

Autoharp Clearinghouse – March 1998 – Tony Wentersdorf

This month's *AC* cover personality, **Tony Wentersdorf**, is a talented and multi-faceted musician and storyteller from the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. Over the years, he has contributed numerous pieces of music to this publication including *Papageno's Song*, *Country Fair*, *Theme From Haydn's Symphony No. 94*, four German Christmas carols and Tony's self-penned *Autoharp For Christmas*. He also taught me to play one of my very favorite waltzes, the very lovely *Lara's Theme* (which I will have to wait another forty-three years to print!). Without a doubt, the most-enjoyable benefit of doing the *Clearinghouse* these past nine years has been in making the acquaintance of so many folks worldwide who share my love for this instrument that we have come to know as the autoharp. I invite you now to read on as Tony relates the part that the 'harp has played in his life. **ER**

I was born in Marburg, West Germany in August of 1945--at which time my birth mother gave me up for adoption. My adoptive father was German, while my adoptive mother had been born in St. Petersburg, Russia. Sadly, she died when I was only five years old and, four years later, my father and I immigrated to the United States, where we settled in Cincinnati, Ohio.

I recall being interested in music from an early age, having grown up listening to my dad's classical records. His collection included the symphonies of Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky, as well as the operas of Verdi, Puccini and Wagner. Quite often, my dad told me stories of his life in Berlin before and during WWII. One of his biggest thrills had been to attend performances at the *Berliner Staatsoper* where he was privileged to hear opera greats like Birgit Nielsen, Kirsten Flagstad and Renate Tebaldi sing arias from Puccini and Wagner.

At the age of thirteen, I joined my junior high school marching band and learned to play the flute. The following year, I began taking classical piano lessons from our church organist, Helen Gough. For a time, my father's best friend and his wife came to live with us (my dad being their sponsor). Among my most vivid memories is having heard Arnold and my dad singing opera duets together from *Madame Butterfly*, *Turandot* and *La Boheme*, or listening to Arnold's scratchy recordings of Enrico Caruso. I also recall attending regular symphony orchestra concerts at Cincinnati's Music Hall as a teenager. Although my boyhood dream had been to become a classical composer, my life soon took another musical direction.

In 1964, I entered college at Xavier University, graduating four years later with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. During my time at Xavier, my musical life turned an abrupt corner. For one thing, I joined the university marching and concert bands as a flutist. It was then that I became exposed to the Sousa marches, Herb Alpert and other jazz greats, and movie themes such as *Goldfinger* and *Dr. Zhivago*. During my junior year, a roommate introduced me to the current *Top Forty* music on his transistor radio. That opened up a totally new and rousing world of music for me. I discovered the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Byrds, the Mamas and the Papas, Simon and Garfunkel--and the many other new solo performers and groups that were revolutionizing the pop music of the day. It spoke to me in a way that classical music was no longer able to do. I was finally discovering the music of my own generation, which reflected all the excitement and turbulence of the nineteen sixties.

In the fall of 1968, I was awarded a graduate fellowship to study English Literature at Ohio State University, and experienced another profound change. For one thing, I fell in love for the first time. My girlfriend encouraged me to take folk guitar lessons, while introducing me to folk musicians such as Judy Collins, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Doc Watson. I'll never forget the time that P P & M came to OSU to perform. I was bitten by the folk music bug and became an instant fan.

Two years later, I returned to Germany to work and study in the town of my birth. There, I continued singing folk music, as well as playing it on my guitar and harmonica. The new generation of singer songwriters such as Cat Stevens, John Denver and James Taylor had come to my attention by that time, and I was motivated to begin writing songs of my own. However, for the most part, I remained a closet musician because I was too shy to perform in public. I remember being pleasantly surprised at the popularity of both English and American rock and folk music among the German students.

Following my return to the United States, I obtained a Masters in Library Science from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. However, it wasn't until I moved to Minnesota in the autumn of 1974 that I finally began to feel more at ease singing and playing in front of an audience. I had discovered a strong Minneapolis folk music scene on the West Bank of the University of Minnesota campus that centered around the Coffeehouse Extempore and the New Riverside Cafe. At those venues and several others, I started taking advantage of Open Stage opportunities and attending concerts, as well as doing volunteer work at a number of *Minnesota Folk Music Festivals*. Likewise, I took lessons on guitar, banjo, dulcimer and harmonica at a nearby alternative music school (The West Bank School of Music) along with classes at various community education programs around town.

Two events I attended during that time period stand out in my mind. The first was a show by Tom Paxton at the Coffeehouse Extempore. Tom's songs had been among the first I learned when taking guitar lessons back at OSU. He impressed me with his great songwriting ability, sense of humor, rapport with the audience and charisma as a performer. I also had the opportunity to see Bob Dylan at the St. Paul Civic Center, and will never forget the wild audience response to his music. At one point, the fans nearly mobbed the stage and, at the conclusion of the concert, I could see people holding up lit candles and cigarette lighters in tribute. Of course, my favorite album at that time was Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*. Inspired by that concert, I read everything I could find on Dylan's life (including the fact that he had grown up in Minnesota), and I began playing his songs. The experience also motivated me to do more songwriting.

My first exposure to the autoharp came in 1977 when I came upon a copy of *Mountain Music on the Autoharp* at the Minneapolis Public Library. Up until that time, I had never heard of Kilby Snow, Pop Stoneman or Neriah and Kenneth Benfield--but, for me, it was "love at first listen." Something about that haunting old-time sound really appealed to me. A couple of years later, while working at a Minnesota Folk Music Festival, I had the chance to attend an autoharp workshop hosted by Stevie Beck (who I later discovered was billed as "The Queen of the Autoharp" on the popular radio show from St. Paul, *The Prairie Home Companion*). Hearing her play the instrument inspired me to ask for lessons, which I learned she taught at her home.

I took to the autoharp like the proverbial duck to water, being enraptured by its full, rich, gentle tones and the fact that I could play melody on it so easily. Following six months or so of private lessons with Stevie, I knew I had found **my** instrument. My newly-acquired skills were soon incorporated into my job as Activities Assistant at a Minneapolis nursing home. It became apparent to me that the senior residents were much more responsive to the autoharp than they had been to my guitar. I made it a point to learn the nostalgic old tunes that they seemed to love such as *You Are My Sunshine*, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* and *Five Foot Two*. As my skills on the autoharp improved, I became more interested in gospel and bluegrass music, along with the traditional country and old-time songs of Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family.

In 1981, I was fortunate enough to secure a job teaching autoharp at a community education class. It pleases me to say that one of my students went on to teach the instrument herself, as well as using the autoharp in conjunction with her work at a nursing home. The following year, I accepted a position teaching autoharp at the aforementioned West Bank School of Music.

Although I continued playing all of my instruments during the next few years, my life wasn't exactly going the way I had hoped it might. My goal was to combine a career between teaching and performing folk music. However, the recurrence of a long-time struggle with severe depression and anxiety got in my way, enforced by negative messages I had absorbed as a child in respect to trying to make a living as a musician or artist. I also lacked the necessary confidence to promote myself or to recruit a sufficient number of students to make ends meet financially. For a time, I had to quit working and get into several therapy programs in order to cope with persistent depression.

Despite these personal setbacks, I continued "playing out" at coffeehouses, cafes, churches and extended-care facilities whenever those opportunities arose. All the while, I wrote songs, and made an effort to get together with like-minded friends at jam sessions and other social gatherings. In 1984, I help to start a coffeehouse and folk music club (the Nobody's Perfect Music Club) which continued for ten years. Four years later, I began hosting a monthly Open Stage Night that is still going on at the Walker Methodist Church here in town. In addition, I got involved with the local storytelling community, and began telling and hosting stories at an area cafe. Quite often, I incorporate music into my stories. One in which the autoharp plays a featured role is called *From Love to Addiction--How I Became an Autoharpoholic*©*.

I experienced another positive breakthrough in 1990 when I recorded the first of two live concert albums at Walker Church, backed up by a group of friends. The second of the two recordings (*Gifts Of Nature*) consisted entirely of my own original material. More recently, I made my first studio tape, *Atom Bomb Baby*, which was reviewed favorably in the October 1977 issue of this publication.

Five years ago, I won a Minnesota arts grant (Metropolitan Regional Arts Council) to form a folk music group known as *The Traveling Troubadours*. This was especially meaningful in that it afforded me the opportunity to “come out of the closet,” as it were, as a person who is struggling with mental illness. All four members of our group were mental health consumers. We performed at churches, mental health drop-in centers and conferences, as well as at special events organized by various mental health organizations. It was our way of doing advocacy and educating the public about these issues in an entertaining manner.

One of the biggest influences on my musical life has been *The Prairie Home Companion* program. An avid listener since the late nineteen seventies, I have learned many songs from that show--as well as from another popular Minnesota Public Radio broadcast--*The Morning Show*. For a while, I did volunteer work for the *PHC* show by answering fan mail for Garrison Keillor. Currently, I am working as an usher at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul, from which the *PHC* program originates.

Autoharp-related influences would certainly include the extraordinary Bryan Bowers. I heard him in concert here in the Twin Cities, and later attended one of his in-depth workshops at an area venue known as *The Homestead Pickin’ Parlor*. I should also mention a now-deceased performer by the name of Bob Larson, whom I first met at the Minnesota State Fair one year. He was a talented vocalist, whistler and yodeler who accompanied himself with an electric autoharp. A number of the songs in my repertoire were learned from the two tapes I bought from Bob before his untimely death.

A number of years ago, I became aware of *The Autoharpoholic* magazine, in which I was first able to publish one of my autoharp arrangements (*Helsa dem der Hemma* in the Fall 1991 issue). It was through that periodical that I learned about the *Autoharp Clearinghouse*.

I play both chromatic and diatonic Oscar Schmidt Autoharps and ChromAharps. My 21-chord OS chromatic instrument has an electronic pickup installed, and is the ’harp I most often use when sharing my music with nursing home residents. I also have a chromatic 15-bar ChromAharp that is set up in such a manner as to make it particularly useful at jam sessions. My diatonic ’harps are dual-key instruments in D/A and C/G.

Into my playing style I have incorporated licks and techniques learned from Stevie Beck, my interpretation of Kilby Snow’s drag notes and back slurs, some things picked up from Bryan Bowers, and other movements that have evolved during twenty years of trial-and-error practice sessions. I wear a plastic thumb pick, along with metal picks on my index, middle and ring fingers. In addition to the basic pinches, strums and plucks, I like to use a lot of long, sweeping strokes with my thumb in order to release the full voice of the instrument. The diatonic open-chording technique has also found its way into my style, along with the hammer-on, single-string playing and other flourishes for which I don’t have names. I enjoy playing a wide variety of musical styles, including everything from classical to folk, country, bluegrass, gospel, jazz, blues, and fifties and sixties classic rock. I learned some interesting jazz arrangements for autoharp from an LP album entitled *Autoharp Ce Soir* by a Frenchman named Patrick Couton.

As for my biggest thrills of the past, there have been many--perhaps the greatest of which was winning the 1993 Bob Dylan Sound-Alike Contest here in Minneapolis. Even though I haven't been able to earn a living as an artist, music has given me a new lease on life by providing me with an outlet for self-expression, healing and inter-personal connections. I am extremely grateful for the many friends I have made over the years through my music and storytelling.

My plans for the future include continuing to write and perform songs and tunes whenever and wherever I can, to host the Open Stage at Walker Church, and to use music effectively to enhance my stories. I also hope to keep expanding my network of friends in music and the creative arts. In addition, I would like to continue recording original songs with the autoharp and my other instruments. I have even toyed with the idea of starting a *Twin Cities Autoharp Club*. And, should the opportunity present itself, I would love to travel to Winfield, Kansas for the Walnut Valley Festival--and enter the International Autoharp Championship.

In closing, I would like to thank Eileen for her support and encouragement throughout the years that I've known her. I sincerely appreciate her willingness to review my recordings, to publish my autoharp arrangements, and to consider me worthy of a feature story even though I am not a full-time musician. (*Autoharpoholic* is a registered trademark of i.a.d. Publications, P.O. Box 1787, Elkins, WV 26241.) **TW**

Spring 2008 Update from Tony:

I'm still very much involved in the autoharp world. In 2005, I started up an autoharp club for the Minneapolis/St. Paul area called **Twin City Autoharpers**. We meet on the 4th Sunday of each month from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. to jam at a Minneapolis church called Walker United Methodist Church. (Address: 3104 16th Avenue South). Although small, our group has a handful of dedicated members who join to jam and share songs. Some of the members are students of Karen Mueller & Stevie Beck (the latter was my autoharp teacher back in 1979).

I have entered the International Autoharp Competition at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas on four occasions. Although I was not able to place as a finalist, I did enjoy the experience. Likewise, I was grateful for the opportunity to have met so many other fine autoharpists and to have benefited from the many helpful autoharp workshops held during the course of the event.

I'm also very excited about my new CD entitled *Yin of my Yang*. A gentleman named Jerry Barnes reviewed it positively in a Minnesota Bluegrass magazine called *Inside Bluegrass*. In addition, Mary Ann Johnston was nice enough to publish it in the latest issue of AQ. I may be contacted as follows: Tony Wentersdorf, 1350 Nicollet Mall, #607, Minneapolis, MN 55403. Telephone: (612) 872-0233 – E-Mail: tonywentersdorf@hotmail.com