

Autoharp Clearinghouse - October 1995 - Pat Mulligan Jones

Pat Jones first came to my attention through the pages of *Tradition* magazine, which is the official publication of the National Traditional Country Music Association. As a regular contributor to that journal, Pat writes the *Prairie Parson* column. During the course of one of her monthly essays, she made mention of the fact that she uses the autoharp in conjunction with music ministry. Since that is also the main focus of my association with this instrument, I immediately fired a letter in Pat's direction. That was a year or so ago and, since then, there has been a steady stream of correspondence (plus a few phone calls) in both directions. As I got to know more about Pat, I came to realize what a multi-faceted musician (and person) she is. It seemed only fitting that Pat's story be told in the *Clearinghouse*, and this issue is dedicated in her honor.

Born Patricia Kay Mulligan in 1953, Pat made her entrance into this world in Kankakee, Illinois. Her ancestry is predominantly Irish, with a smidgen each of English, Scotch and French. One of her grandfathers was a Cherokee Indian chief. During her autobiographical recollections, Pat mentioned several times that she had been blessed with "wonderful, loving and caring Christian parents." Before his untimely death at age fifty-two, Pat's father had played music with the Dorsey Brothers earlier in life, and was for years an award-winning High School Band Director. He would bring various instruments home from school, and began teaching Pat to play them when she was only three years old. She has particularly fond memories of playing B-flat clarinet duets with her Dad. More than anyone or anything else, Pat believes that her father provided the creative spark that ignited her mutual virtuosity.

Her mother, a retired registered nurse, is a wonderfully expressive vocalist, an artist and a published writer. Pat's folks sang together for many years in area churches, as well as on radio and television. She remembers singing with them on occasion, and says that she started as a regular church pianist when she was but nine. Her actual debut performance, however, came about when Pat was a mere two-year old. During a period of meditation at church, she broke the silence by belting out a robust chorus of *The Ballad of Davy Crockett!*

Formal music training for Pat began when she was barely six in the form of piano lessons with a Miss Carolyn Puckett. Later, when she was thirteen, Pat studied under the late Helen Bloodworth (aunt of writer/producer Linda Bloodworth Thompson). Helen had traveled all over Europe with the Fred Waring Orchestra as an organist and singer. She was also an accomplished concert harpist, and Pat says that her own interest in harps of all kinds is most likely attributable to Ms. Bloodworth's influence.

Additionally, Helen was Pat's connection to Leonard Bernstein. One day, when she had been under Ms. Bloodworth's tutelage for about a year, her teacher asked her to play the second movement from *Beethoven's Fifth*, as well as *Beyond the Sunset*. Unbeknownst to Pat, her instructor taped the pieces and sent them to Mr. Bernstein for his evaluation. In his response, Mr. Bernstein wrote that Pat "had the hands of a master," and asked if she'd join his Young Artists organization? Of course, she accepted!

To keep up her national ratings, Pat had to do quite a lot of studying in regard to music theory and composition. She was also tested periodically, and her progress was monitored by Leonard Bernstein through Ms. Bloodworth. Throughout her teens, Pat performed piano concerts as part of the Young Artists program.

All the while, Pat had continued her relentless pursuit of achievement in respect to the numerous other instruments that she had at her disposal. At the same time, she nurtured and developed her vocal capabilities, and played and sang at churches, on radio and television, in schools and at nursing homes and other venues. Pat also studied acting, writing and art. She is a graduate of Trevecca Nazarene College in Nashville, Tennessee, having earlier attended both Arkansas State University and Central Baptist College in Conway, Arkansas. In addition, Pat has completed correspondence courses in Freelance Writing and Creative Writing.

For twenty-eight years now, she has taught private music lessons on piano, electronic keyboard, synthesizer, guitar, harmonica, accordion, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, E-flat alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, autoharp, banjo, mandolin, trumpet, French horn, flute, drums, violin, viola, trombone, voice, songwriting, music arranging, and music printing.

Obviously, the autoharp isn't Pat's only instrument, or even her primary one. Nonetheless, she uses it extensively in conjunction with her performances, recording sessions and teaching. Pat's instrument is a ChromAharp, with which she is well pleased. She relates that, although she had previously "inherited" her chorded zither, it wasn't until she met Dan Wiethop (of the Memorial String Band) that she was inspired to seriously "take up" the autoharp. At the time, Pat was serving as Entertainment Coordinator for the Central Point, USA of the *Hands Across America* program. Dan, of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, was among the performers for that event, and Pat says she was overwhelmed by his talent.

Up until that time, she doesn't recall having heard our instrument used to play melodies. (How many times have we heard that story?) Pat feels that certain songs and tunes almost seem as though they were composed to be played on the autoharp. She has also discovered the apparent therapeutic benefits of the instrument, and says that an autoharp "fix" never fails to cheer her up when she's feeling down and out. In particular, Pat mentions the autoharp's soothing influence upon both body and soul. "I can close my eyes and the autoharp seems to draw me closer to the Lord," says Pat.

Her family suffered a house fire in January of 1994, and Pat thanks God that her autoharp was one of the few instruments that survived. Divorced since 1982, Pat and her daughter, Vinessa, live with Pat's mother, Virgie Mulligan. Their next door neighbor is Pat's Aunt June. The three women perform as The Harmonettes and, as one might expect, their voices are well-matched and well-blended. A "chip off the old block," Vinessa has been singing and playing a wide spectrum of instruments for eleven of her fourteen years.

Since 1988, The Harmonettes have been an integral part of a weekly radio broadcast of the Knobel Church of the Nazarene. A typical program consists of two songs by the trio, one of Pat's instrumentals, and Sister Veda Underwood's message. Pat is Assistant Pastor of the church, and her senior associate has really taken "a shine" to the autoharp and is encouraging Pat to

incorporate the instrument more frequently into their worship services. Pat also serves as Director Of Music and Youth Ministries at her place of worship. As yet, there are no commercial recordings available. However, Pat sent along two tapes of excerpts from the radio program. After having listened to them repeatedly, I'd venture to describe her as an authentic musical genius. On the piano and keyboard, Pat's strengths include clean, precise articulation and a split-note style reminiscent of Floyd Cramer. She has an apparent ability for finding an approach to a song that best brings out the material. Of particular interest to this writer was an instrumental autoharp rendition of *How Great Thou Art*. Pat's harp-like approach to the autoharp put me very much in mind of the playing of David Morris.

Pat credits Bob Everhart as having been another significant influence when it comes to her development as a performer, writer and composer. As most of you know, Bob is the driving force behind the huge festival of traditional music which has been held for the last twenty years in Avoca, Iowa (the week that includes Labor Day). He is also the proprietor of a musical instrument museum, the Fiddler's Hall Of Fame and the Walnut Country Opera House as well as being instrumental in producing the *Old Time Country Music Hour* for Iowa Public Television. As if that weren't enough, Bob edits and publishes the previously-mentioned *Tradition* magazine and, along with his wife Sheila, owns a recording company called Prairie Music. The couple additionally plans music related tours and trips and puts on an annual Cajun Festival in Louisiana. Bob is also a tireless crusader for the preservation of traditional country, bluegrass and old time music, and an internationally-known performer and songwriter.

Pat fits into this picture because she has transcribed nearly all of Bob's recordings and put them down in written form, as well as creating arrangements for some of his compositions. (Although it is not a well-known fact, Bob does play the autoharp. Perhaps we'll delve into that area at a future date.)

Pat oversees recitals and musical variety programs to showcase the talents of her many students. She says she thrives on the challenge of teaching others to play, thereby spreading the enjoyment derived from being a musician. Those to whom she teaches autoharp are as young as ten years old. Pat taught her daughter to play the instrument at around the age of five or six, and says that the most major difficulty she has had to overcome in teaching children is in finding picks small enough for their fingers. (Note: Gibson makes tiny plastic picks which I have used, with success, for my granddaughters.)

Pat is presently writing a book on music theory entitled *Music Brings Understanding*. The title comes from an essay she wrote, while still in high school, for a National Federation of Music Clubs competition. It was good enough to win Pat first place for the state of Missouri and second place in the nation.

In keeping with her status as a trained member of the Christian Writers' Guild, Pat's most recent undertaking is the authorship of a book called *The Dragon's Fire*. It has to do with the effects and strategies of what she refers to as "the growing, malignant New Age Movement." Pat is convinced that this is the "beastly" Anti-Christ religion described in Revelation 13 and 17. Still another undertaking of Pat's is a Christian Ministries Referral system. The purpose of this organization is to provide help for people wanting to know where to turn for guidance and/or

training in their respective fields of Christian ministries. Interested persons are invited to contact the foundation c/o Pat Mulligan Jones, 708 Bryan Street, Corning, AR 72422.

Over the years, considerable acclaim and accolades have been accorded to Pat, including two National Traditional Country Music Association awards for performances and work in the fields of country and gospel music. She attributes her success, at least in part, to unwavering adherence to the principles in which she so firmly believes. While the ink was still wet on this article, Pat told me that she had recently been honored by being invited to perform for the 1995 Regional Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene. In closing Pat mentioned, once again, her eternal gratitude for the incredible gift of music given to her by her parents and The Good Lord.

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