

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse - November 1992 - Ray Sine and Elroyce Makley**

There are very few things in this life that I enjoy more than a story with a happy ending, and that's what the Clearinghouse has for you this month. Ray Sine is a widower, having lost his wife of twenty eight years to Alzheimer's disease. Elroyce Makley was widowed following twenty seven years of caring for her semi-invalid husband. After reading their respective stories, I'm certain you will agree that the Lord surely used the autoharp to unite these two lives into one so that they might share their Golden Years. I have interpreted Ray's story from a taped interview and from conversations during a visit to my home. Elroyce's account is in her own words. This issue is lovingly dedicated to both of them.

Originally from Pennsylvania, Ray Sine was born legally blind as the result of congenital cataracts. His two sisters were afflicted with the same handicap, having inherited it from their father. To further complicate Ray's childhood, his Dad died when he was only three years old. A year later, he was to undergo the first of a dozen surgical procedures which have partially restored his eyesight.

When Ray was approaching school age, his mother moved her family to Baltimore so that the children could be enrolled in the Maryland School For The Blind. Most facilities of this nature place a strong emphasis on musical training, and Ray was active in the glee club and choir throughout his twelve years there. He also studied the piano, but decided it wasn't quite his cup of tea.

Following graduation, Ray moved to the suburban Washington, DC area and entered the working world. He purchased a diatonic German-made accordion and used the instrument to accompany his singing, which has always been his musical priority. Unfortunately, the accordion was stolen from his car and Ray was unsuccessful in his attempts to replace the instrument. It was while on one of those shopping trips that he noticed an autoharp displayed on the wall of a music shop. When Ray inquired as to what the instrument was, the shop owner suggested that he go into the back room and give it a try. Fifteen minutes later, Ray left the store with that autoharp, and the accordion was soon forgotten.

Ray vaguely recalls an old movie in which a southern belle sat under a tree with an autoharp on her lap singing *Who Will Shoe Your Pretty Little Feet*. Having never seen anyone else play the instrument, Ray sat it on his lap and played it "upside down and backwards", a style that he still uses today, although he has added a strap which enables him to play while standing. Ray uses a white felt flat pick rather than thumb and finger picks. Later, after witnessing people playing the instrument Appalachian style, he did try that method briefly. But, since many persons who are visually-impaired have an extremely acute sense of hearing, Ray found having the 'harp so close to his ear to be distracting.

That first autoharp was a black Oscar Schmidt A-model which included three diminished chords. Later, Ray acquired a 21-chord Schmidt Autoharp, and that is the type he prefers today. His only modification has been to move all of the minor chords two spaces to the left to make them more

accessible. He briefly tried a diatonic autoharp, but says that it didn't have sufficient chords to back up the wide range of music that he likes to sing.

Shortly after the autoharp became a part of Ray's life, he began to participate in a monthly "sing out" at the public library in Prince Frederick, Maryland. Later, he relocated to the Orlando, Florida area, but kept a summer home at North Beach, Maryland. Ray did a lot of charity work at veteran's hospitals and nursing homes. He also participated in benefit shows for The American Cancer Society, and has continued to support that organization, via his music, for more than twenty years.

It was during the course of one of these shows as part of the Strawberry Spring Festival in Orlando that Ray first caught the attention of Clay Townsend. The proprietor of Townsend's Plantation restaurant, which is housed in Apopka's historic McBride Mansion, Mr. Townsend sat down on the grass and didn't budge until Ray had finished singing and playing. One thing led to another, and soon Ray was invited to organize weekly jam sessions at Townsend's eatery.

This evolved into his being hired as a roving musician and historian at the site. Working for a small salary, tips and his choice of anything on the menu, "Uncle Ray", as he is now widely known, moves from table to table in the restaurant singing a requested song while accompanying himself with his autoharp. Despite those early years of piano lessons, Ray doesn't read music. But, he has committed hundreds of songs to memory. Diners may choose from his extensive repertoire of country, folk or western songs, ballads or hymns. Often, it becomes a singalong, which Ray considers to be a great compliment. After the song, he will recount some of the history of the plantation house. Ray performs in this capacity five evenings a week plus Sunday brunch. In the summer months, he heads north to the Chesapeake Bay, where for five years he was an approved street performer at Baltimore's famous Inner Harbor Waterfront.

In the spring of 1989, Ray became aware of the Friends Of Florida Folk and commenced to participate in their various functions. At a festival in May of 1991, a lady saw him with his autoharp and asked if he would have a look at her instrument, which was a little "out of whack". She gave Ray directions to her campsite and he agreed to stop by at a designated time with his autoharp and tools. As fate would have it, he was never able to locate the woman. Instead, he stumbled onto the campsite of Elroyce "Mother" Makley and her singing and yodeling family.

Using a line that is nothing short of classic, Ray said, "I'm looking for a woman with an **autoharp** that needs attention". As will happen (call it the folk process if you wish), Elroyce heard his introduction as, "I'm looking for a **woman** with an autoharp that needs attention". Having been very recently widowed, and being temporarily overwhelmed with both grief and responsibility, Elroyce was packing up to leave the festival when Ray wandered by. Being a hopeless romantic, I like to think of it as sort of a "damsel in distress" story with the autoharp-toting handsome prince arriving just in the nick of time. The two of them played their 'harps and sang for five hours that evening.

Because they lived 140 miles apart, they kept in touch via telephone and correspondence, and met again in November at the Pioneer Days event in Barberville. Ray invited Elroyce and her entourage to sit in with him for a Sunday brunch at Townsend's. It was a few weeks before Christmas, so they joined forces to entertain the restaurant's clientele with holiday music.

This past July, Elroyce traveled with Ray to the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania where the duo won the People's Choice Award for open stage performers. I now turn you over to Elroyce for her portion of this story. *ER*

"We are a family group and call ourselves simply The Makley Family. Several of us can play the autoharp, but I am the only one who has fallen in love with the instrument. As a girl growing up, I played the dobro guitar and I accompanied my singing voice with simple chords. But, I am a small person and it was always awkward for me because I had to sit down to play it. I couldn't manage it standing, with a strap, as most men do. Our group sings and yodels in harmony, and it isn't easy to yodel sitting down!

If my memory serves me correctly, I was on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour television show in 1964. The man for whom I auditioned noticed how difficult it was for me to handle the dobro and suggested that he accompany me on the piano instead. I ended up on the show, billed as 'The Yodeling Housewife' singing and yodeling to Jackie Gleason's orchestra. The end result was that

I performed with the full band, including a kettle drum. While it was an interesting experience, it made me realize that the lifestyle of a professional entertainer was not for me. Since that time, I have focused on performing for folk festivals and at churches and nursing homes.

I have in my memory over one thousand songs to which I know at least one verse and the chorus. About ten years ago, after having been asked how many songs I knew, I made an alphabetical list, but quit when it got to one thousand fifty. My memory for songs is a special gift from God. I am able to sing for hours, doing many of the old songs that people seldom hear anymore.

My first autoharp, which I found in a Goodwill Store around fifteen years ago, was one of the old black ones with twelve chords. Because it was in pieces, I only had to pay \$1.50 for it. My husband was able to put it back together, but I still didn't know how to tune it or play it. My college-age son took it somewhere and had it tuned and then began to play it on campus. As I watched him, I could see that the chord progressions were the same as I had played on my dobro. And, this was an instrument that I could stand and play. I put aside the dobro and, from that day forward, the autoharp became like a part of me. Because that old black harp was light weight, it is still the one I often choose to play as I sing to the Lord just before I go to sleep at night. In my performances, I prefer a 21-chord autoharp because I am not so limited with it.

At the age of twenty, I was married to a submarine sailor. About ten years or so later, he became totally disabled with heart problems caused by the stress of his wartime military service. We had six children by that time, three boys and three girls. The oldest was barely ten, and the youngest was just an infant when my husband was taken ill. Needless to say, I didn't have a lot of time to pursue my music during those years. But, as time went on, I found singing and playing the autoharp to be therapeutic and it helped me to cope with my situation. When I began singing again, the children (especially the girls) began to sing with me in a natural family-type of harmony blend. Sometimes at our Christmas cookie decorating parties, we would have six and seven part harmonies when the children's friends would join in.

After my husband became sick, we moved to a ten-room house in Farmington, New Hampshire and had planned to live out our lives there. But, the winters proved to be too harsh for Phil and we relocated to Jacksonville, Florida in 1963. At that time, the doctors gave him a maximum of two years to live. But, the Florida climate was good for him and he lived until October 1990. My life has been very lonely since that time, and my music has been a great source of comfort to me. Back in 1972, I heard about the Florida Folk Festival and I called Cousin Thelma Boltin and asked her how we could participate. She told me to go get my autoharp and I could audition over the phone. I yodeled for her and she loved it. The girls had to audition separately in order for us to take part in the festival. That first year, we only had one five-minute spot all weekend. But, I had made pretty, long, old-fashioned dresses for each day and we added a lot of color to the festival and attracted quite a bit of attention in the process. I attended one of the very first autoharp workshops ever held in conjunction with the Florida Folk Festival. Since the workshop was not very well attended, I found myself singing and sharing as well as learning. A picture of me taken on that occasion was included in the autoharp instruction book by Clay Jones called *Traditional Autoharp*.

Although I had used finger and thumb picks on my dobro, the first time I saw the autoharp played with picks was at the folk festival. A boy of about age twelve showed me his picks and asked me if I would like to try them. His grandmother had taped them to his fingers, and he was due on stage in a few minutes, but he took them off and let me try them anyway. I found it much easier to play with picks and was finally able to play some melody breaks. Because of the kindness of that young man, my love affair with the autoharp grew even stronger.

With a family of eight living on a fixed income, it was quite a while before I was able to get a better autoharp. Actually, it was a 15-chord ChromAharp, which gave me more versatility. I started playing in church, and my pastor helped me to get a newer Oscar Schmidt Autoharp. It is still one of my favorites, although it is a bit heavy for me. You see, I've had surgery and am not supposed to lift anything heavier than a tea cup. My interpretation of the doctor's orders is 'nothing heavier than an autoharp'. After all, it is my therapy and my joy.

Music has often proven to be 'good medicine' for me. The girls and I even sang for my husband's funeral, and playing the autoharp helped me to get through the ordeal. When I sang his final song, *The Last Farewell*, mine were the only dry eyes in the church. But, I knew that I couldn't let so much as one teardrop fall or I wouldn't be able to sing for him. God gave me the strength to do this last thing that I would ever be able to do for my Phil. Following his death, I traveled a lot, not being able to stand being in our home all alone. Wherever I went, I took my autoharp and shared my music.

A few years later, the Goodwill Store was to eventually provide me with still another autoharp. It was a 15-chord Appalachian model, and I had been admiring it, and went in every few days to see if it was still there. I had tuned it within itself and played it during my visits. The price tag read \$75.00, but the manager of the store finally let me have it for \$25.00, which was all that I had.

My first exposure to the 21-chord autoharp came at a prayer meeting in Clearwater. Since I was a guest at that church, I hadn't taken my autoharp, figuring that they would have their own Music

Ministry. Instead, they put on a tape of sacred music. The lady I had gone with suggested to the person in charge that, if they had an autoharp, that I could provide them with live music. One of the choir members had a 21-chord autoharp and I played for them for over an hour. None of them could play any instrument without having written music to look at, and they were amazed that I could play from memory. I was so impressed with the wide range of chords on that 'harp that I went home and ordered one for myself from the Sears Christmas Wish Book.

I credit my mother with instilling in me a love for music. She had a wonderful voice and, when we would go for drives in the family car, we would sing all the way to our destination and all the way back home. No one ever taught me to harmonize. I guess you could say it just came naturally to me. None of my sisters have pursued music in their adult lives. I am the only one that has passed it down to my children and grandchildren. At the present time, The Makley Family consists of Mother Elroyce (Me), daughters Gail Makley Maynard, Ruthanne Makley Mason and Bettina Makley Johns. New to the act are Bettina's two oldest children, Natalie (15) and Stephen (12). Their sister, Sarah, made her debut in the Yodeling Workshop at the 1992 Florida Festival. This year marked the Fortieth Anniversary of the event, and our twenty first appearance there. To commemorate the occasion, we were given one hour to perform and teach a workshop, rather than the usual thirty minutes. Of course, the autoharp has been an integral part of every performance that we've made there.

At the 1991 festival, a photographer from National Geographic Magazine asked if she might take our pictures singing and yodeling as we strolled along the banks of the river. The proposed magazine article was to be about the Black Water Rivers, but the photographer said that there was a chance our picture might be included. As it turned out, I am depicted in the April 1992 issue of the publication. While I am very grateful to have been so honored, I was disappointed that they didn't choose one of the photos showing the entire family.

Toward the end of that same festival, I was sitting in the campground one evening feeling really down-in-the-dumps when a gentleman walked into our campsite with an autoharp hanging around his neck. He said, "I'm looking for a woman with an autoharp that needs some attention". It was Uncle Ray Sine and what he meant was that he was trying to find a particular lady whose autoharp needed some work. He sat down and I got out my 'harp, thinking that his probably wouldn't be in tune, and that he probably wouldn't know any of the same songs that I knew. But, neither was the case and we sang and played non-stop for five hours. He would start a song and I would harmonize or I would start one and he would add the harmony. Before he left, he said, "You weren't the woman I was looking for, but I surely have enjoyed myself." He never did find the woman with the ailing autoharp and, should she happen to read this, Uncle Ray sends his apologies.

Since that time, Ray and I have become very close friends. We aren't certain what God's plans are concerning us, but we are thankful for the autoharps that brought us together and for our common love of the instrument and the joy that it has brought into both of our lives." *Elroyce Makley*