

Autoharp Clearinghouse – June 1998

Victoria Young and Dick Harrington

Dick Harrington & Victoria Young seemed destined to unite their singing and playing. In 1990, at a music party in an old mill south of Charlottesville, Virginia, a mutual friend, Bill Kelso, introduced them. Nothing much came of it right away but, a few months later, Bill told Dick that Victoria was looking for a guy to play guitar and sing with her. Dick auditioned and got the part.

They got together one night a week at Victoria's house. In those early singing sessions, Dick played guitar and Bill sat in on bass. They weren't sure what direction their music would take? Dick, who was interested mainly in traditional music, was active in the Central Virginia old-time scene on guitar and fiddle. Victoria had sung tenor in a bluegrass band, lead in a blues band, and loved classic country, too, of the Patsy Cline ilk. For years, she'd plunked on lap dulcimer and autoharp, with a liking for the old tunes and songs.

As luck would have it, the new trio was invited to perform in a benefit concert on a Saturday night when Bill wasn't free to play. Forced by circumstances to practice without him, Dick & Victoria started meeting more often, just the two of them, working mainly on three songs for the upcoming performance. The concert theme was love and relationships. Straining to find three happy songs about love, they settled on *When You and I Were Young*, *Maggie*, *The Battle Hymn of Love* and *Devoted to You*--an Everly Brothers hit they both remembered from their high school days. That was November 1991.

On a sunny fall day the next year, they married at Ash Lawn-Highland outside of Charlottesville. As the bride-and-groom-to-be walked into the garden, the band Uncle Henry's Favorites played *The Hen's March*. Then a rooster crowed, which everyone took as a good omen.. At the reception, there was old-time dancing to music by The Mando Mafia as well as more by Uncle Henry's Favorites..

Three months later, Dick & Victoria released their first recording, *Long Journey*, which features the two voices and Dick's guitar. It includes traditional songs such as *Bachelor's Hall*, country pieces such as *Today I Started Loving You Again*, the Stanley Brothers' *Old Love Letters*, *S-A-V-E-D* from the Blue Sky Boys, and the gospel standard *Drifting Too Far from the Shore*, to name a few. The album was recorded by Bill Dudley during an eight-hour summer day in Victoria's living room and mixed at the Augusta Heritage Center during Old-Time Week.

By the time they laid down their second recording, *Lover's Return* in April 1996, they'd settled on common ground in old-time Southern music, both having enjoyed long-standing attractions to the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, the early Stanley Brothers, and a variety of other singers and string bands. They'd tightened up and intensified their harmonies and instrumentation, adding Victoria's autoharp on a number of pieces. On some cuts, they also included friends Mark Beall on bass, Judy Chaudet on clawhammer, and Gary Hawk on harmonica. Recorded during the fall and winter of 1995-96 at Dream Sequence Music in Ivy, Virginia, with sound engineer Kevin McNoldy, *Lover's Return* was another milestone and quite a learning experience. Now just a

year and a half later as they look back on it, they realize how far they've come musically even since then, not only as a duo but as front members of the Afton Mountain String Band.

In the summer of 1996, Dick took George Shuffler's guitar cross-picking class at Augusta and has incorporated the technique into a number of breaks. "It adapts very well," he says, "to old-time music, and provides a welcome alternative to my other styles." They include three-finger picking, a kind of Carter lick with thumb and finger picks, and a variety of strum and lead styles with the flat pick. His most vivid memory of a guitar player that influenced him is of Earl Scruggs in 1961 playing Carter style with thumb and finger picks. Because of ongoing practice on his old Guild, Dick's playing is much more varied, fluid, and expressive than it was even two years ago.

On fiddle, he recently decided to adjust his rhythmic bowing style to reduce sawing and increase fluidity. He was a late comer to fiddle, taking it up just nineteen years ago when he was thirty-six, so he still considers himself a budding player. A few ribbons have gone home with him from area fiddle contests over the years. He delights in old-time jam sessions and is happy to play either fiddle or guitar. His favorites are just about any "A" tunes in cross-tuning, even when he's playing guitar in that crampy "A" chord for hours on end.

Victoria has long adored the Carter Family and fancied the simple but rhythmic, expressive style of Maybelle. In the summer of 1996, just before leaving for Clifftop and Augusta, autoharpist Drew Smith was kind enough to rework her main harp. Then, at Augusta, she took John Hollingsworth's class, a week with lots of nice people and inspiring musicians. John's musicianship was especially impressive. Recently he transformed her old Oscar Schmidt into a diatonic. Speaking of diatonic, she's also been inspired by her friendship with June Maugery, winner of the 1996 Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship.

In developing arrangements with Dick, Victoria strives mainly to keep a strong, complementary rhythm, fill in tastefully with melodic riffs, and develop simple breaks appropriate to the feeling of the song. In the year and a half since the recording of *Lover's Return*, she has made strides in all three areas, with the guiding principle that, often, less is more.

Victoria recently acquired a cherry and spruce dulcimer made for her by Steve Parks from the Shenandoah Valley. She keeps her old standby in "A" and the new one in "D," tuning to Ionian or Mixolydian as needed. Dick and Victoria are doing more, too, with dulcimer and guitar, as they've come to see new possibilities for both rhythm and melody.

As their voices have improved in range and control, their harmonies have taken on more edge, and many songs have crept up a whole key. Such flights, no longer a surprise to the band, give Dick the chance to rethink guitar arrangements. The effect on some pieces is a bassier sound more reflective of the Carter style.

Last June at the Mt. Airy festival, Victoria and Dick both entered the folk song competition. She sang *Pretty Saro* a cappella and Dick did *Bachelor's Hall*, accompanying himself with guitar. The judges, unaware of their relationship (different last names), awarded them second and first. What a happy surprise!

Perhaps a few paragraphs are in order in respect to Dick and Victoria's respective backgrounds. Dick's mother, who hailed from a farm north of Minneapolis, was an accomplished soprano who toured nationally with the St. Olaf College choir. His father, from Valley Springs, South Dakota, also sang church music. After marrying, the couple moved to Rapid City, South Dakota, where Dick was born in 1942. Dick's grandmother Harrington loved to sing folksongs. Her favorite, *Darling Clementine*, became Dick's first memory of folk music.

After Dick's father died, his mother's new job as parish worker for a large Lutheran church in Minneapolis centered life around church activities. She sang in at least one choir and often performed solos for weddings and funerals. Dick served as an altar boy and sang in the youth choir. He took violin lessons for a few months and dabbled with piano. But mainly, he sang and performed in middle school with a glee club.

During high school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, he toyed with the songs of Elvis Presley, twice doing impersonations at dances. As a junior he began playing a small Gibson guitar, and took an interest in folk music. He learned most of the Kingston Trio songs and often led group sings at college parties. Soon he discovered Joan Baez, the Weavers, the New Lost City Ramblers, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry, Lightnin' Hopkins, Doc Watson, Jean Ritchie, the Stanley Brothers, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the Carter Family, and many other native and revivalist musicians.

During the coffee house era, Dick put himself through his last two years of college with a full-time singing job at the House of Pegasus in Fort Lauderdale. He did three sets a night, six nights a week, alternating with traveling musicians such as Phil Ochs and Tom Rush. Some nights he'd perform two or three new songs he'd learned earlier that same day. At the age of twenty, Dick built a mountain-style banjo fashioned after one a friend had brought back from North Carolina.

After marrying his first wife, Lois, in 1964, Dick earned his Masters in English at the University of Colorado while teaching folk guitar at the Denver Folklore Center. While there, he acquired the Guild F-47 guitar he still plays today. His first college teaching job took them to Saint Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia, a small African American college just a few miles from the North Carolina line. While launching his teaching career and starting a family, Dick kept up his music as best he could. After moving to Charlottesville in 1970 for his PhD work (finally completed in 1981 after years of graduate study and full-time teaching), Dick, Lois and their two young sons found a trove of old-time music.

Dick performed several times at the Prism Coffee House, where there were also weekly jam sessions. Lois began to play autoharp and banjo, and the two sang together. Besides taking up the fiddle, Dick built a mountain dulcimer and a hammered dulcimer. The couple joined the Well-Fed String Band, a large collection of budding old-time musicians who gathered one night a week to play tunes in a big circle and eat. Soon, Dick and Lois also hosted a monthly jam at their house in the country.

The Harrington family band even performed in a couple of benefit concerts with Richard, 11, on hammered dulcimer, Erik, 8, on spoons, Lois on banjo, and Dick on fiddle. Shortly, the boys realized there was much better music out there than the funky old-time stuff their parents liked. Eventually, Dick and Lois, Pete and Ellen Vigour, and Bill and Ellen Kelso formed the Crossroads String Band.

When Dick and Lois parted ways and sold their house in 1989, thus ended the band and the monthly jam sessions. Dick continued to be active in old-time music in central Virginia, thankful for the regular monthly jam sessions at Pete and Ellen Vigour's home, as well as other chances to play with friends. He frequented festivals such as Mount Airy, Galax, Clifftop, and Rockbridge. Soon he would meet Victoria.

Born in 1945, Victoria was raised in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Her mother was a singer and ballet teacher. Her father, a businessman, would take Vicky around town on Saturdays, listening to country music on the radio, enchanted by the heartfelt sounds of Patsy Cline. Piano lessons were the joy of her youth. She'd would bend over backwards on the piano bench with her head hanging down under the keyboard and play her pieces upside down. A born performer!

Victoria started out singing in the children's choir at church, where she could utilize her gift for harmony. In high school, she sang in the glee club and a small madrigal group. The folk revival was sweeping the country, and Victoria took up the ukulele and sang folk songs. College, marriage and children then took precedence, but she kept up her singing via church choir, choral group, and local benefits. It wasn't until her marriage ended in 1981 that she turned to music earnestly. Fortunately she lived in a rural area of Central Virginia and made friends with many of the local musicians.

She began singing with Peter Stanley, a folk musician of many years who was a friend of Judy Collins. He introduced her to Don Polifka, a luthier and musician from Rapidan, Virginia. Victoria became fascinated with the instruments he made and soon got hooked. First it was a banjo. She bought an old Vega head, and Don made her a beautiful neck. She looked up Bill Evans, the well-known banjoist who was at that time with Cloud Valley and later with The Dry Branch Fire Squad. She took lessons with Bill for three years, but as she says, "It didn't take too good." Next, Polifka made an Appalachian dulcimer for her. She still plays the song he taught her to help her get started, *Grandfather's Clock*. Then she fell in love with sound of the autoharp and convinced him to make one for her. Though he'd never made one before, it turned out beautifully. The autoharp and dulcimer, she played by ear, picking out the tunes of old songs.

She hooked up with Dennis Hammons of Southwest Virginia, who taught her lots of old-time songs as well as banjo licks. The two of them performed as a duo, once at the Carter Family Fold. Soon she joined a bluegrass band called C.W. and the Bluegrass Sound. C.W. Vanover, who sang just like Lester Flatt, had an old school bus converted to a touring bus, and they had some exciting trips going over the mountains to play in West Virginia. Fortunately C.W. was a pretty good mechanic.

Then, in 1984, Victoria's life called her to a long-delayed career, and she entered graduate school at the University of Virginia, leaving her beloved Madison County behind. She emerged five

years later with a Ph.D. in Counseling and a new profession. Though she still played at home and at parties, she gave up performing during those years, and it wasn't until she met Dick that music resumed its rightful place in her life.

Dick still loves to teach writing at the community college after twenty-five years there. Harcourt Brace has just published his book, *The Writing Circle*, which is a guide for constructive small-group discussion of writing in progress. Dick enjoys writing, exercise, mountain biking, backcountry skiing, and hiking. Victoria chooses not to bike or ski, but she, too, likes to walk the mountain trails. The main camping they do anymore is at music festivals, in a pop-up camper, which feels like a hotel compared to Dick's minivan. She continues to enjoy her private practice as a psychotherapist, specializing in addictions but also working with clients on other matters. She pursues spiritual growth through study and mediation. From their former marriages, the couple has five grown children: Richard, recently married, Gordon, Erik, Jay, and Magnolia.

Though active and dedicated in their regular professions, Dick & Victoria consider music a way of life, too. They love to perform, especially in intimate acoustic venues where they and their audiences can interact naturally. They appear often at apple festivals, craft fairs, galleries, the Prism Coffee House, First Night Virginia, and a variety of other gatherings. They spent several weeks in France in the spring of 1996 and 1997, performing at festivals, clubs, and inns, not to mention adventurous busking. Dick and Victoria also find it gratifying when people report hearing their music on public radio stations in various states. In particular, they receive a lot of airplay on Red Shipley's Sunday morning gospel show in the Washington-Baltimore area, *Stained-Glass Bluegrass* (88.5 FM/WAMU).

Music is a balm in their busy lives, whether practicing in their timber-frame house on the side of the Blue Ridge, performing at a house concert at Wintergreen, or jamming at a music party. Music is their joy and their meditation. There is nothing better than music, they believe, to connect people spiritually.

Note: *Lover's Return* (Dick and Victoria's autoharp-inclusive recording) features the following cuts: *Lover's Return* • *The Rain Don't Fall on Me No More* • *On a Lonesome Night* • *Rye Straw* • *Mountain Laurel* • *Pretty Saro* • *T for Texas* • *When First Unto This Country a Stranger I Came* • *Greasy String* • *Will You Miss Me?* • *Bravest Cowboy* • *St. Louis Blues* • *Little Birdie* • *Midnight on the Stormy Deep* • *Dry and Dusty* • *Wild Bill Jones* • *Angel Band* • *West Virginia, My Home* • *8th of January* • *I'm Going to the West*. I do not know if this album is still available because, I am sorry to say, Victoria and Dick have since divorced. **ER**