

Autoharp Clearinghouse – May 1996 – Ron Penix

Those of you who are relatively new to the autoharp may be unaware of the contributions that **Ron Penix** has made to our instrument over the years (not to mention his contributions to this publication). To others, **his** will be a name out of the past. Unfortunately, multiple health problems have prevented Ron's active participation of late. However, prior to 1985, he was a force to be reckoned with in autoharp circles.

This story begins in Ashland, Kentucky shortly before the onset of World War II. One of seven children, Ron doesn't remember a time when music wasn't a part of his life. The first instrument to which he had access was a triple-strung, melon-backed mandola sort of thing which he taught himself to tune and play. By Ron's recollection, he was about eight years old at the time.

Since the time that Ron was less than a teenager, he accepted the role of babysitter for his oldest sister's children, and she would "pay" him in 78 rpm phonograph records. The ones to which he took an instant liking were those of Maybelle Carter and her daughters. Ron was really "taken" with Maybelle's guitar style, as well as her expertise on the autoharp.

One of his brothers brought home a borrowed guitar and told Ron he would buy the instrument for him if he could learn to play a song in just one day. By day's end, Ron succeeded in playing *Wildwood Flower*, the guitar became his, and the die was cast.

By his mid-teens, Ron had earned and saved enough money to buy his first autoharp, which was a 15-chord, black A-Model Oscar Schmidt instrument. Being already familiar with chord progressions from the guitar, Ron says that he had no trouble whatsoever learning to play the autoharp. By this time, his record collection had expanded to include recordings of the Original Carter Family (A.P., Sara and Maybelle). He also had a deep appreciation for classical music but, at the time, thought it looked "too hard" to learn.

Because he never considered himself to be much of a singer, Ron played lead or melody on both the guitar and autoharp--as well as every other instrument he has since "taken up." In fact, to this day, Ron says that he doesn't feel as though he is a good backup musician.

Always supportive of his interest in music, Ron's sister took him to a concert by Maybelle, Helen, Anita and June Carter at a drive-in movie. After the show, they approached Maybelle, and Ron fondly recalls that she treated him as though they had been friends for years. After that, he never missed a Carter Family program that was within driving distance of home. His backstage visits with Maybelle became a regular thing, and it was because of her encouragement that Ron widened his musical horizons to include numerous other stringed instruments. Although Maybelle was sincerely flattered that Ron wanted to emulate her guitar and autoharp stylings, she urged him to stretch his talent and find his own niche.

Later, following a show in Pennsylvania, she honored Ron by sending him one of her “retired” ‘harps. It is a *New Golden Autoharp*, made by Oscar Schmidt and distributed by the National Autoharp Sales Company of Des Moines, Iowa from 1952 through 1964. Just recently, Ron loaned that instrument to *The Autoharp Museum* so that it might be viewed and enjoyed by visitors from around the world.

Following a stint in the Navy, a degree in Commercial Art, a move to Baltimore and marriage, Ron began seriously collecting stringed instruments. Between 1965 and 1980, he had accumulated one hundred ten of them. When I inquired as to a possible favorite, Ron mentioned an antique rosewood Bavarian concert zither with sterling silver tuning gears and trim. Among his large collection were also many custom-made instruments by American contemporary luthiers. During the last decade or so, he has sold a few of his instruments and given a number of others to “good homes.”

A self-taught musician, Ron learned every instrument strictly by ear. While he **does** read music, he uses it only occasionally and, even then, just until he has a piece memorized. His feeling on the subject is that “playing from paper” inhibits expression. When learning each new instrument, Ron would concentrate on it exclusively until such time as he felt he had it mastered. Ron’s only formal music training consisted of five or six piano lessons. His son, now a Peabody-trained pianist, had displayed musical talent at a very young age. Since the family had invested in a Steinway Grand Piano for the boy, Ron thought that he should learn at least the basics himself. (Of late, that keyboard knowledge has come in handy in respect to entering music into his computer.)

In February of 1981, Ron traveled to Jenison, Michigan to record the first of two albums co-produced by Jay Round at Jay’s studio *The Vault*. Jay, recalls Ron, is one of the most well-rounded musicians with whom he ever had the pleasure of working. *Reflections on the Carter Family* was the first project, with *Hammered Dulcimer Reunion* being the second. His cohorts for both albums, in addition to Jay, were the very talented Cathy Barton and Dave Para. Ron had made Cathy’s acquaintance following her performance at an establishment known as The Red Fox in Bethesda, Maryland. Both Cathy and Dave give Ron most of the credit for fostering their interest in Carter-style music. During a summer 1994 interview with Cathy, she had this to say: “Ron had studied the Carter’s recorded works so intensely that he could play any of their songs, lick for lick, on either guitar or autoharp.” In a display of mutual admiration, Ron remembers being duly impressed by the fact that Cathy was able to record almost every track on the first take.

Sadly, my copy of *Hammered Dulcimer Reunion* didn’t survive our 1992 house fire. However, I still have *Reflections on the Carter Family*. While this recording authentically captured the quality that made the Carter Family so special, it went far beyond simple mimicry. Ron, Jay, Cathy and Dave had not, in this instance, attempted to simply duplicate the Carter’s sound, but rather to pay tribute to it. On the album jacket, Cathy states: “The music of the Carter Family has truly been an inspiration to untold numbers of musicians for many years, and will continue to be for generations to come.” Ron’s autoharp contributions to that project were: *Gospel Ship*, *Motherless Children*, *Liberty Dance*, *John Hardy*, *Chinese Breakdown*, *Victory Rag* and

Lonesome Pine Special. Both of these albums have enjoyed considerable popularity over the years but are, unfortunately, now out of print.

In order to promote the *Reflections* album, Ron traveled to Winfield, Kansas in September of 1981 to perform with Cathy and Dave at the Walnut Valley Festival. At Cathy's insistence, and with only an hour's notice, Ron entered the very first International Autoharp Championship. The only 'harp he had with him was the one Maybelle had used--and which Ron had subsequently played on the Carter tribute album. He had rehearsed no "contest pieces," so just performed a couple of numbers from the record. Not only was he called back for the final round, from thirty-one contestants, but ended up placing third behind Marty Schuman and Bonnie Phipps. In retrospect, Ron says that it was probably the "high watermark" of his autoharp career. (He also entered the hammered dulcimer contest, but all he remembers about it was that the wind was blowing so hard he wasn't able to keep his hammers "on course.")

Among the many people Ron met at Winfield was Ron Wall--who did his best to "convert" him to the diatonic style of playing. Although Ron (Penix) has a sincere appreciation of that sound, he has continued to walk a straight chromatic line. With the exception of the *New Golden Autoharp*, Ron's autoharp-of-choice has always been the Oscar Schmidt *Appalachian*. **ER**

2 February Update from Ron Penix:

After a very successful second album *Handin' Down...*, the Lefty Caps (Left-Handed Capricorns..Ron's band) took a break that produced 4 babies. Gary=daughter Lily, Bart=son Finnigan, and Kevin=daughters Fiona & Mairi, and not to be outdone, Ron got a new dog...a 6 yr old Treeing Walker Coonhound. We have been keeping our fingers limber and are considering a third recording this year. It will be in the same vein as the *Carryin' On...* and *Handin' Down...* recordings which are still available through www.countysales.com and will mainly consist of the favorite tunes that didn't make the prior recordings. The autoharp is scattered throughout both recordings as it will be on the third. If I'm allowed to sound a little proud, again, it will be Maybelle's *New Golden Autoharp* which is still the best sounding Autoharp I've ever heard after all these years. My contact info is:

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repenix@starpower.net The recordings are also available through me BUT THEY'RE CHEAPER AT COUNTY SALES. **RP**

Note from Eileen: Be sure to check out the photo and sketch of in the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* album via the Photos option on the *Autoharp Enthusiasts* homepage. There is a great picture of Ron with Mother Maybelle Carter.