

Autoharp Clearinghouse - August 1993 - Stephen Young

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* proudly dedicates this issue to 1989 International Autoharp Champion Stephen J. Young. It should be mentioned that Steve has also graced the pages of *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp -Volume Ten* (FYI, page 20) and *Autoharp Quarterly* (January 1990, page 2). He is the author of a songbook, *Forty Three Arrangements of O'Carolan Tunes for Diatonic Autoharp*. In the works as this issue goes to press is a second book, *Old Time, Fiddle and Dance Tunes for Diatonic Autoharp*. Steve has graciously shared one tune from each collection to accompany the following article, which he very kindly wrote himself. **ER**

I was born in Long Beach, California in 1942. A year before, my father had come down from the gold fields to build Liberty ships in the Los Angeles harbor. It had been his ambition for some time to go to Alaska, and one day he just did. He left the ship building trade and got a job in Anchorage as a bridge builder with the Alaska Railroad. He got into a bit of trouble with the federal government over this, but since both jobs were War related, he got away with it. When I was three, he sent for the rest of the family. I grew up and was schooled entirely in Alaska, including eight years at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks where I earned a doctorate degree in physics. I met my wife, Veronica, there and was married in 1965. We have one son, Stephen, who is now fifteen. After leaving the University, I spent two years as an officer at an Army research laboratory in New Hampshire and, in 1971, returned to California to take a position at an aerospace company near Los Angeles where I'm still employed and do theoretical research on space and environmental problems. In full circle, I now live in a house with a view across the harbor where my father worked to the city where I was born.

Growing up in Alaska is pretty much like growing up anywhere else in the United States except for the extremes in temperature and daylight. In Fairbanks, it will usually get up to +90 sometime during the summer, and I've seen it down to -70 in the winter. Summer days start at 1:00 A.M. and go until about 11:00 P.M. Winter days start at 10:00 A.M. and end at 3:00 P.M.

My introduction to music consisted of playing various band instruments up through high school, Burl Ives records, and listening to my father sing at home in the evenings. He did old tunes like *Wildwood Flower*, *Wabash Cannonball* and *Little Old Sod Shanty*. At 16, I learned to play his guitar well enough that he helped me to buy a Gretsch electric guitar so I could play Chet Atkins tunes. I've dabbled in finger-style guitar ever since, but have never obtained any real proficiency.

I learned of autoharps in 1978 browsing through a local music store where I came across Bryan Bowers' *View From Home* album. (I wouldn't be surprised if history records this to be the most-influential autoharp album of the 20th Century.) I was impressed with the instrument but didn't really consider getting one for myself. However, I played Bryan's album so much that my wife decided I must have some interest in it (she's perceptive) and bought me a 21-chord Oscar Schmidt Appalachian in the fall of 1982. Soon after, I attended one of Bryan's workshops in Santa Monica and learned of diatonic instruments. Over the next couple of years, with the help of recordings by Kilby Snow, Bonnie Phipps and Ron Wall, articles in *The Autoharpoholic*

magazine, my experience with the guitar, and a modified OS Centurion instrument, I developed the open-chording, alternating finger (a.k.a. pinch-pluck) approach that is now my main style.

Like many 'harpers, I was isolated from other players for some time. This changed in 1984 when I learned of the Summer Solstice Dulcimer and Traditional Music Festival held in the Los Angeles area. This is by far the most important of the southern California traditional music festivals, and has an international reputation as a "teaching" festival. In recent years, I've been able to play a little more active role in this event doing a few workshops and playing on the demonstration stage. I've met many expert players who've come to conduct workshops including Becky, Evo, Mike, Ivan, Lindsay, Stevie, Will, Michael, Charles, Karen and Tom. I also first met George and Mary Lou Orthey there in 1987. The closest associations I made there were with Bill Bryant, who came down from northern California in 1987 and 1988, and with Bob Lewis in 1989. I'd actually met Bob twice before at other local events where we discovered we were very compatible in both repertoire and style. It was my association with these two men that got me to Winfield in 1989 where I was fortunate to win the International Autoharp Championship. This was my first win at an autoharp competition, although I had won first place with the 'harp in the "Other Instruments" category at the local Topanga Banjo and Fiddle Contest in 1986 and 1987. In 1992, I was invited to play a demonstration set at this festival. I had to follow Phil Salazar and the Acousticats!

In 1986, I developed an interest in O'Carolan tunes (probably from hearing Bonnie Phipps' rendition of *Morgan Hagan* on her *Autoharpin'* album). I bought O'Sullivan's book on O'Carolan and arranged as many of the tunes as I could that fit pretty well on open-chorded autoharp. I eventually got up to about 50, but could never remember more than half a dozen or so at a time. A couple of years ago, I decided to put them all together neatly in one place so I could have a ready reference to go to when I wanted to resurrect one. I printed up some copies of the collection and gave them to a few friends. With encouragement, I decided to print up a few more and try to sell them. I knew that the specialization to a single musical subject and the open-chording style of playing would limit sales, but I certainly wasn't in it to make money (I have cleared expenses). I've now decided to do the same thing with my collection of old-time tunes (that being my current musical obsession). I've put about 200 of them in final instrumental form and need now to find some time and inspiration to write up the introductory material. In addition to some commentary on the tunes, I plan to include a section on how to set up a suitable multi-key instrument to play the tunes, and a section on how to play thumb-lead and pinch-pluck melodically. It's release will be announced in both of the autoharp publications.

I have seven autoharps, four of which I use regularly. My main instrument for festivals is a 3-key Orthey diatonic (G-D-A). This instrument is very stable under the temperature and humidity stress of outdoor life. Almost as stable, and sweeter sounding, is an O.S. Centurion set up as a 2-key diatonic (C-G). I use this when I need to play in C. For chromatic work, I use the Orthey instrument I won at Winfield. In concert, I'll also use my Goose Acres 'harp set up as a 2-key diatonic in Bb and F and fitted with a homemade chord-bar assembly patterned after Orthey's design. This instrument is quite sensitive to environmental conditions, so it doesn't get much outdoor use. I also have an early non-American-made Centurion which is in contention for "worst-sounding instrument ever made," and a Wildwood Flower that will shift its tuning by 10

or 15 cents from one day to the next for no reason whatsoever. The seventh instrument is my original 21-chord Appalachian which my wife uses occasionally.

My diatonics are set up pretty much like most except that all my lock bars are located in the treble row at the top of the chord bar assembly and are fitted with buttons so they can be held down or released with the left thumb. This allows for instantaneous key change during the course of a tune and works great for two-key tunes like *Fire on the Mountain* and *Flop-Eared Mule*, or tunes which combine the major and Mixolydian modes such as *Over the Waterfall*. For this tune, the D lockbar is held down except at the end of the first part where a C chord is needed. Then, the D lockbar is released and the G lockbar held down. For single-key tunes, the appropriate lockbar is locked down.

When I took up the autoharp, I abandoned the guitar. After ten years, I've taken it back up again (my flat-top Guild, not the Gretsch) and am using it to play fiddle tunes with a combination of Travis and Carter-style picking. It's a bit of a novelty from the usual flat-pick style, but people seem to accept and even appreciate it. I also play a Blue Lion mountain dulcimer, but in six years have never taken it out of Ionian tuning. About a year ago, I bought an old Stewart open-back banjo, and have progressed far enough on it to think that someday I might be a clawhammer banjo player. On a whim, I also picked up a banjo/uke about the same time. I have worked out a few fiddle tunes on it, and the results have been surprising. I pick out a simple version of the melody with the thumb and fill in the rhythm with a first-finger Carter lick.

I keep musically busy with festivals, house parties, and the Santa Monica Folk Music Club (Bob Dylan is an honorary member but, not surprisingly, has never shown up for a meeting). Recently, this club has attracted a lot of old-time musicians, so there's always enough for a really good jam session. In addition to the festivals already mentioned, I regularly attend the Claremont Folk Festival and an Old-time Fiddlers' Convention up near Santa Barbara. I also get to two or three Bluegrass festivals a year where I usually manage to find some old-time musicians to play with (this is good since I don't care much for Bluegrass). At the Follows Camp festival held in the San Gabriel Mountains that rim the north side of L.A., the old-time contingent consists of members of the Whitewater String Band from Las Vegas (with Laura Newton on autoharp), and the Upstairs String Band from L.A. These bands have been the biggest influence on my interest in old-time music. For the last year or so, I've also been going out to a monthly contra dance in Orange County where the band (The Occasional String Band) allows players to sit in. This has been a great experience for building stamina and speed and learning new tunes. In all of these activities, I make a special effort to present the autoharp as a serious instrument for both melody and backup. I keep it well tuned, avoid chromatic hammer-ons, and never put cute stickers on my cases.

Aside from my music, I also enjoy computer programming. I wrote all the PC software for my wife's bookkeeping business, and have written a lot of programs to understand the physics and acoustics of autoharps. My most-recent project is a program to assist in the design of string position on the 'harp to obtain proper tension and stress. It's also cute (and I'm not particularly known for cute), with a lot of buttons you can click on with a mouse, and a nice graphical display. I'll share this tool with anyone who has a 386 or faster PC (a mouse is nice but not necessary) and sends me a SAS floppy disk and mailer (5'4 or 31/2").

By now, I think I've told you as much as (or more than) you want to know about me and I'm sure that, if I continue, I'll tell you things I don't want you to know. If you see me around, say "hello" and we'll do a tune. By the way, just call me "Steve." I use the full-form of my name in print because there is already a well-established professional singer/songwriter who goes by the name "Steve Young" and I want to lessen the chance for confusion. *SJY*

Note from Eileen:

As of "press time," no response has been received from these last few profile subjects to my snail mail and/or e-mail requests for updated information. As a result, those cover stories are being posted as originally published. I've saved them until the very end hoping that updates would be forthcoming, but such has not been the case. Please keep in mind that some of these articles were written as much as nineteen years ago. Contact info and availability of recordings and books may no longer be correct.