

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - May 1993 - Mike Herr**

One of several reasons that I return to the Augusta Heritage Workshops in Elkins, West Virginia year after year, like a swallow to Capistrano, is for the reunion with the hundreds of friends that I have accumulated while there. Most certainly occupying a prominent place among them is Mike Herr. If my memory serves me correctly, we first met in 1986, but it was an incident that happened the following summer that I shall never forget. As part of the Intermediate/Advanced Autoharp Class, Ivan Stiles taught a session on MARCHES, which included his arrangements of *American Patrol* and *The Washington Post March*. At the student showcase the very next afternoon, Mike and another student (Eileen Durlacher) amazed us all by competently playing the latter-mentioned march. Needless to say, I was none too anxious to follow that act with my feeble rendition of *You Are My Flower*.

Over the ensuing years, I have joyfully watched Mike's musicianship continue to develop. I applaud his success with the Irish band *Lost In The Woods*, and I have thoroughly enjoyed reading his contributions to *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. Mike reviews recordings for that publication, as well as writing occasional features such as the two-part article, *How to Play in an Irish Band*. He was also their instructor for the January 1992 Interaction Lesson, teaching the tune *Kesh Jig*. Mike is always a top contender at autoharp competitions, having been a finalist at Winfield among other such accomplishments. He and his wife, Donnie, are avid folk dancers and participate in dance-related functions throughout West Virginia.

With due respect to all of the above, I think I admire this man most because he is a good person. Mike Herr greets everyone with a smile, and extends his hand in sincere friendship to all camps of the autoharp community. He is patient with less-experienced players, and never fails to offer words of encouragement to beginners. I feel fortunate to call Mike my friend, and am extremely pleased to be able to dedicate this issue to him. What follows is Mike's account of the part that music, and the autoharp, have played in his life. **ER**

"I grew up in southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in a Mennonite home in the small town of Quarryville...right in the middle of Amish Country. My earliest memories of music consisted of

a capella singing in church. In fact, both Mennonite churches I attended through high school had only a capella choral singing, as no 'worldly' instruments were allowed. But the public grade school got me hooked into the world of flutophones, clarinets and violas, which I played for one year, three months, and three years, respectively. I also took the ever-present piano lessons for seven years, from age seven to fourteen, until my teacher passed on. I'm not certain if it was from cancer or from us insolent, recalcitrant students? During my childhood piano experience, I have vivid memories of not only hating to have to practice, but also of times of losing myself in the music and realizing forty-five minutes to an hour later that my thirty-minute practice was indeed over. It is this memory of myself totally wrapped up in the music and losing myself that I would come back to much later, and that would help me get over the insecurities regarding musicianship that would plague me for several decades.

You see, I have an older brother who was a virtuoso violinist. He was a member of the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra at the age of thirteen, and I was barely limping along in the county public

orchestra on the viola. He could also play circles around me on the piano and thus, adolescent sibling competitiveness being what it is, I gave up music after high school in the performance sense, choosing only to listen and enjoy with my ears.

Up to this time, in regard to the greater world of music, my exposures consisted only of classical music, Mennonite hymn singing, and minimal folk music. My parents gradually became less strict as we children eventually disobeyed more and more and bought transistor radios and the then-popular 45 rpm records. I really didn't know who Elvis was until the late 1960s, and didn't even like his music. I was much more into the bubble gum, avant-garde rock music scene by my late teens. I still sang in the church choir, however, through high school and we would go to the huge Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania either at Easter or Christmas to sing for the more than eight hundred prisoners. One performance was even witnessed by, of all people, Jimmy Hoffa, who was spotted in the back row by several alert members of the choir.

My college years were spent mostly with my nose to the grindstone, as well as learning to adapt to becoming a husband and a father. Yes, I married young, at 18, to Donita Schertz from the farm country of Illinois, and have remained married to my 'honey' ever since. The only highlight musically during college was an event at Goshen College known as the Hymn Sing. Some of the chapel services consisted only of singing hymns, a capella of course, and the feeling and sound of those mornings was always wonderful and uplifting. One song in particular, #606 in the new Mennonite hymnal, *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow*, was always so grand and energetic that my brothers, sisters, wife, parents and in-laws who attended Goshen still always sing it together when we congregate at vacation or Christmas. It's akin to the *Hallelujah Chorus* in spirit.

After college came medical school and post-graduate training, which I did in the Philadelphia area. My music consisted only of beating on little bongo drums while others played. When we decided to move to West Virginia, I happened upon my Mom's autoharp, an early 1960s Oscar Schmidt Appalachian model. I thought, hmm, I'm going to the coalfields, maybe there will be some mountain music or something and I could learn to play this thing. I have no concrete memory of ever hearing my mother play it, nor of having heard one being played in grade school. It just looked like it had a lot of strings and ought to sound neat.

Upon our arrival in Beckley, the autoharp spent the better part of three years in its box, although I did take it out a couple of times, tune it to the piano as best I could, and try to play something. The real kick in the pants came, however, when a friend told me about the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops at Davis & Elkins College. Doug Yarrow was doing photography for Augusta then, and talked me into attending the first week of autoharp class that was offered there in July of 1983. Our instructors were David Morris and Bryan Bowers, neither of whom had I ever heard of prior to that. I hit it off with both of them during that week, and the subsequent workshop a year later. They became good friends with whom I've maintained long-distance relationships ever since.

So much of my basic knowledge of the harp was laid down in those first two workshops that I'll always be indebted to David and Bryan. The first really magical moment came when Bryan

played a tune for me with my ear pressed against the edge of his harp. I remember the light going on in my head and having the desire to replicate the experience myself.

After skipping a year at Augusta, I returned in 1986 to find Becky Blackley organizing and managing the autoharp class. Alan Mager and I roomed together that year and another friendship was begun. Among other autoharp buddies who have come out of the Augusta experience are Helen Miller, Tom Fladmark, Woody (Mike) Naas, Eileen Roys, Kathy Ferguson, Ivan Stiles, Charles Whitmer, Eileen Durlacher, Mary Lou Orthey, Mary Ann Johnston, Paul Peter, Vera Gamble, Martha Kiker, Dot Stiles, Carole Outwater, Susan Francis, Jerry Kandies and Tom Schroeder...in no particular order.

So what about my playing, you're probably thinking. I've enjoyed learning complicated tunes like Beethoven's *Minuet in G*, Sousa's *Washington Post March* and Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*. But, when Ivan Stiles got to teaching *Speed the Plough*, *Tennpenny Bit*, *Swallowtail Jig* and other reels and jigs, something clicked in me, and I had found something which tickled my fancy. Irish music touched a long dormant interest, that of classical music of composers such as Bach, Vivaldi, et cetera. Having never pursued classical music in the shadow of my prodigy brother, I finally found something that was challenging, but not impossible to play. It sounded pretty and sad, alternately, seemed to be a niche not well explored in the autoharp world and, best of all, it was something of which my brother knew nothing! Ha!

As I listened to more and more Irish music and talked to Irish musicians and friends who had attended music house parties in Ireland, I realized that melody is everything in the authentic Irish tradition. There is a minimum of harmony playing and a relative lack of extras beside the basic tune. There is also a tradition of not taking a 'break', as the tunes are not structured like bluegrass tunes. The purpose of a group playing Irish music is to have one whole sound of the melody. What this meant to me as I listened and learned is that my melody picking had to be exceedingly clean. So I stripped down my picking to get rid of all rhythm strums, all thumb plucks and as much as I could to keep the melody from sounding 'muddy.' Then, it was just a matter of practice.

Along the way, I've been particularly entranced by many of the tunes of Turlough O'Carolan, which do lend themselves to tasteful harmony and beautification. As a result, embellishments, open chording and the like found their way back into my style. It also makes a difference whether or not I'm playing solo, or with others. A couple of years ago, I started jamming with a group of folks known as the Oak Hill Ceili Band. As I improved and was able to contribute to the group and not just keep up, I was asked to join. What a thrill for me! After the band underwent an evolution and two members left, we renamed ourselves Lost In The Woods, after the habitat of one of our members who lives way up in the mountains here in southern West Virginia.

We play Irish dance tunes, jigs, reels, hornpipes, slip-jigs etc. But, we do not play the bar room drinking songs nor the patriotic Orange or Green songs of old Ireland. Playing with these musicians has provided some of my most memorable experiences and fun times.

Some time ago, the Winfield, Kansas music festival and contest was mentioned to me, and I ended up there three years ago to try my luck. I didn't have much, but I was hooked on the festival and made it back in 1991. I was fortunate enough to get into the finals in the autoharp

competition, which remains one of the biggest thrills of my life. The whole Walnut Valley Festival is so incredibly fun that I'll probably make the extended trip every two or three years. The Orthey event has also been a key item every summer for the last five or six years for me. With so many good friends there, I plan to continue supporting the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering as best I can.

Lastly, future musical endeavors center around playing with my wife, Donnie, who has picked up the hammered dulcimer in record speed. I also plan to continue playing with Lost In The Woods, playing folk and blues with my friend Don Steck, and developing my own talents like thumb lead, arrangement etc. I've been reworking harps along the way and, now that the keys of G, D, A, and E are well represented, I think Scottish strathspeys in the key of Eb are calling me.

A self-titled cassette entitled *Lost in the Woods* features the traditional dance music of Ireland. There are fourteen cuts on the all-instrumental recording featuring fiddle, whistle, mandolin, concertina, banjo and bouzouki in addition to Mike's autoharp and percussion. Tunes include several medleys such as *Ladie O'Beirne's/Hunter's House* and *Kesh Jig/ Merrily Kissed the Quaker's Wife*. Among the other offerings are *Friar's Britches*, *Miss McLeod's/Wissahickon Drive*, *Old Copperplate/Master Crowley's*, *O'Carolan's Concerto*, and *O'Carolan's Welcome/Belknap's*. Fans of Irish music may want to add this tape to their music libraries

#### **August 2008 Update from Mike:**

In 1994 I decided to go back to Winfield and was fortunate enough to come in second in the contest, with the great Ron Wall taking top honors that year. When he chose the winner's harp he took the Fladmark which was available and this meant that I could take the beautiful dark walnut Orthey F-C harp with the Winfield logo - not a bad consolation prize for second place! I still treasure and use that harp to this day.

Along the way I continued to play more and more duets with Carlos Plumley (fiddle, mandolin) in WV and we eventually recorded two CD's during the 90's - Gander in the Pratie Hole and Hawthorn. These are compilations of Celtic instrumental music and include a fair number of contemporary tunes from the wonderful Northwest fiddler Vivian Williams. The supply of these CD's is dwindling fast, although there is still a large number of cassettes available, if anyone uses that format. Contact info will appear at the end of this column. Also during this time I continued practicing and preparing for contests, and in 1998 I was able to break through the "harmonic ceiling" to win both the National Autoharp Championship at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering and the Walnut Valley International Autoharp Championship at Winfield, Kansas. The only other person to have done this in the same year before this was Lucille Reilly. I felt honored to be in such esteemed company.

During 2001 our daughter and her family moved from WV to Hartford, CT and, as we had helped raise the two grandsons to that point, my wife Donnie and I decided to pull up stakes and follow them to the northeast. We had all the arrangements made for our move in late September when the big Tragedy of 9/11 occurred. Imagine our fear of moving from the safe, secluded hills of West Virginia up to the hotbed of the metropolis of the northeastern seaboard! But our family awaited us and we've been fine.

In 2004 I again decided to compete in the Mountain Laurel contest and was fortunate to take the top prize again...which was very satisfying and fulfilling. I have not felt any urge to compete again and I also joined the Board of the MLAG in the summer of 2007, so I'm ineligible to do so anyway.

I've continued to contribute to the Autoharp Quarterly by doing an occasional CD review but also by writing a regular column called Jam 'n Bare Bones. My thrust in this column is to take commonly-played tunes from autoharp jams and present them in such a way that beginners and intermediate players alike will be able to contribute. The aim is to encourage melody playing so that the less-accomplished player doesn't feel as if they need to sit in the back of the jam and just struggle with finding the right chords. I also record the tunes from the magazine in MP3 format and send them to Mary Ann Johnston who puts them online at the AQ website.

As far as musical endeavors occurring now, I'm fortunate to live a short distance from John and Heidi Cerrigione and we've been able to get together occasionally with Glenn "Scotty" Scott to enjoy each others' company and play tunes together. We have played on several occasions as the band "The Harpbreakers" and we now have two performances coming up locally within the next two months. Anyone in the Connecticut/Massachusetts area wanting info can email me privately. And lastly, an exciting period of recording is coming up soon in which Scotty on many instruments, Jill Smith on keyboard , Amy Basse on fiddle and me on autoharps will work toward releasing a CD or two within the next several months. Stay tuned!

You can contact me at <mikeherr@comcast.net> and my address is 39 Webster Hill Blvd, West Hartford, CT 06107. Home phone is 860-561-1556. The old *Lost in the Woods* cassettes are not available at this point but I am willing to send out the other two CD's mentioned above. **MH**