

Autoharp Clearinghouse – March 1996 – Mike Seeger

Whether as a performer, archivist or revivalist, **Mike Seeger** needs little introduction. One could accurately say that he was literally born into the world of music. With parents who were themselves celebrated musicologists/composers, Mike grew up in a household that was filled with both vocal and instrumental music. By the age of five, he was singing the lengthy old ballad *Barbara Allen* from memory. His music education was furthered by countless hours of listening to his parents' collection of early Library of Congress documentary recordings, along with those of his brother Pete. Mike recalls that there was always a piano, guitar, dulcimer and autoharp around the house, which he and his siblings were encouraged to play.

When he was right around ten years old, Mike “took up” the autoharp, having learned it from his mother. As a music instructor, she used the instrument in schools whenever she didn't have access to a piano.

In those days, with no one other than the Original Carter Family to emulate, all they knew to do was more or less keep rhythm on the instrument by making chords and strumming. After a while, Mike became somewhat disillusioned with what he thought to be the limitations of the autoharp. Also, because he was beginning to play a lot of bluegrass, a musical genre where our instrument has always been somewhat under-appreciated, Mike decided that he would rather play fiddle or banjo.

Then, around 1956 or '57, Mike encountered Ernest V. (Pop) Stoneman at a talent contest or fiddlers' convention near Glen Burnie, Maryland. Mike remembers that Pop had his autoharp amplified so that he might make himself heard over both his large brood of onstage children and their louder bluegrass/country-type instruments. After the Stonemans had finished their contest set, Pop played some autoharp pieces for Mike.

During the discussion that followed, Pop told Mike about Kilby Snow who was, as we all know, another of the true pioneers of the autoharp. Mike tracked Kilby down and, to this day, credits him with having been a substantial influence on his own approach to playing the 'harp. (If it weren't for the efforts of Mike Seeger, chances are that Kilby's notoriety might not have expanded much beyond his home region.) But, since both Pop and Kilby played down at the butt end of the instrument below the chord bars, that is what Mike continued to do. So, although Mike's interest in the instrument had been renewed, it was still somewhat lukewarm until...

Mike attended a Grand Ole Opry performance in 1957 and not only heard Mother Maybelle Carter play melodies on the autoharp, but also observed her holding the instrument upright in what has since become known as the Appalachian Style. Mike considers that experience as having been a major revelation to him and, from then on, has almost always held his 'harp up against his chest and played above the bars. Before going to the Opry, Mike heard Maybelle's autoharp on the Wilburn Brothers country music rendering of *Go 'Way with Me*, and attributes importance to that recording. The first melodic numbers he heard Maybelle play were *San Antonio Rose* and the fiddle tune *Liberty*. Prior to that, he had listened to some of the recordings, with autoharp, that she had done with her daughters Helen, Anita and June but, of course, had

not been able to ascertain from a recorded source just how Maybelle had produced what was to become her trademark sound.

One of the first songs on which Mike was to play autoharp lead was, in fact, the Carter Family favorite *Sailor on the Deep Blue Sea*. Considering himself to be a vocalist first and instrumentalist second, Mike began to use the autoharp to accompany himself while singing ballads and other traditional songs. Later, he was also experimenting with playing tunes usually associated with the guitar, such as *Victory Rag*, on the autoharp. In Mike's estimation, his style was closer to Maybelle's in terms of backing up his voice, with a good measure of Kilby's drag notes and back slurs eventually finding their way into his instrumental breaks. Throughout it all, though, Mike has maintained what he calls "his own touch" on the autoharp. As an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, Mike is quick to say that he has never really applied himself solely to the autoharp in the manner of someone who focuses primarily on that instrument--such as Bryan Bowers or Ron Wall.

As most of us know, Mike was one of the founding members of the near-legendary group, the **New Lost City Ramblers**. He incorporated the 'harp into most of their performances and recordings, and the instrument received a lot of exposure as a result. During those early years, Mike played one of the black 15-bar Oscar Schmidt Autoharps. Along the way, around 1970 or so, he also had an Appalachian model and a ChromAharp. Mike says that his biggest challenge was in trying to keep them in tune. This was long before everyone had a tuner in his or her instrument case--and, to quote Mike directly--"Life before electronic tuners was discordant." Musicians had to rely on tuning to pianos, should they be fortunate enough to find one in tune, or to pitch pipes or harmonicas.

Mike modified his factory-made instruments somewhat by moving the chord bar assembly down in such a way as to allow for better access to the treble strings. He also fashioned a resonator of sorts from a piece of plywood which he attached to the back of one of his 'harps to keep it from being against his body while he was playing. Additionally, he would add D, A and E Major chords to those instruments which lacked them, and rearrange the bars so he would have a uniform configuration for all of the keys in which he played.

For a while during the sixties, Mike was a consultant to the Oscar Schmidt Company, and some of his ideas were incorporated into the original A-Model Appalachian Autoharps. He says that he was always trying to convince them, or anyone else who would listen, to take autoharp building to a higher level and produce a better instrument.

Mike's first custom-built 'harp was made for him by Tom Morgan, a well-known musician and luthier who was living, at that time, in Washington, DC (Tom now resides in Dayton, TN). For those of you unfamiliar with the Morgan autoharps, they feature an arched spruce top with "F" sound holes. The back is made from Brazilian rosewood that Tom acquired from the Martin Guitar Company. The instrument is trimmed out with a herringbone binding. Since Tom is no longer making autoharps, Mike is fortunate to count himself among a very small circle of musicians who own Morgan 'harps.

Early in the 1970s, Mike met luthier Bob Welland near Chicago. Bob was just getting started building autoharps, and Mike had him construct one for him. The resulting instrument has remained one of Mike's favorites over the years, as he has it set up and tuned in such a way as to favor particular melodies.

Mike also has an Orthey "wide body" diatonic 'harp that plays in the keys of F and C. That instrument has doubled strings in the upper register for a total of forty-two. Its sound board is cherry, with spruce on the back. Those additional strings at the top of the 'harp provide better tone in an area where the sound on an autoharp is often very thin.

After experimenting with various brands and compositions, Mike found that he prefers the sound and feel of Dunlop brass finger picks of the .0225 gauge. He says they "stay put" better than others he has tried, and provide a nicer tone. On his thumb, he wears a clear plastic Dobro pick which he says, if you should drop it, is usually found under your foot! Mike tends to round off the point on his thumb picks with sandpaper in order to get a sound that is more pleasing to him. He feels as though there is no limit to the possibilities in terms of pick design, and expressed an interest in picks that would allow a player to strum in both directions--as Mike believes both Pop Stoneman and Kilby Snow did.

Volumes could be written about Mike Seeger, his accomplishments, and his contributions to the field of traditional music. He has a true appreciation of yesterday's artists, and has traveled far and wide to produce more than twenty-five field recordings and documentary films. Among them were the highly-acclaimed *Old Time Country Songs and Tunes Played on the Autoharp* (Kilby Snow), *Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp* (Ernest Stoneman, Kilby Snow, Neriah and Kenneth Benfield) and a film presenting Kilby Snow and his music, which will be available in about a year on Vertapol. *Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp* is to be re-released in 1997 with a lot of new material included. For the first time, it will be available on compact disc.

Mike has been honored with three Grammy nominations; most recently for *Solo: Oldtime Country Music* in 1991 and *Third Annual Farewell Reunion* in 1994. In 1995, he received the Rex Foundation's Ralph J. Gleason Lifetime Achievement Award. Mike has also been inducted into the Autoharp Hall Of Fame. He has recorded nearly forty albums, both as a solo artist and with the Ramblers and others--as well as organizing countless tours and concerts featuring traditional musicians and dancers.

Anyone who has been privileged to see Mike in concert, to participate in one of his workshops at the Augusta Heritage Center or elsewhere, or even to merely listen to his recorded works will agree that the songs and tunes that this man sings and plays are well-rendered memorials to the days and ways of life long gone. At the same time, Mike gives new life to old-time music as he serves up each tune to its fullest. Mike Seeger is, in no uncertain terms, a preservationist and a musician of the highest order. It is with sincere admiration and respect that this issue is dedicated in his honor. **ER**

To obtain a listing of available recordings by Mike Seeger, contact: Rounder Records, One Camp Street, Cambridge, MA 02140 - (617) 661-6308.

For further reading, I direct you to:

The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp, Vol. 1 - View From The Top - Mike Seeger by Becky Blackley - pp 38-42. Published by i.a.d. Publications, P.O. Box 504, Brisbane, CA 94005. Available from Elderly Instruments - (517) 372-7890.

Autoharp Quarterly - April 1990 - *Reflections Of Mike Seeger* by Alan Mager -pp 2-5. P.O. Box A, Newport, PA 17074.

Banjo Newsletter - Interview with Mike Seeger in February 1980 issue, and article about banjo made for Mike Seeger by Clark Prouty in April 1993 issue. P.O. Box 3418, Annapolis, MD 21403 - (800) 759-PICK.

2008 Reminder: Please keep in mind that the above article was first published twelve years ago. Addresses and phone numbers may no longer apply.