

Tina Louise Barr – Autoharp Clearinghouse March 1994

Although her name and face were familiar to me from the pages of *The Autoharpoholic*, I didn't actually get to meet **Tina Louise Barr** until the summer of 1993. At that time, she impressed me in the capacities of both performer and instructor. During the course of our conversations and subsequent correspondence, Tina not only accepted my invitation to be the subject of the cover story that follows—she was accommodating enough to write it herself! *AC* is pleased to dedicate this issue in her honor. **ER**

I am a native of California, born and raised in the Modesto area. My interest in music began as a passing phase when I was 14 years old. My family had accumulated several shoe boxes full of S & H Green Stamps. The agreement was that, if I pasted all of the stamps into the savings books, I could redeem them for a small electric guitar and amp. I taught myself basic chords that sounded like they “matched” the songs I listened to on local AM country radio stations.

When I was almost 18, my musical interest was renewed again temporarily when I watched Mother Maybelle Carter play an autoharp on television. I was intrigued by the way she held the instrument upright. My past exposure to the instrument was having seen it played flat on a desk top by a teacher as she led the class in a singing session.

I mail-ordered a Sears Silvertone Autoharp for \$45.00 with money I had earned that summer. I had it tuned at a local music store, and used a chromatic pitch pipe thereafter. I taught myself *Red River Valley* within the first half hour that I picked up my new autoharp. The felt pick that was included in the chipboard case sounded muffled to me. I found that the plastic thumbpick worked well in experimenting with rapid back-and-forth rhythm patterns that I developed out of a desire to play country radio songs like *Cotton Fields Back Home* or *Country Roads* in a more lively manner than the performing artists had intended.

My interest in music was not revived again for another 12 years, when I glanced at a newspaper ad from a local music store that was sponsoring autoharp and hammered dulcimer workshops. Familiar with what an autoharp was, I attended both workshops. The hammered dulcimer was new to me; however, that was the more interesting instrument at that time. The workshop teacher had one for sale, so I gave it some thought for about a month and then “went for it” by buying his hammered dulcimer and beginning private lessons.

Shortly thereafter, the autoharp workshop leader began giving a six-week course for beginners at the music store, so I signed up for the class. I also enrolled in a beginning guitar class at the local community college. These endeavors, including many hours of practice, kept me at a busy pace in addition to my regular 40-hour work week.

Having been introduced to the worlds of bluegrass and Celtic music through my instructors, I first learned to play those types of tunes on the hammered dulcimer. After about three months of lessons, I contacted a local recording studio and decided to record several original songs I had written along with some traditional tunes. I sang and recorded all of the instrumental tracks playing guitar, hammered dulcimer and rhythm autoharp.

I then contacted a folk and bluegrass deejay at a public radio station in Stockton and asked him if he was interested in playing one of my recordings, which was an instrumental version of *Wildwood Flower*. We arranged a time to meet with him and his assistant. After previewing my tape, he told me he would be happy to play it on the air. His assistant then asked me how long I had been playing this type of music? When I replied “three months,” both the deejay and his assistant grew suddenly silent and stared at me for what seemed a very long time. It did not even occur to me until several years later why they rendered such a reaction. I realize now that such a story would be hard to believe.

Another interesting occurrence happened at a different time when my hammered dulcimer teacher introduced me to his other student. She and I teamed up as a hammered dulcimer duet. We both happened to be county employees who worked in separate departments in town. During the year that she and I performed as music partners, my department experienced budget cutbacks. They transferred me into her same department, where the only transferable county position was located in front of her desk!

My autoharp instructor began giving me private guitar lessons later that year. After a couple months of lessons, I was asked to join his family’s bluegrass band. It was a wonderful training ground to learn new bluegrass repertoire. I was hired as the band’s rhythm guitar player, but it was during that period that I was listening to Bryan Bowers’ records and spending many hours trying to figure out how he produced melody notes from his autoharps. As it became easier for me to find a melody on the strings, I started to transfer what I had learned on the hammered dulcimer note-for-note onto the autoharp. This provided an opportunity for me to play more of the ’harp while performing with the band, as well as learning the discipline of keeping tight rhythm with the group.

During that same year, I joined another local bluegrass band. Being a member of two different bands at the same time was quite a challenge in respect to learning new material. It really motivated me to play more of the autoharp since people enjoyed hearing it when we performed.

I played with several different bluegrass and Celtic groups during the years that followed. My husband, John Gwinner, and I met at a local folk and bluegrass music club that held monthly meetings at a city park. We started performing as a duo at town events and at the county fair.

John and I still perform sometimes as a twosome and other times with three or four members in our band **Frettin’ Around**. John played the mandolin and guitar, the other two members play banjo, fiddle or guitar and I alternate between autoharp and electric bass. We have performed at bluegrass festivals and various other music events.

Right now, John and I have started another group that features Celtic music. My former teacher plays the hammered dulcimer and a friend from another previous bluegrass band sings and plays the upright bass. Since I sometimes get kidded about my name, Tina Louise, I thought we’d have some fun with it. The name of our group is **The Drifting Gilligans**.

I have developed a beginner's autoharp workshop that demonstrates the "T-Barr Method." It utilizes a step-by-step approach in learning basic rhythm strums, with emphasis on positioning the fingers close to the 'harp.

My second place win in the International Autoharp Championship at Winfield, Kansas in September of 1993 certainly was the high point of that year. The entire experience was wonderful, including the late night jam sessions at the Orthey's campsite **Otter Harp Heaven**.

I hope to be able to do more traveling in the next year to give workshops and autoharp performances. For more information in respect to booking me for one and/or the other, please contact me at: AutoharpHighGear@hotmail.com

Becoming involved in music as an adult has allowed me to appreciate it both as an observer and as a participant. The people I have met in the folk music and autoharp circles are sincere believers in the kindred spirit the music carries on. **TLB**

Summer 2007 Update: Tina Louise Barr has two recordings available for \$12.00 in Cassette format and \$17.00 on a CD...postpaid within the USA and \$3.00 per item shipping elsewhere. Album titles are *Breakin' Tradition* and *Rock-It 'Harp*

Spring 2013 Update: Tina Louise Barr is featured on the Autoharp Legacy anthology CD, and has since recorded with Michael Martin Murphey, as well as with the Black Irish Band. Tina is a recipient of the Modesto Area Music Association (MAMA) award, and has been a main performer several times at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering, the California Autoharp Gathering, and the San Francisco Folk Music Festival. Tina also has been a featured performer at the Folk and Heritage Festival in Glendale, Arizona. In addition to her top place wins at Winfield, Tina has won the all-category Grand Prize at a California regional music contest three times. Tina does solo autoharp performances, as well as with her musical group, "Hot Wire". She previously served on the AQ Critics' Panel as a reviewer of recordings. Tina Louise Barr is Profiles Editor for Autoharp Quarterly. Tina is well-known for her original concepts in making the autoharp sparkle with arrangements and expressive playing. To schedule Tina Louise Barr for a group autoharp workshop or main performance, contact: AutoharpHighGear@hotmail.com