

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - June 1994 - Will Smith

I usually find myself in Music City, USA at least once a year and, whenever possible, try to get together with Will Smith, his lovely wife Lulu and their daughters Megan and Lyra. This past February, it was my pleasure to spend a day with Will and family at their home in the Nashville suburb of Nolensville. On that occasion, I conducted what turned out to be a lengthy interview, from which the story that follows was taken.

So diversified are Will's talents that the autoharp is but one facet of his musicianship. Having always managed to support his household by way of his music, Will considers himself to be primarily a songwriter and recording session artist. However, over the years, his career has pretty much run the gamut from one end of the entertainment business to the other. Autoharp enthusiasts with a sense of adventure will find a kindred spirit in Will Smith.

Will was born in Syracuse, New York, and his earliest musical influence was most likely his father...who sang as part of a glee club and also performed in amateur shows and for civic events. When Will was a young teenager, he and a couple of buddies thumbed a ride across town to a somewhat "shady" establishment called the Three Rivers Inn. Appearing there that day was a "comeback" artist named Link Wray who had scored a big hit a decade or so earlier with his recording of an instrumental tune entitled *Rumble*. Will credits that experience with influencing him toward wanting to become a musician, and he started playing the guitar shortly thereafter. Since that was during the "folk boom," Will recalls that he would play and sing the songs made popular by Bob Dylan, Donovan, the Beatles and others of that era. This trend continued during his years at a boarding school in Massachusetts.

When the time came to choose a college, Will had already made up his mind to spend those four years in a warmer climate. In fact, all of the schools he considered were in the Old Dominion State, with his final decision being to attend the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Will says that the music scene on campus at that time was primarily soul and blues. In retrospect, that seems unusual to him because the university was still, for all practical purposes, segregated at that point in time. As luck would have it, one of the nation's original coffeehouses, the Prism, was located nearby on property owned by the Presbyterian Church. It was part of the regular circuit for artists such as Ian and Sylvia, Tom Paxton and the Lovin' Spoonful. Will remembers hearing Kilby Snow when Mike Seeger brought him through town, and also Emmylou Harris, Robin and Linda Williams, Bill Staines, Duck Baker, Ralph Stanley and many more. The Prism was (and still is) host to entertainers from the varied fields of folk, blues, jazz, country and bluegrass music...not to mention the then-popular poetry readings. Will confessed to me that he had hung around the coffeehouse for a good six months before he built up sufficient courage to sing and play his guitar as part of their Open Mike night. This was around 1968 by Will's recollection. He had been writing songs for some years, and found the response of the coffeehouse crowd to be a good indicator as to the progress of his craft.

One of the first times that Will saw Bryan Bowers perform at the Prism, Bryan was playing slide guitar along with Raleigh Powell on autoharp. Around 1970, when Bryan came back with his trademark stack of single-key diatonic autoharps in tow, Will was totally fascinated by the sound

that Bryan was able to get out of those instruments. As a matter of fact, Will was so in awe that he asked Bryan to order an Oscar Schmidt Autoharp for him right then and there. Later on, Will acquired one of Bryan's "cast off" 'harps...but, we're getting ahead of the chronological order of things with the mention of that.

From 1971 through 1974, Will managed the Prism. His duties included booking entertainment, running the sound system, acting as Master of Ceremonies and keeping the coffee pot full. He says that it was also important that he build up a nucleus of regular customers so that lesser-known performers would be assured an audience. Every spring, as a fund raiser, the establishment would host a folk marathon with around-the-clock entertainment from Friday evening until Monday morning.

During the period from 1974-1978, Will had begun singing and playing in clubs, restaurants, dinner theatres and the occasional bar in and around Charlottesville, Lexington, Lynchburg and Richmond. He also performed at weddings, funerals, political rallies, store openings and fairs in that general area. For a while, Will teamed up with Lorraine Duisit (later of Trapezoid fame) and played gigs as a duet. He says that he would often do an instrumental autoharp and/or guitar piece during each set to provide a change of pace.

Will was also actively involved, through the Student Union, with an organization called the National Association of College Activities. By way of this affiliation, Will performed at colleges in fifteen states, as well as playing in folk clubs in England and taking part in the Cambridge Folk Festival there.

While attending an N.A.C.A. showcase in San Antonio, Will met Rod Kennedy, which resulted in his being asked to perform at the prestigious Kerrville Folk Festival, which was also in Texas. It was there that Will became acquainted with Lindsay Haisley. Lindsay extended to Will the hospitality of his home, where the two engaged in a prolonged discussion of autoharp-related topics including tempered scales, alternate tunings and diminished chords. Lindsay also told Will about *The Autoharpoholic* magazine and the International Autoharp Championship. With his interest aroused, Will went home to Virginia and began to work up some contest pieces.

In September of 1983, Will packed Lulu, four year old Megan and his autoharp (not necessarily in that order!) into the family vehicle and they set out for Winfield, Kansas and the Walnut Valley Festival. In those days, the autoharp competition was the last event to take place and Will says that, by the time he finally made it onto the stage, he was dog-tired and both Lulu and Megan were sick. However, the grueling trip and all of Will's practice time paid off when he won second place. (Will jokingly claims that he actually was the autoharp champion because the first place winner, Jewel Boesel, had played a Chromaharp!) Lulu remembers that Will played the Everly Brothers' hit song, "All I Have to Do Is Dream," for the victory round and that the audience had loved it.

Will was also a finalist (top 5) at Winfield in 1985 and 1986. The songs and tunes that carried him to success those three years were: "St. Anne's Reel;" "Malaguena;" "Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring;" "Planxty George Brabazon;" "Fisher's Hornpipe;" "Meadowlands;" "Tennessee Waltz;" "Irene Goodnight;" "Drowsy Maggie" and "Si Pheag Si Mhor." (These may be heard on

the Winfield Winners - Autoharp series of recordings produced by, and available from, Drew Smith, 529 Ardmore Road, Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ 07423 - [201] 444-2833.)

An acquaintance of Will's in nearby Louisa, Virginia had a remote recording studio in an outbuilding on his property. This man, R. Paul Bier, was an accomplished musician who had done musical scores for PBS television programs and also for some of the National Geographic specials. Paul allowed Will to record during slack time at the studio, the result of which was a 1984 concept album of twelve tunes from around the world called *Across the Seven Seas*. Will freely admits that he almost bit off more than he could chew with the project. For one thing, each tune had to be arranged, and then orchestrated, in a manner that would be true to its origin. Having always been either a solo or duet performer, Will had a lot to learn about playing with other instruments, and he learned it by trial and error. After having "done his own thing" for so many years, he had picked up a lot of bad habits such as dropping beats and adding measures.

Will recalls having to alter his tuning and change his chord bar configuration from song to song in order to accommodate the repertoire at hand and says that it proved to be a constant challenge. He called in favors from friends to play the various ethnic instruments, and remembers that trying to synchronize schedules was still another thing to be taken into consideration. However, those who have heard this album will most likely agree that the end result is surely worth whatever effort was necessary to see the project through to completion.

Although he is not a trained musician per se, Will has been blessed with a gift of personal inventiveness that enables him to cross musical boundaries and to move into uncharted waters, so to speak, with the autoharp. His judicious selection and careful treatment of material, along with a savvy for arrangement that fits each tune and its creative and varied instrumentation, makes this album truly unique. It embraces a myriad of sounds and influences unlike any other autoharp recording to date.

All the while, Will's main focus was still on his songwriting. After having attended a songwriters' convention in Nashville, Will came to the realization that he was going to have to relocate there if he ever hoped to get his career as a tunesmith (no pun intended!) off of the ground. In 1985, Will, Lulu and Megan moved to Tennessee and the earnest pursuit of Will's dream began. (Little Lyra, whose name is a literal translation of the word "harp," had not yet been born.)

Will says that he has never felt as though he "fit in" with any one genre of music, and has had a tendency to occasionally fall through the cracks between categories. In Nashville, he found himself gravitating toward performers and songwriters who were on the folkier perimeters of country music. After nine years, Will comments that while he is still pretty low on the country music totem pole, at least he is ON the pole now. Judging from his recent successes, I would say that Will is being modest in his self appraisal. In a town where it is said that a thousand pickers and singers get off of the bus every week, Will Smith has made his presence known both as a songwriter and as a session musician.

In terms of country music, Will generally feels that the autoharp is used to its best advantage on slower songs. He is particularly fond of the way the instrument lends itself to 3/4 time pieces. Will has recently played autoharp on the recordings of a number of major artists including:

"What Could Have Been" on Kathy Mattea's album *Time Passes By*. "Somebody's Love," "What Never Was, Was Never Meant To Be" and "Tried to Get My Heart to Close That Door" on Hal Ketchum's "Past The Point Of Rescue," "Just When I Needed You Most," "She's the Reason," "Stories, Trophies And Memories" and "Ain't Nothin' Coming Down But The Rain" on Every Now and Then by Randy Van Warmer "Love Of God" on Susie Luchsinger's Country Christian release "Did You Fall In Love With Me" by Prairie Oyster. This cut was voted the 1992 Song of the Year by the Canadian Country Music Association. (Although Prairie Oyster's Joan Bessen is seen finger synching an autoharp on the music video of this song, it is actually Will doing the playing.)

Most recently, he contributed the autoharp tracks on three songs for Craig Duncan's album of spirituals. That's on the Contemporary Christian Intersound label, and the songs are, "Will The Circle Be Unbroken," "Oh, How I love Jesus" and "Peace Like A River." Will is also currently in the studio working on a Rounder recording performed by Barry and Holly Tashian, with the renown producer Jim Rooney.

In terms of songwriting, Will co-wrote "Falling Never Felt So Good" and "A Little Bit Of Love" with Shawn Camp. Shawn is a rising young singer who is presently enjoying rave reviews for both the audio and video renditions of "Falling Never Felt So Good." It has received extensive airplay on both TNN and CMT.

When it comes to instrument preference, Will says that he is a "B-model man," with a special fondness for the American-made Oscar Schmidt Centurion and Festival Autoharps (Me, too. *ER*). He is also an advocate of fine tuners. During his early years in Nashville, Will met Moses Scrivner, a luthier who built A-model autoharps in addition to other instruments. Will was never able to convince Moses to build a B-model 'harp for him, but Moses did put a new back on Will's Centurion, and also refinished it. Unfortunately, Moses died before his time as the result of a heart attack at age 45.

As for picks, Will starts with a National thumb pick to which he adheres a Fender guitar pick with a product called Bondini (from Wal-Mart). When dry, he sculpts this pick-on-a-pick to the desired shape with a file. Because he objects to the string noise when recording that metal picks make, Will uses plastic picks exclusively except for a .025 gauge metal pick on his little finger. He likes a somewhat flexible pick on his index finger so that he can "go both ways" with it by anchoring his thumb and first finger together. Will also strikes single notes with the side of his index finger pick. He tries to hit the strings as near as possible to the middle, especially in the upper register. Will says that he will pick above the sound hole for certain special effects. He varies which finger he uses in his pinches because each has a slightly different tone. Often, the fingers on his right hand work independently of one another during periods of improvisation. Will also angles his hand in such a way as to vary his attack on the strings.

Other "secrets" that Will was kind enough to share with fellow 'harpers include the fact that he replaces standard autoharp strings with gold-plated guitar strings wherever possible. He prefers plugging into a keyboard amp rather than a guitar amp because it results in a more-acoustic sound.

It should be mentioned that Will is also much sought after to teach autoharp workshops, and has done so at the Summer Solstice Festival in California, the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops in West Virginia, the Cosby, Tennessee Harp and Dulcimer Festival, the Stringalong event in Wisconsin, the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering in New York, the Memphis Dulcimer Festival in Tennessee and for autoharp clubs. As a postscript, Will adds that his most unusual gig was probably when he was hired to perform at MacDonald's in downtown Nashville!

In a philosophical moment, Will made the statement that being in good tune and keeping time correctly constitutes about three quarters of what it takes to be a musician. And, narrowing that down specifically to the autoharp, he maintains that half of the battle is won if you can teach people to tune correctly. Folks who show up at festivals and other events with out-of-tune autoharps break up more jams than traffic cops.

You may contact will at: P. O. Bos 159, Nolensville, TN 37135. Having been a long-time fan of Will Smith and his music, I am especially pleased to be able to dedicate this issue in his honor.

***ER***

<http://autoharper.com> (Tunes and updated bio)

<http://www249.pair.com/coasters/cyberplugger/wsmusic.htm> (More info)

Update:

Most recently, Will taught four autoharp workshops at the Suwannee Dulcimer Retreat  
STEPHEN FOSTER FOLK CULTURE CENTER STATE PARK  
NOVEMBER 14-15, 2008