mouth harp on a rack around my neck. Teachers in England are beginning to see the value of the autoharp for schools, especially now that the cheaply-

made German autoharps appear to be a thing of the past and the Oscar Schmidt models are now easy to obtain in England (mainly through me). I will reach my 1,000th school visit sometime in 1993.

My schedule for 1992 and 1993 is pretty well sorted out. I will be making visits to the U.S.A this year at Easter to visit with the Ortheys in Newport, Pennsylvania to collect some new diatonic 'harps, and also to finish an album; then, in August, to make an appearance at the A.P. Carter Memorial Festival, and the Autoharp Jamboree in Mountain View, Arkansas. The people in Mountain View have given me a lot of encouragement along the way, and I always look forward to being with them again. I also love the sound system in the auditorium at the Ozark Folk Center!

I am currently working on four new albums--a Christmas children's recording, a Harvest tape (also for schools), another children's collection, and a recording of some of my favourite tunes and songs for the autoharp. This last project is my main priority, and I hope to see it released by June of this year. I have tried to present a great variety of music on this tape, and it will include some string band music, blues, classical, and Irish melodies. Titles of the cuts are *The Water Is Wide*, *Dipper Of Stars*, *Largo* (from The New World Symphony), *Planxty Fanny Powers*, *Jesu Joy Of Man's Desiring*, *Jamboree Medley* (fiddle tunes) and *Fife and A' The Lands About It*.

I'll not be at Winfield this year, but hope to be there again in 1993."

Available recordings by Mike Fenton are *My Privilege*_(Heritage 053), *Galax International* (Heritage HCR 067), *Kangaroos and Pussycats* (Heritage 1219) and *Welcome to Galax* (with the Bill Sky Family) - Heritage HCR 078. Mike may also be heard on Volumes 1 and 2 of the *Winfield Winners! Autoharp* series.

When the history of autoharp music is written, Mike Fenton is certain to be well-represented. **ER**