

Autoharp Clearinghouse -

May 1995 - Ron Wall

Is there anyone out there who doesn't know who Ron Wall is? Widely acknowledged as being among the leading exponents of the diatonic style of playing our instrument, Ron is an autoharp builder as well. Becky Blackley, in *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp, Volume Twelve*, describes him as "one of the most visionary thinkers in terms of autoharp design." Being the current International Autoharp Champion further places Ron in the front ranks of Autoharpdom's elite practitioners. To say that he has had considerable influence on other autoharpists would be a gross understatement. Ron Wall has awed the autoharp world for nearly two decades with his finesse, taste and technique, and this publication is rightfully honored to dedicate its May 1995 issue to him.

Having developed many talents and musical interests since his youth in Columbia, Missouri, Ron's musicianship entertains multiple influences. He says that he "always had to be playing something," and studied wind instruments from about the age of ten through his secondary education. Although Ron went to the same high school as Cathy Barton, they weren't acquainted at that point in time. Following graduation, a guitar-playing co-worker introduced Ron to the recordings of Doc Watson. He says he thought it was the "neatest thing he had ever heard," and he couldn't get enough of it.

Ron became acquainted with the autoharp as the result of his attending a Norman Blake concert where none other than Bryan Bowers opened the show. The very next day, Ron went out and bought an autoharp. Although he didn't know anything about how to play the instrument, he was able to figure it out "in a New York minute." As is so often the case, it was love-at-first-sound between him and the autoharp. Ron adds that, once he started playing the autoharp, it was all he really wanted to play.

It was at a Fourth Of July celebration in a local park that Ron first saw Cathy Barton and her group perform. At that time Cathy played primarily banjo, but was starting on the hammered dulcimer. Ron was "blown away" by that sound and, shortly thereafter, tracked Cathy down. She told him about the Chez Coffeehouse in Columbia, and encouraged him to come there and bring along his autoharp. Ron occasionally played bass with Cathy and her group and credits her, more than anyone else, with having inspired him to play old-time music. Most of his early repertoire was learned as the result of late-night jam sessions with the coffeehouse crowd.

The Chez Coffeehouse was very important to Ron's musical development because it provided him with a place where he could perform before a friendly audience. Various musicians from that venue, including Ron, were also invited to play regularly over KOPN...a college town radio station.

Ron had been playing the autoharp "maybe two years" when he went to Winfield and ended up on stage with Bryan Bowers. Their two styles, although both diatonic, were totally different. Bryan always has a chord bar depressed whereas, by that time, Ron had opened the door, so to speak, with his trademark open-chord technique. Along with Mike Seeger, Ron and Bryan conducted the first autoharp workshops ever held at the Walnut Valley Festival.

Until just recently, Ron has played modified Oscar Schmidt Autoharps exclusively. He did have two Centurions, but they collapsed after being exposed to dampness. Ron later replaced them with a pair of O.S. Wildwood Flower 'harps which he "gutted and refurbished."

In early 1981, Ron visited Fretted Industries (Oscar Schmidt International Division) with a multi-key diatonic autoharp he had designed to play in the string band keys of G, D and A. At that point, there were some design problems that needed working out. Two test models were produced by the factory, with one being sent to Ron and the other to Becky Blackley. After some trial-and error experiments, it was Ms. Blackley who came up with a workable concept for the lock bar. At Winfield that fall, Ron approved Becky's modification to his design and the two put their heads together and worked out the specifications for a production model. The first prototype came out of the factory at the end of that year and was sent to Bryan Bowers...who suggested that more playing room was needed. That was implemented by using narrower chord bars. The end result was the OS-200 (F,C,G) and OS-210 (G,D,A) Oscar Schmidt Festival Autoharp, so named because its design was conceived at the Walnut Valley Festival. This was, and still is, in the opinion of many, one of the best-sounding Autoharps that O.S. ever made, and it is a pity that the model has been dropped from their line. (See *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp, Volume Three*, "The Development of the Diatonic Autoharp," for the full story.)

Meanwhile, Ron had relocated to Mountain View, Arkansas and, in 1983, organized and acted as Program Coordinator for the Autoharp Jamboree, which is held every year in August at the Ozark Folk Center. Although he has since moved to the Nashville, Tennessee area, Ron returns annually to participate in that event which, for the record, was the first of its kind to be held any where. Ron had a woodworking business even back then, so was able to be a "weekend musician" but had to be back at work on Monday morning. He has, in fact, always had responsibilities that have kept him from pursuing music on a full-time basis. In his words, "I always made a big splash, but in short spurts."

In addition to the aforementioned Winfield and Mountain View events, Ron has also been a classroom or workshop instructor at the Augusta Heritage Center and the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. In earlier years, he developed an autoharp tablature system and wrote an instructional manual, but didn't publish it. Never one to let grass grow under his feet, Ron practices his music several hours every evening, preferring to sit and "pick" rather than watching television. He says he is always developing new techniques which continue to change the way he feels about our instrument. "I am constantly relearning the autoharp," says Ron.

During the course of our February 1995 interview in "Music City, USA," Ron related that he has never been completely satisfied with any autoharp...always thinking that it could be better. He first ventured into diatonics because of his dissatisfaction with the sound of standard chromatic autoharps. He has always considered the autoharp to be an under-thought and under-developed instrument...firmly believing that it has more potential. Ron has spent half of his life working out design problems of the autoharp, and feels as though he "knows as much about the instrument as anybody." When Ron believes in something, he admittedly "comes on really strong" with it. He doesn't pretend to be an expert on everything but says, "I know what I know."

In addition to the autoharps that he himself builds, Ron has worked closely and shared ideas with luthier Tom Fladmark. Not only does he admire Tom's workmanship, but Ron likes his attitude in that, unlike some in the field, Tom is open to suggestion in regard to new possibilities and concepts for the instrument. As the current International Autoharp Champion, Ron selected a Fladmark Gospel Model diatonic (key of D) autoharp as his contest prize. This was especially meaningful to both Ron and Tom since they had exchanged ideas as to the instrument's design.

At this point, I should make it clear that Ron is not trying to "sell himself" nor is he interested in becoming an autoharp manufacturer. What Ron wants is to move the instrument past its present limitations, and he firmly believes that there are ways to do it. He would like to revolutionize the

design of the autoharp, as he has done with the diatonic style of playing the instrument. Then, he intends to offer the results of his work to other builders that they might incorporate his findings into the construction of their respective instruments.

Ron has worked tirelessly trying to develop the autoharp to where it is accepted as a "real instrument," and can contribute equally in an ensemble or band setting. It is his dream to help take the autoharp "to the next level." In the process, he would like to blow the autoharp stereotype out of the water. Ron plays and records with world-class musicians in Nashville, many of whom had been previously unaware of the capabilities of our instrument when properly set up, and placed in knowing hands.

After having recorded several albums for Brentwood Music, Ron, his wife Alisa (hammered dulcimer), and long-time friend Mark Howard (guitar, mandolin) formed their own label, which they call Cumberland Records (the Cumberland River runs through Nashville). The threesome owns a 24-track studio, which they lease to a lot of bluegrass acts in addition to using the facility to record their own brand of acoustic instrumental music...which they refer to as "polished old-time." Quoting his mother-in-law, Ramona Jones (Mrs. Grandpa), Ron says, "Just because it's old-time doesn't mean it has to be out-of-tune." Together with some of the "hottest pickers Nashville has to offer," Ron, Alisa and Mark have created a timeless line of secular, gospel and Christmas instrumental recordings that has sold in excess of 250,000 units. One of the secrets to their success is the fact that Ron is well aware of the difference between art and mere product. On every Cumberland Records release, he goes to great lengths to interpose ideas and techniques that maximize the appeal of each tune. "Sometimes just one little technique can make all the difference in the world," says Ron.

Instead of being distributed through music stores, these recordings are marketed in gift shops, tourist areas and Christian bookstores through the Benson Music Group. Among the more than twenty titles currently available are: *Cumberland Records Sampler; Old Time Gathering (Volumes I and II); Hammered Strings; Old Time Gospel Hymns; Old Time Country Christmas (Volumes I and II); Cumberland Christmas; A Midnight Clear* (Cindy Wyatt playing harp); *Smoky Mountain Sleigh Ride* (Eileen's favorite); *Solo Acoustics* (guitar); *Mandolins and Friends; Autoharps; Hammered Dulcimer Hymns; Dogwood Winter* (Blaine Sprouse on fiddle); *On Christmas Day*; and *Church In The Wildwood*. The newer releases have been expanded to one hour in length.

At the present time, Ron is working on a recording called *New Ground*. It will be a collection of his favorite instrumental tunes performed with some of Nashville's most-renown instrumentalists. With this release, Ron hopes to gain acceptance for the autoharp in a wider market. Another possibility is an autoharp instructional video, and Ron has been approached by Steve Kaufman in respect to doing one for him.

Ron's "day job" is that of owner of Tennessee Woodcrafters. This business employs approximately forty persons and, as the name implies, designs and manufactures an extensive line of hand-crafted products that are sold through establishments such as the Cracker Barrel restaurants and other shops. Tennessee Woodcrafters is related to Cumberland Records in that it produces appropriate displays for the music: a sleigh for Christmas recordings, a Conestoga wagon for the old-time selections, and a wooden church to hold the tapes and CDs of hymns.

In terms of performance, Ron most often appears onstage as part of a trio with Alisa Jones and her mother Ramona (who is a respected and accomplished old-time fiddler). In that ensemble, he sometimes puts down the autoharp momentarily and plays his Martin guitar. Ron, Alisa and

Ramona are regulars at the annual Tennessee Fall Homecoming in Norris, and have appeared at such diversified venues as the Christmas Pops Concert of the Nashville Symphony. Having ample income from his business ventures, Ron will often perform at a festival in exchange for expenses and the opportunity to sell his recordings. He incorporates his innovations into his performances and workshops, and it is his desire to share his ideas and concepts for the betterment of the instrument. Ron Wall is continually engaged in a quest to take the autoharp way beyond the instrument as we know it. In the process, Ron has probed the very inner spirit of the autoharp and has selflessly shared his expertise with all who desire to learn from him. Both his talent, and his attitude, should serve as an example and as a source of inspiration for the rest of us. *ER*

March 2009 Update:

<www.cumberlandrecords.com> (Online source for Ron's recordings)

Contact Ron Wall c/o:

Tennessee Woodcrafters

P.O. Box 239 (Physical address is 311 Driveway Avenue)

Springfield, TN 37172