

Autoharp Clearinghouse – May 1998 – Richard Scholtz

As is often the case, the music of **Richard Scholtz** first came to my attention through his recorded works. To be more specific, I “met” Richard in the spring of 1994 when he submitted his compact disc *Gentle Bird* to this publication for review. That was followed, three years later, by an *AC* review of Richard’s second album, *Late Night Conversation*. It was autoharp Sarah Andree of Mukilteo, Washington who introduced us. . .making this the second *Clearinghouse* cover story to which she has contributed (also Italene Gaddis - December 1993/January 1994).

After familiarizing myself with Richard through both his musicianship and the liner notes of the aforementioned albums, it became apparent to me that his was a story that deserved to be told in greater length than one is able to relate within the context of a review. Richard accepted my offer to be featured in this issue, and the following autobiographical piece is extracted from the material he provided. **ER**

I love the intimacy that happens through music. My favorite setting is to play music with a few people in a room small enough to make it easy to hear. Many years ago, a friend said of me that I could turn any performing venue into a living room. I am not certain as to whether or not he meant that as a compliment, but I have chosen to take it as such.

I was born in Los Angeles in 1947. Although music was an ever-present element in our home, my early involvement with it was as a spectator. Later on, however, I did take piano lessons as well as belonging to a glee club and playing trumpet in middle school. During my high school years, I was led to both folk music and jazz through my brother and some of my friends. But, even as I entered college, I still thought of myself mostly as a listener. A friend at Antioch played guitar and introduced me to the music of Doc and Merle Watson.

As I was walking by the college music building one day, I heard the sounds of a Beethoven quartet and wandered into the classroom. It was a class in Harmony and Analysis for music majors for which I had not taken the prerequisite courses. The instructor let me sit in on the rest of the quarter, and I ended up taking three additional classes from that professor.

By 1972, I was working for Antioch in San Francisco. While discussing music with one of the adult students, I mentioned that I had previously studied piano, but that they were too large to carry around. He said that he played the autoharp, and suggested that I might want to get one. As it turned out, the local music store was having a sale, during which I purchased a 15-chord model by Oscar Schmidt. From the beginning, I knew I wanted to play melody and, with the help of Harry Taussig's book, *Folk Style Autoharp*, I was able to pick out some tunes in fairly short order. Drawing on my music theory education, I also worked out major and minor scales on the 'harp.

On one occasion, I took my autoharp into work and played a little bit for the same student who had acquainted me with the instrument. His first comment was, "How can you play it when it is so out of tune?" I had been tuning to a pitch pipe, and didn't realize until years later how many different pitches you can get from one note on them.

Within the year, I traded in that first autoharp for the 21-chord *Appalachian* that I am still using. A guitar-playing friend from my high school days would show me some songs when we got together and, before I realized it, I had undertaken a lifelong song-collecting project. The *Mountain Music on the Autoharp* album, as well as a ten-record Peggy Seeger set called *The Long Harvest* were both significant influences to my musical development in respect to folk music and the autoharp.

During the latter part of 1973, my wife Helen and I relocated to Bellingham, Washington along with our young son Ben. At that time, I began to do music programs in the area schools, as well as taking on close to forty private students. I also started helping out during storytelling sessions at the public library, which included leading a few songs and providing musical accompaniment for stories.

For the next fifteen years, I tuned and maintained forty-five autoharps for the school system. Electronic chromatic tuners were not yet readily available, and the pitch pipe was an inadequate tool for keeping that many 'harps in tune. With the cooperation of a local music store, I purchased a dozen "E" tuning forks for \$1.50 each with the understanding that they would let me use their grinding wheel, files and strobe tuner to make myself a set of chromatic tuning forks (which would otherwise have cost \$160).

In addition to my work for the school district, I was teaching classes through the continuing education program at the Western Washington University and several other locations. Usually, there were fifteen to twenty students in each class and, particularly in the groups of beginners, I would have to check the tuning of each autoharp before the class started. For seven years, I taught anywhere from two to five classes a quarter in the area from Bellingham down to North Seattle.

Helen was teaching "parenting" classes through Whatcom Community College, and we got the idea of offering a song class for parents. From that beginning, Helen and I developed more courses for teachers, librarians and parents. Included were a class that covered about one hundred twenty songs, a class in using songs in the curriculum other than music, and one in using songs and picture books together. We taught them for eight years as Continuing Education and

Summer Session classes through Western Washington University for both the Music and Education Departments.

The Pacific Northwest was a good place in which to be taking up folk music at that time. There were a lot of people in and around Bellingham with whom I could play and from whom I was able to learn. One acquaintance I made was that of Cliff Perry, who played Dobro, mandolin and guitar and was the lead singer in a bluegrass band. Together, Cliff and I did some traveling in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and British Columbia performing at colleges and folk societies, as well as doing school programs.

In 1974, I started the Whatcom County Homemade Music Society, which is still going strong as of this writing. We meet every Wednesday, with the first, third and fifth weeks being music circles for anyone who wants to come and play. The second and fourth Wednesdays are concerts by both amateur and professional musicians. For about three years, I ran the music circle. In those days, I didn't know how to recognize chord changes by watching the guitar players' hands, so had to learn to depend upon my ears. I remember the first time I went to a jam session where the musicians seldom talked but just played one tune after another. Later, as I tried to teach that concept to others, I realized I had been fortunate in that it had come to me rather easily.

During that same period, several other musical events had their beginnings. In Seattle, there was the Folklife Festival which, at that time, was primarily a gathering of musicians rather than a spectator event. The Puget Sound Guitar Workshop has probably been one of the most influential elements in respect to the development of my music. I was first invited there in 1976 to teach autoharp, and have since been an annual instructor of autoharp, mountain dulcimer and repertoire as well as becoming one of the organizers. PSGW is a teaching camp, one week in duration, with a teacher-to-student ratio of approximately one to six. Almost all of the acoustic instruments are represented within the context of the various workshops even though there is not always a specific session for each instrument.

Around 1988, Western Washington University initiated a three-hour Saturday morning music program for youths 5-18 years old. The heart of it was an orchestra for the older students. The head of the music department was from England and wanted a chorus to be included as well. They had a hard time finding a chorus director who knew what to do with that wide an age range, and the enrollment wasn't sufficient for more than one chorus. After going through several prospective choral directors, I was approached to fill the position. But, since I was uncertain as to my qualifications, I declined. After still another unsuccessful attempt by a trained choral director, they came back to me. I agreed to do it in conjunction with someone trained in the field, and thus began four years of Saturday sessions. Our group grew to between forty and fifty youngsters. The choral director and I would each take half of the kids for part of the morning, trade groups for a second segment, and then all sing together. The most satisfying part of the experience for me was in getting to spend those three hours each week with kids who were genuinely interested in music. It made me realize that there are not many places in our society where youngsters with an appreciation of sound are afforded the opportunity and encouragement to hang out with one another.

After a couple of years just working with the chorus, I also started working with some of the advanced orchestra kids. Taking five or six at a time, I would teach them traditional tunes by ear, and then work with them on finding harmony parts. It was fascinating being associated with youngsters who had such good ears for music and knew their instruments so well, but who had always played from written music. Having experience only with single-note instruments, they had very little knowledge of harmonic structure and it was a challenge for them.

I had my aortic valve replaced with an artificial one in 1987. After the surgery, I wasn't able to do much performing or teaching right away. In an effort to somehow "repay" the medical staff for the excellent care they had given me, I took my autoharp and dulcimer in to the cardiologist's office and played music for them. They liked it and asked me back. This was a large practice of about fifteen physicians. For the next three years or so, I would sit at one end of the waiting room every Friday afternoon and play instrumental music for the many patients awaiting their appointments. Friday was chosen because it was the day when the staff was growing weary. They said they could always notice a difference in their patients on the days when I was there.

More recently, for the last five years, I have been doing an end-of-the-week music program for all of the Elderhostel programs offered by the North Cascade Institute. An average session will consist of about forty people from all around the country. By the time these folks come to me on Friday, they have been together all week and are acquainted. I do a combination of performing my music for them and then getting them to sing. We also play some singing games such as asking if anyone knows a song that they think no one else will know. Another interesting aspect is in discovering how the lyrics to a folk song might vary from region to region.

Tom Hunter is a long-time friend who travels the country writing and singing songs with teachers and school children. We have both done a lot of work with teachers, and Tom has been a presenter at many educational conferences. He imagined something different; a camp that would have presentations like a conference. Entire families would be welcome to attend, and there would be ample free time for nature walks, boating, writing, storytelling and music. June 1998 will mark our third session of the Northwest Teachers' Camp. Participants at this event come from Head Start programs, college day care centers and elementary schools, and may include music specialists or even home-school parents. The morning sessions are structured, with a choice of free time or workshop attendance in the afternoon. After the evening meal, we have a camp-wide gathering with songs, games and stories.

Living in a small town and playing in many different situations means playing with a lot of different people. One of those with whom I have made music for a long time is Frank Jackson. We met when a mutual friend asked if I would join Frank in providing background music for a poetry reading he was scheduled to do at an area museum. Frank excelled on the recorder but, having always played from the written page, wasn't experienced in the art of improvisation which is so essential to storytelling and the reading of poetry. After that, we began to play together regularly. Frank is a great resource for tunes, and especially loves to play music from varied sources. Our combined repertoire grew and, about five years ago, we recorded an instrumental album together entitled *Gentle Bird*.

Eric Schoenberg is another friend with whom I have made a recording. Until recently, he lived in Boston and we would only have the opportunity to play together once a year at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop. It became customary for each of us to bring a tune that we wanted the other one to hear and play with us. We didn't do any singing songs, but rather just melodies. Our sessions would begin at about 10:00 PM and often continue until 3:00 AM or so on the same tune. We learned a lot over a period of twenty years. Eric, a luthier and renowned guitarist, gets amazing tone from his instrument and has an uncanny ability to blend it with both the autoharp and dulcimer. We like to play a tune until it really "flows."

Getting together annually didn't seem adequate, so I hatched the idea of Eric and I doing some recording together. An experienced recording artist, he had already made three solo albums of finger-picked guitar. I invited Eric to come out periodically for week-long visits, during which time we would just sit in my home and play with the tape recorder running. The finished product is an album called *Late Night Conversation*.

More recently, I was involved with another friend in a recording project of a different nature. Margie MacDonald, with whom I was acquainted from the Washington State Folklife Council, is a PhD folklorist as well as a children's author and librarian. The publisher of Margie's most-recent books wanted companion tapes for several of them. In all, we did six stories, with the text and improvised music being more like duets than accompaniment. The series of stories is called *Tuck Me In Tales*, and is available through August House Press.

In addition, I have done some studio session work. However, at the present time, I have become more interested in making recordings of live music, as I feel that it results in a more realistic representation of a performer's artistry than what is recorded in the studio using multiple tracks, over dubbing, etc.

Last summer, I got a chance to attend the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering. With the exception of the many students in my classes, it was the most autoharp players I had ever seen or heard. When I moved to Bellingham, there was a lot of music here--but no other autoharp players. In fact, most of the people I have played with have never even heard another melodic autoharp. The only other players of the instrument I knew were Bryan Bowers, who was reinventing the instrument in Seattle, and Meryle Korn, who lived in Portland, Oregon. They were both too far away to see very often, plus each of them had developed styles that were very different from mine. I suspect that most people who took up the autoharp before the nineteen eighties found themselves to be isolated 'harpers. You pretty much had to develop your own style because there was no one else from whom you could learn. Even autoharp-inclusive recordings were scarce. There never has been any one person that I wanted to emulate. Rather, I have been more interested in adapting the music I liked to the autoharp and dulcimer, at the same time making my instruments collaborative.

At one time, I learned a lot of songs and tunes from either books or recordings, and would spend a great amount of time playing along with records. I found it to be an ideal way to practice hearing chord changes and also to get a feel for different styles of music. Particularly on folk recordings, there was not a lot of care taken to make certain that each cut was at standard pitch.

As a result, I bought a variable-speed turntable so that I wouldn't have to retune my autoharp for each track.

As previously mentioned, I collect songs and tunes, which I hand write into bound composition books of one hundred twenty pages each. It is slower than keeping a binder of photocopies, but it insures that I only collect things that are really important to me. As of the present time, I am into the eighth book. Many of these pieces of music have been gathered in living rooms from other musicians. My feeling is that there is no better way to learn a tune than by playing it over and over with a person who shares my enthusiasm about playing it until it turns into music. **RS**