

Autoharp Clearinghouse - December 1994/January 1995 - Neal Walters

Neal Walters' contributions to traditional music are many, and include membership in the very popular Mill Run Dulcimer Band, the authorship of articles, reviews and arrangements of tunes for Notes-a-la-Mode and other music trade journals, writing songs, and presiding over stringed instrument classes and workshops in northern Virginia and elsewhere. Although most would agree that Neal is among the truly gifted, he does not consider himself to have been "a natural." During a Sunday visit here at Royaleen Farm, Neal shared his back ground, current status and musical outlook. In behalf of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, I take extreme pleasure in dedicating this issue to him.

Neal's paternal ancestors emigrated from Germany and settled in Minnesota during the first part of the nineteenth century. On his mother's side, the roots were in Missouri and Oklahoma. Although Neal was born in "The Land of 10,000 Lakes," his parents relocated to the west coast when he was six months old, and Neal grew up in San Diego County, California.

In respect to his music, Neal can attribute it only to the fact that his Dad had played the tuba while in high school. He recalls no other musicians in either branch of his family. The first instrument that Neal learned was the baritone horn, which he played from fourth grade through college. He especially liked that horn because it "always got a good part on the Sousa marches." Neal was often called upon to be a soloist and, by the time he entered high school, was also learning tuba, trumpet and trombone, and had ventured into jazz. So, even though it wasn't in the folk or traditional genres, music has always been an important part of Neal's life.

Although he didn't, for all practical purposes, undertake the playing of stringed instruments until adulthood, Neal had been exposed to them by way of country dances during his teen years. When the weather conditions were favorable, he could pick up a country radio station from Albuquerque. This was during the period in time when rockabilly artists like Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis were emerging onto the record charts. Consequently, Neal had an appreciation for that type of music although it never really "came home to him" until later. He remembers picking up a ukelele while in high school and trying to play the Dixieland and jazz pieces with which he was familiar.

Neal joined the U.S. Air Force in 1962, and was "shipped" to New Haven, Connecticut to a language school. He didn't take his horns along because, like most school band instruments, they do not provide much enjoyment to either the musician or his neighbors when played in a solitary context. Not long after his arrival in New England, Neal was struck with the idea that maybe he could learn to play a guitar? As luck would have it, a fellow airman had one which he was willing to sell to Neal for a nominal fee. That purchase was followed by the acquisition of several Kingston Trio-type songbooks, and many hours of practice.

After he had been working at the guitar for a year or so, Neal found himself in Los Angeles living on campus at the University of Southern California. While there, he and his wife, Coleen, ran across a couple of girls that she had known in school. They had formed a folk duo known as Kathy and Carol, and played Appalachian music as well as old English folk songs. Kathy

(Larisch) had an autoharp, and Neal believes it to be the first one that he had ever seen or knowingly heard. He says that he "got excited" about that sound and decided right then and there to make the autoharp his next instrument.

At the earliest opportunity, Neal went to McCabe's in Santa Monica and bought a black 12-bar, A-model Oscar Schmidt Autoharp...an instrument that he owns to this day. Without the benefit of our now-taken-for-granted electronics, Neal says that tuning proved to be right much of a chore. However, once he got the instrument in proper pitch, he was able to apply his guitar techniques to the autoharp--and was "off and running" almost immediately. Neal really fell in love with the sound of the autoharp, and has never lost that affection for it since he bought that first 'harp in 1963. On Kathy and Carol's record album, the song *Gold Watch and Chain* was among those accompanied by the 'harp. That was the first tune that Neal learned on our instrument, and is still one of his favorites.

It was to be years before he actually met another autoharp player, and Neal is quick to credit Becky Blackley and *The Autoharpoholic* magazine as being responsible for ultimately uniting isolated 'harpers such as himself, and organizing an autoharp community.

While stationed in the Los Angeles area, Neal and Coleen went to The Ash Grove nearly every weekend, and it was there that they enjoyed the talents of such artists as Doc Watson, Clarence White, the Kentucky Colonels and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Also, a lot of country and Grand Ole Opry acts were regularly booked into the service clubs on the various military installations where Neal had served.

Without a conscious effort on his part, Neal's tastes were gravitating toward string band music...most likely because it was fulfilling to play, and because it afforded him a renewed enjoyment in respect to vocal music. Neal says that it wasn't until he began singing traditional songs that he felt as though he was actually becoming a singer. Previous attempts at performing folk songs in coffeehouses and clubs had always fallen short of Neal's expectations. It was at this point in time when Neal really started to invest some time toward developing his musicianship. As a result, his interest in the music increased as did his skill level as a musician.

During their twenty-three year tenure as an Air Force family, the Walters moved around a lot. A stint in England served to foster in Neal an appreciation of that country's music. They also spent time in Okinawa. Later, while going to school in Montgomery, Alabama, Neal attended a number of bluegrass festivals, and recalls being impressed by the music of groups such as Jim & Jesse & the Virginia Boys. By then, he had added an open-backed banjo to his accumulation of instruments.

In a festival parking lot, a man was selling mountain dulcimers out of the bed of his pickup truck. Needless to say, one of them went home with Neal. He attacked the dulcimer, as he had the autoharp and banjo, from a guitar player's perspective.

Neal dates the start of his real musical development as the time when he came to the Washington, D.C. area in 1978 to serve at The Pentagon. Shortly after settling in there, he

turned on his radio one day, happened upon WAMU (a public radio station from American University), and thought he had "died and gone to heaven." (For you out-of-towners, WAMU plays three hours of bluegrass and other traditional music Monday through Friday, and six hours daily on weekends. Eat your hearts out!) By way of a public service announcement on that station, Neal became aware of the Washington Folklore Society and joined the organization.

While attending a Folklore Society concert, Neal picked up a flyer announcing some upcoming weekly music classes sponsored by Keith Young, which were to take place at a church in suburban Virginia. Among the offerings was a basic mountain dulcimer class with Maddie McNeil as the instructor. Neal figured that it would be a good way to meet people, and promptly enrolled. As a result of that class, Neal was invited to a potluck supper and jam session at Keith's home, and cites that turn of events as a real "jumping off point" in terms of his involvement in a bonafide music scene.

Around the District of Columbia and its metropolitan areas, there loosely exists a group known as the Dulcimer Disorganization Of Greater Washington. Through its activities, Neal crossed paths with Woody Padgett, and believes that Woody was only the second autoharp player that he had ever actually met. Woody and Keith Young, as most of you probably know, are long-time members of the Mill Run Dulcimer Band. They were significantly impressed with Neal's talents to ask him to "pinch hit" for band member Robin Gaiser, who was in traction with back problems. Robin returned temporarily, but Neal was there to stay, except during a tour of duty in Germany.

The Dulcimer Disorganization holds semi-annual campouts over the Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends in various parks around the area. At one of those gatherings, Neal sang the Civil War ballad *Lorena* on the Open Stage. The band was in the process of collecting material for their first album, *Sunday At The Mill*, and it was unanimously decided that *Lorena* be included. Robin worked out a harmony part to Neal's lead, and the cut that resulted is indisputably the definitive recording of that song. Radio personality Jerry Gray of the aforementioned WAMU took a liking to *Lorena* and gave it a lot of air play. The song became equally popular with the station's listeners, and ended up with a very enviable #14 position on the annual Bluegrass Top 40 chart. To this day, whenever I hear a new version of *Lorena*, Neal's rendition resonates in my memory.

To date, the MRDB has six albums to their credit, and expects to return to the studio this winter to record number seven. All indications are that they have hit on a sure-fire recipe or formula for successful recordings. Always modest in respect to his musicianship, Neal feels as though his main contribution to the band has been in bringing fresh material into the group. Since none of the band's members are rural or mountain folks, they refer to their repertoire as nostalgic or sentimental music, in that it is either old, in itself or reminiscent of olden times. Their material is drawn from a conglomeration of sources, with Neal seeming to have a special knack for locating candidates for rediscovery that are suited to the group's instrumentation and vocal capabilities. He says that he has a tendency to gravitate toward the traditional end of the spectrum in respect to whatever kind of music he listens to. Neal also describes himself as a "student" of his vast record collection, and has incorporated some of what he absorbs from those recorded works into his own music as well as to that of the MRDB.

Generally speaking, the band will work up an arrangement of new material and perform it in concert a while to get the reaction of their audiences before they "commit the piece to wax," as they used to say. It is not their wish to fall into a rut by just resting on their laurels and playing the band's "greatest hits" over and over again. Also, they want to ascertain whether or not the band members continue to enjoy doing the number. If the musicians are exhilarated themselves, that electricity is likely to be related to its listeners. Performers and audiences alike can get stale, feels Neal, if you don't continually work toward expanding your repertoire. Likewise, the MRDB strives to always project the impression that they are at ease with their offerings. Balanced sets are planned so that all of the musicians are featured on one or more numbers. Neal says that his years with the band have greatly expanded his musical horizons, and thinks that he may have just "floated" for—ever had he not joined their ranks.

At the risk of opening the proverbial can of worms, I asked Neal to express his views regarding the often narrow-minded and inflexible attitude of some members of the old-time music community. He prefaced his response by saying that, every few years, he feels as though he sheds another layer of civilization and goes farther back in time with his own music. Neal does not, however, believe that old-time music needs to be forever "frozen in time" with no new songs or tunes ever added to the genre. Nor does he think that a musician has to grow up poor in the southern mountains in order to be a true purveyor of the tradition. Neal appreciates the sincerity of old-time music, and also the fact that it reflects an aura that no longer seems to be prevalent in our society. He says that there is a mind set that goes with the music, as evidenced through the atmosphere surrounding places like the Augusta Heritage Center. The appreciation of old-time and other traditional music forms is not purely musical, but also social and literary. Once you adopt it into your lifestyle, it affects all aspects of your life and not just your hobby time.

Neal also mentioned his observation that both old-time and bluegrass are participatory in a way that so much of today's music isn't. To sum things up, Neal says that he is drawn to the simple values and altruism that parallel traditional music and the people who play it. In terms of his own musicianship, Neal thinks of himself as a "Jack of all trades and master of none." It is highly unlikely that his legion of fans would agree with that analogy! A testimony to Neal's mastery of his craft is the fact that he never fails to overwhelm his peers. Being among those awe stricken by Neal's many talents, I inquired as to how he manages to seem equally adept at all facets of the music spectrum? Neal maintains that each subsequent instrument that he learned to play became easier—with the exception of the fiddle. He says that a lot of musical knowledge transfers unconsciously from one instrument to another. As an example, playing the fiddle has inadvertently improved his techniques on the guitar, mandolin, banjo and bass. Although Neal feels that most people have the capability of becoming multi-instrumentalists, he cautions against "biting off more than you can chew," and suggests setting, and then achieving, short-term goals instead.

The most important aspect, in Neal's opinion, is that you play for the love of the music. For Neal Walters, music is not and has never been a strictly commercial proposition. Even those members of the MRDB who are officially retired still have day jobs of sorts. Therefore, none of them are dependent upon income from band gigs or the profits from their recordings. This affords them the option of selectively choosing their venues.

A lot of water has flowed past the Colvin Run Mill since the Mill Run Dulcimer Band (who took their name from that facility) first entertained under a maple tree on the lawn there in 1976. That impromptu performance has evolved into a regularly-scheduled concert series at the mill. Having attended a number of those shows, I can vouch for the fact that one leaves feeling a longing for what used to be, and what has been again for the couple of hours that you have spent in the presence of "the band," as we refer to them in these parts.

The MRDB is often in demand to appear at folk and dulcimer festivals, craft shows, fairs and other traditional music gatherings over a wide area. As a matter of collective personal preference, they do not entertain in bars or clubs. One experience that particularly stands out in Neal's mind was a trip to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands to participate in an event called October Sunday. While there, the band also took their talents into the elementary schools on the island, thereby exposing a potential new audience to traditional instruments and music.

On a long range basis, Neal, Keith, Woody, Kit and Kathleen hope to be able to continue to perform and record at their very best to as wide an audience as possible while, at the same time, fully understanding the limitations of doing so on a part-time basis. Hopefully, their travels will take them to your area or vice versa. Meanwhile, you may bring Neal and the rest of the band into your home or vehicle via their numerous highly-acclaimed recordings. **ER**

October 2008 Update:

Shortly after this article appeared in *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, Neal and Coleen met John and Heidi Cerrigione on the porch at Halliehurst at the Augusta Heritage Old Time Week. The two couples hit it off immediately and subsequently found themselves playing tunes together wherever they happened to meet – including one memorable Sunday afternoon in 1996 at Eileen's Open House on Kent Island, which is just off of Maryland's Eastern Shore in the Chesapeake Bay.. That was the beginning of Doofus, the band. Subsequently Neal and Heidi published a book of *30 Old Time Tunes* for both dulcimer and autoharp, Coleen started playing bass, and the two couples have since recorded four albums as Doofus – *What Did We Leave Behind*, *Handful of Songs*, *Relatively Serious*, and *Stream of Time* as well as publishing a number of tune books in their "Occasional" series. The band has also been featured at a great many festivals and workshops across the country and is still going strong. Neal and Heidi were also featured on the *Autoharp Legacy* compilation.

Neal continued to play with the Mill Run Dulcimer Band until 2000 when he and Coleen moved to rural Pennsylvania and the long commute made that infeasible. He recorded another album – *Give Me Just a Little More Time* – with Mill Run and also appears on their gospel compilation album *We Shall Meet*.

In 1998, he edited the *Music Hound Guide to Folk Music* which eventually had a 2nd printing and is still available at Amazon! In his spare time, he has been the reviewer at the *Dulcimer Players News* since the mid-nineties as well.

Since the move to Greencastle, Neal and Coleen have been running Basement Music Studios from their home and have produced nearly 70 CD projects over the last 8 years including a

number which feature autoharp from the likes of Karla Armstrong, Eileen Kozloff, Rick Fitzgerald, Ivan Stiles, Mike Fenton, June Maugery, Cindy Harris, KatsEye, Adam Miller, Patsy Stoneman, the Mill Run Dulcimer Band and, of course, Doofus. The Walters' have released two albums of their own as well – *Snowbirds* and *My Pathway Leads to Pennsylvania*. Neal continues to teach twice-a-year group classes in both dulcimer and guitar in Annandale, Virginia run by Keith Young. Neal and Coleen also organize dulcimer and autoharp workshops and house concerts whenever he and Coleen travel either for fun or to perform or teach at one of the many festivals they attend each year so look for them at a venue near you!

Some of you may know Neal and Coleen from their work with the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering where Neal is the Director and Coleen is the Secretary/Registrar.

Additional information about Doofus, including performance schedules, is available at <http://www.doofusmusic.com>. Basement Music has its own WEB page at <http://www.basementmusicstudio.com>. CDs and Books are available for purchase on the WEB sites including Mill Run Dulcimer Band CDs.

Neal Walters
Basement Music/Doofus Music
12228 Hollowell Church Road
Greencastle, PA 17225-9525
neal@doofusmusic.com
<http://www.doofusmusic.com>