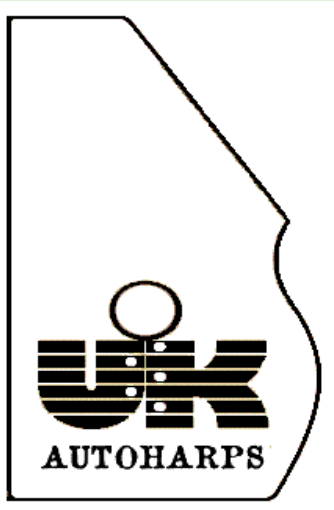




Autoharp Notes

(The UKA Magazine)

Issue No.59 Summer 2022



Artwork by Anne Pyne

AUTOHARP NOTES ISSUE No. 59. SUMMER 2022

- 2 CHAIRMAN'S CHIRPINGS
- 3 EDITOR'S LETTER
- 4 SLIDER STRAP QUESTION & ANSWER ... follow-on questions and some solutions
by Nadine Stah White
- 8 AUTOHARP DITTY & QUIZ Alison Simmons
- 9 NOT TAKING A BREATHER Anne Pyne
- 10 HOUSE CALL ... HOW I MET KILBY SNOW Mike Fenton
- 16 PROGRESS IS A TWO-EDGED SWORD Hilary Robinson
- 17 MY JOURNEY WITH THE AUTOHARP Tony Archibald
- 20 CIRCLE OF FIFTHS CHORD PROGRESSIONS Charles Levy
- 22 THE AUTOHARP & THAT SOUND! Doug Harbour
- 26 SHEET MUSIC RESOURCES Helen Slade
- 27 FACE TO FACE Heather Farrell-Roberts
- 29 BBC LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS Anne Pyne
- 30 A 52 YEAR LOVE AFFAIR June Barke
- 33 HOW I GOT MY AUTOHARP Janice Rock
- 34 CASTING MY MEMORY BACK Karen Torell-Hoffman
- 35 SO MANY THINGS ARE HAPPENING IN OUR WORLD Marcia Dungan
- 36 A PERSONAL AUTOHARP MEMOIR Bob Lander
- 38 AN ACROSTIC POEM FOR THE AUTOHARP Jane Reynolds
- 39 SORE FINGERS SUMMER SCHOOL 2022 Sue Edwards
- 41 WHAT AM I? Christophe Amineau
- 42 A USEFUL IDEA Christophe Amineau
- 43 HEARTSTRINGS AT ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, HARDWICKE by Pat Gilbert



Chairman's Chirpings with Derik Palmer (President of UK Autoharps)

So, here's another issue of Autoharp Notes courtesy of the indefatigable Jan. As always, she's done a splendid job of pulling it all together and getting it out. Quite what we'd do without her I really don't know. So here I am, writing my piece whilst she sits in the Isle of Man, tapping her fingers on her desk waiting for me to provide the piece to complete the issue that I should have written some weeks ago, but somehow forgot ...

So what has happened since the last issue? Life has continued on its ineffable path and brought us some excellent and varied workshops with Karen Mueller and with others as well. Teaching online via Zoom is very different to standing in front of a class or at the front of a lecture theatre; you don't realise just how much you rely on the feedback you get from a live class until it isn't there, and it takes both time and courage to take the plunge and enter this new medium. But gradually people are doing so, learning the new teaching techniques the online medium demands, and our musical experiences expand accordingly.

One thing that has happened since the last issue is Sore Fingers – and that's important. I realise that only a minority of UKA members actually attend at Sore Fingers, which is a shame – it's a fabulous week of music and fun – but nevertheless it does keep the autoharp in front of a lot of people who play other instruments, and the scratch bands that come together each year show both them and us how the autoharp can integrate with a whole variety of other instruments and players. Neither the autoharp or its players can exist in splendid isolation; we have to make and take our place within the musical environment as a whole.

Talking of Sore Fingers and accepting that a whole week might be seen as a bit of a plunge, I'd urge you to consider coming for the October weekend and get a flavour of the SF experience. It might just persuade you that the week at Easter could be a good idea after all, and even if it doesn't, you'll have a great time and leave with a load more techniques and music to keep you going through the depths of winter. If you have any questions either Neil or myself will gladly help. Come – and be uplifted!

As always, happy harping! Derik.



A Notelet from Jan Brodie (Editor)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who so kindly took the time to send me something to include in this Summer 2022 edition of Autoharp Notes. All your names will go forward to be entered into the annual draw for free

membership of UK Autoharps for 2023 at our next online UKA Day planned for November.

Once again you have treated us to some wonderfully interesting and readable articles and on such diverse subjects. All autoharp-related too. It is wonderful how we are all so different, with different views on life, death and hereafter, yet we all love playing our little box of strings and sharing our joy in it together. Long may it continue.

UK Autoharps is far more than a little 'club' to me and I am sure it is to you as well. We are like a family and are always there to offer support and encouragement to each other as we travel along on our individual autoharping journey.

I thoroughly enjoy all our Zoom get-togethers, both for workshops and for our monthly Meet, Greet & Warble singaround. It has been truly joyful to get to know new friends from the UK, all over Europe and the USA via the medium of Zoom as well as being able to see and hear old friends too. I would like to thank Hilary Robinson for stepping in as 'Warble' Host on many occasions. Tony Archibald has agreed (with only minimum arm twisting) to host our next one on Wednesday 20th July. The theme will be 'FOOD'.

Sore Fingers was my first time away from the Isle of Man for well over two years and I thoroughly enjoyed my week of music and learning. I returned home full of excitement, music, ideas, a 'new' ukulele and many thumbpicks from Sue's charity stall.

It was especially lovely to catch up with friends once again in the flesh and share in such a special musical gathering. We laughed (and learned) so much.

Enjoy your Summer and Very Happy 'Harping.

Jan x

SLIDER STRAP QUESTION & ANSWER

... follow-on questions and some solutions
by Nadine Stah White

A while back, I wrote an article on solutions for playing with your autoharp in an upright position entitled ***Cuddle Your Autoharp***. For me, the end solution to securing my autoharps in an ergonomic playing position (particularly important if I wanted to stand up and sing while playing) was to use the Slider Strap. Unlike a simple single guitar strap, the Slider is contraption of webbing loops which is alternative loved and loathed by many in the growing Autoharp Community. (Note: ***Cuddle Your Autoharp*** has been printed - and re-printed - in *Autoharp Notes* some time ago, and a copy of the article is available by emailing me at nadine@ifwtech.co.uk).

A friend recently asked the following question:

I find that the slider strap, to which you introduced me, is the very best way of keeping the harp upright, in a good playing position, and not worrying about it slipping or dropping; it allows me to stand up and play, which makes my singing sound better.

Despite all these good reasons to use it, I rarely do! The reason is that it is cumbersome and a bit embarrassing to wrestle with in front of an audience. It just takes a while, and is a bit of a faff, to put on.

I am wondering whether you have found any easier way to put it on / attach the harp to it - other than putting the strap onto one's body first, with both arms through, and then adding the harp. And I guess this means having it all on and set up before standing up to sing. Something about standing up as "me", without the harp, explaining a bit about the song, then putting on the harp to sing, appeals to me. But do you think this is possible with the slider? Or do I just have to adjust, and start with the harp in place?

I thought about the request and considered the kind of things which could keep a gal from using a good playing strategy which would help them prevent injury through playing the autoharp in ways which are not ergonomic.

The issues:

- The Slider strap looks 'strange' – both as you put it on and when you wear it.

- It can also be awkward to don a slider – which breaks your concentration just as you are getting ready to connect with your audience and perform.

The solution to the second issue is largely practice: it gets easier to put the Slider on quickly if you are strapping your autoharp on every time you pick it up to play. Also (as was covered in my original article) if you have pinned the criss-crossing webbing straps together under the leather back patch, then the slider stays in the right proportion loops for your use, which makes it a little easier to put on.

But the main problem remains: the appearance of the Slider can be obtrusive, especially if you are a gal of petite stature, it can look rather cumbersome.

I'm reminded of a story told to me by Jo Ann Smith of the time when her (then teenage) sons brought friends home after school. She had been practising her autoharp and was still wearing the Slider strap as she greeted the boys and then headed off to the kitchen to make some snacks ... to be followed by a whispered awe-struck question from one of her son's friends: 'Is your Mom in the FBI?'

Right.

FBI.

Well, I guess that the wide black webbing does resemble a shoulder holster!

The response I put together in answer to my friend was built around medical considerations - that it's safest for your muscles (arm, shoulder, back and hands) if you ***always support your autoharp properly when playing.***

To share my thinking about this:

After many years I now put the Slider on much more quickly than I used to do – so part of the solution to making it easy to don the Slider is just to do it more often (like, EVERY time you pick up your 'harp to play ... smile).

Having said this, I would agree that the process of donning it isn't particularly elegant. However, the more you wear it, the more straightforward it becomes to put it on (especially if you have pinned the straps together under the leather patch so your Slider is always in the same configuration). I tend to grab the leather back patch and ensure it's right side up, then catch hold of the two leather attachment tabs and flip the strap over on my back (kinda like twirling a skipping rope) before sliding first one arm through then the other through the loops of webbing. So – it's not an elegant or discreet process, but pretty quick and efficient, and just fine for informal playing situations.

When preparing for a performance, I *always* plan to put the slider on beforehand - perhaps concealing it under a jacket or cardigan if I have to walk around wearing it for some time before stepping on stage.

Important Caution: Having come out the other side of unfortunate shoulder, muscular, and hand issues which were caused by playing heavy modern autoharps

without a strap, these days I most definitely wear the slider every time I play – whether seated or standing. I wouldn't wish those painful problems on ANYONE!

People who are used to watching performers with guitars, banjos, mandolins, etc. who stand to play will expect to see a strap of some kind being employed. But I'll admit that the Slider does appear a bit unusual as instrument straps go – and perhaps especially so if you are a petite gal.

I have found a few solutions for making the Slider look less obtrusive when standing and performing, **but in all cases, I put on the Slider *before* I stand up to play.** In some instances (when I need to get 'off' and 'on' quickly) I will even walk onstage or step up to the stage with my 'harp already strapped on in front of me.

1. The simplest solution to not making the Slider look obtrusive is to wear a black (or dark) top, so that the cross-over strap is not obvious. When doing this, your audience will always focus on the autoharp and its player, rather than how the 'harp is being secured.
2. Another approach is to dress in 'layers' - don the slider over a T-shirt, camisole or similar and then wear a loose open-fronted jacket, cardigan, shirt, etc. as a top layer over both shirt and slider, so that the ends of the strap just peep out and can be hooked onto the strap buttons. This approach has the advantage that your outer layer is free to move/float about, etc. with your movements without being held down and restrained by the slider straps.
3. A third solution, when an outer layer isn't a good idea, is to say 'the heck with it' and let the black slider be visible as part of the outfit (perhaps it co-ordinates with black trousers or skirt). One of the better styles of performance outfits I've found to do this is a vividly coloured or patterned tunic which flares out and down, so that it doesn't matter so much to the overall 'look' that the tunic is held tightly by the black Slider strap on my upper body.



(I then attached a couple of photos – see left and below – from the Scottish Autoharp Weekends which demonstrate me using: approach 1) where the Slider is in place but invisible and approach 3 where at least it isn't obtrusive).

Slider looks 'okay' and not obtrusive



Invisible black Slider is in place

I hope that you'll agree that in neither of these two photos does the Slider strap 'obtrude' visually. I fear that the thumb brace for my arthritic right thumb that I now also routinely wear on my right hand is much more obtrusive than the Slider... but both of these bits of kit are essential to my continuing to play. So, my priority is to keep playing but always rely on both Slider and thumb brace – and I know that in practice folks stop 'seeing' both of these bits of kit and just listen to the music when I perform.

So, I guess that my summary points on this topic would be...

- To encourage you to get used to wearing the Slider strap as much as you can, so you are well-practised in using it and...
- To advise not trying to don your Slider when you're onstage – but instead to step up on stage 'ready for action' as it were and finally...
- **To repeat what I said above: I wouldn't wish the painful problems that I suffered from playing without a strap on ANYONE!** I think you can guess that I feel strongly about this issue (smile).

Happy 'harping!

Nadine Stah White, Whithorn, Scotland

AUTOHARP DITTY

by Alison Simmons

(Name that Tune!)

A is a key, with 3 lovely sharps

U are our members with great autoharps

T is the drink we enjoy with our cake

O is the word when mistakes we do make... (oh)

H is for humming, which we all enjoy

A is the query when tunes go awry.... (eh?)

R is the sound when soft songs we play ... (aaah)

P is the relief at the end of the day

Joking aside, with errors so many

I love autoharping and all of our merry

Gents and ladies with talents galore

Can't wait to retire and join in so much more.

Alison xxx

(Clue ... there is a certain Irish song tune that fits Alison's lyrics perfectly – Jan)

NOT TAKING A BREATH

13 Pointers for Autoharp Beginners

by Anne Pyne

Since starting just 15 months ago, I play my Autoharp every day, even if it's only for a few minutes. I feel especially benefitted by all the workshops run by UK Autoharps group. As a result of joining, I've learned some salient facts:

1. Join UK Autoharps on Facebook!
2. Ask advice of our wonderful community of Instrumentalists.
3. Learn to strum, but don't just learn to strum, start playing melody too.
4. Learn a new Tune SLOWLY, you'll speed up naturally as you get better at playing. Better to get the notes right first!
5. Learn it thoroughly before moving on.
6. Find a set of fingerpicks that suit your playing - there's plenty of choice. Or learn to play bare fingered (after you've worked through the blister stage and developed the corns!)
7. Don't be afraid to alter a note in your Autoharp sheet music if it sounds wrong to you.
8. Join in every workshop you can - they are still run online and are extremely good value - you're taught by experts who are very amenable.
9. Clean your unwound strings fairly often but gently with plastic 'wire wool'.
10. Keep your instrument in tune and cover it when it's not being used, and keep in its case when it's being transported. No need to be frightened to do this - tuning Apps are available via your phone.
11. Use every possible resource to improve - YouTube, on-line tutorials, books and you'll discover lots more.
12. Attend 'Sore Fingers' - and try to find local players near you.
13. And finally - enjoy the journey: it's VERY rewarding and you don't HAVE to sing too - you're not very likely to be competing with Kylie Minogue!

GOOD LUCK!

HOUSE CALL

How I First Met Kilby Snow a True Autoharp Genius

by Mike Fenton

Fifty years ago, this August, I experienced one of the most memorable meetings in my musical life, the vibrations of which have never left me. I was in Virginia on my first trip to the USA, just two years into a teaching career and many years before I vacated that occupational avenue in favour of a life on the road with the autoharp. In 1970 I had met banjo player Pete Parish in Slough, the home of the Mars Bar, who was to emigrate to the USA and urged me to come out and visit, as he was to live in a region of Virginia and North Carolina which was a hotbed of old time and bluegrass music. Domiciled in the town of Independence in the New River Valley, Pete's house was just eighteen miles from the town of Galax, home of the celebrated Galax Old Fiddlers' Convention, which I was due to attend for the first time, where I was to achieve a 4th place in the Folk Song Contest with my renditions of two Carter Family songs with my autoharp, the only one that I then owned, but that's a whole 'nuther story. One of my top priorities for the trip was to meet Kilby Snow, who lived near the old textile mill town of Fries only a few miles away (pronounce 'freeze' in the winter, 'fryze' in the summer!), whose unique approach to the autoharp was familiar to me through the documentary recordings for the Folkways label supervised by the legendary folklorist and multi-instrumentalist Mike Seeger.

A book on the history of the Galax convention celebrates 'The Two Englishmen' as among the first musicians from abroad to participate in the competitions there – Pete Parish was the first, I was actually the third, I think (as English fiddler Janet Kerr had made documentary recordings there for Leader Records in the UK in the early '70s). On August 1st, 1972, on Pete's suggestion, I ventured to the offices of the Galax Gazette to talk to them about my trip, and two days later they ran a front-page trumpeting "Englishman Will Play at Fiddling Festival."

GALAX GAZETTE



Serving Grayson, Carroll and Alleghany Counties

ons -- 26 Pages

Thursday, August 3, 1972 -- Galax, Virginia 24333

Englishman Will Play At Fiddling Festival



Mike Fenton . . with Autoharp

By Munsey Poole

It's a long way to travel all the way from England, across the Atlantic Ocean, to Virginia --- to attend, and take part in, an old-time country and folk music event. Nevertheless, that's the distance that Mike Fenton, a 24-year-old English country-music enthusiast, has covered in order to make the Galax Moose Lodge's 37th annual Old Fiddlers' Convention to be held here in Felts Park Aug. 10-12.

Mike, who visited the Gazette Monday and favored some of us here in the office with a little of his autoharp music, is a friend of Pete Parish, another Englishman who came over here a couple of years as a confirmed devotee of the kind of banjo-picking that the late "Uncle Wade" Ward of Independence used to do. Pete finally decided that he liked this Blue Ridge Mountain country so well that he wanted to stay with it, make it permanent. So, he took unto himself a wife and settled down. Now he and his wife, and also a youngster, live at Independ-

ence, and he is employed in Galax.

Mike says, though, he's going back to England in about two weeks, after the Fiddlers' Convention. He just can't afford to hang around here too long, although he says he thinks Virginia is great, because he said wedding bells will be ringing for him soon after his return. He came from Wiltshire County, England, which is also, he said, the place from which Pete Parish came. While in this area, Mike is staying with the Parishes.

A school teacher, he said he has been interested in what Americans call country-style music for about 20 years, and making music himself for the last four years. Besides the autoharp, he said he plays the guitar, Appalachian dulcimer and others. He will play only the autoharp at the Old Fiddlers' Convention, he said.

In England, he said, he works in Slough, the town from which Pete Parish came to America. Incidentally, he said Pete plans to play the banjo (clawhammer-type) at

the fiddlers' convention next week.

"I'm very fond of Virginia," Mike said, but he said he had to get back to "my girl" in England after this "last fling," as he called it.

With reference to playing at the fiddlers' convention, Mike said: "I don't expect to win anything at the convention, but if I can win a few friends with my music, then I'll be happy. I'm very fond of American country music."

He indicated that he came over to America, to Virginia, and to Galax -- to play in the Old Fiddlers' Convention here -- one of the biggest of them all -- because "there's not a big enough audience" in England.

Mike said he played at the fiddlers' convention held at Dublin just a few days ago. He said he was well pleased there, because the audience "seemed to appreciate what I did."

He seemed very appreciative of the encouragement which he said he had received in Galax, especially from James Lindsey and Wil-

lard Gayheart -- two of the local country-music artists. "I'm looking forward," he said, "to hearing their bands, 'The Mountain Ramblers' and 'The Highlanders,' at the Old Fiddlers' Convention."

Mike said also that he had another purpose in coming over to be at the old-time

musicians' gathering. That, he said, is to "record certain musicians and take the tapes of their performances back to England, so the English people can hear them and learn what good country music really sounds like."

Mike plans to go to Nashville, Tenn., this weekend and to see and hear the Grand Ole Opry in action. He said, though, concerning this trip to Nashville: "I don't honestly believe that Nashville music today reflects the true spirit of rural-America music, in the way that the Fiddlers' Convention does. I prefer country music with two fiddles -- not an orchestra with 50."

Planning relative to the scheduled visits to Galax of a number of dignitaries during the Old Fiddlers' Convention is taking shape.

Gov. Linwood Holton has indicated that he and Mrs. Holton plan to arrive at the Twin County Airport Thursday afternoon, Aug. 10. The state's chief executive is expected to remain in Galax through most of Friday morning before returning to Richmond.

Galax Gazette front page, August 3rd, 1972

It really was big local news, another Englishman playing American music come to explore the local music and culture! So, the day after the paper came out, I'm alone in Pete's house, and there's a busy knock at the door. I open it and there's two venerable mountain men stood there, one holding a banjo case, the other a rectangular box. The banjo player in bib overalls introduced himself; "My name's Stuart Carico, and that there's the great Kilby Snow come to visit with the Englishman!



My unexpected visitors, Stuart Carico, left, with Kilby

They'd seen the Galax newspaper, obviously! I recovered from my shock in time to make sure I had some film in my camera (Brownie 127, 8 shots on a roll) and switch on a cassette recorder. I'd had hopes that I might be able to look up Kilby at home, but I never thought for one moment that he'd come looking for ME! Right place, right time, I've been very fortunate so many times in my musical life! They stayed for an hour and I recorded the whole thing. Talk about being star-struck, I was so freaked out that, listening to the recordings fifty years later, I wished I had asked more technical questions about autoharp parts, technique, chord bar arrangements and the rest, but you know, it was enough to be there with them, being astounded by Kilby's 'drag-note' technique and his method of holding the 'harp, 'left-handed, upside down'', and also having time to enjoy Stuart's old time "clawhammer" style on the 5-string on 'Arkansas Traveller' – "That's the one that won me the blue ribbon over at the Fries Convention." Yes, there was an annual event there too, still

running as I write, where I was years later to win blue ribbons in autoharp and dulcimer and also serve as a judge.



Kilby Snow in playing position. Note the left hand playing below the chord bars down at the bridge. When playing seated the autoharp would be more horizontal.

Probably the most remarkable thing that happened during that hour was when Kilby invited me to fetch out my autoharp. This was an Oscar Schmidt 15-chord Silvertone that I'd only owned for two weeks, having traded my old 12-Chord German Rosen and \$25 for this chordal upgrade – back then a Schmidt was the Holy Grail, and now, wondrously, I had an E7 chord and could play 'Victory Rag'! But what I remember vividly and incredibly was that as Kilby and I duetted 'Star-Spangled Banner' and 'Chinese Breakdown' together we were both

perfectly in tune, no adjustments necessary! This was 1972, remember, when autoharpers still risked pariah-status at jam sessions, no electronic tuners in existence yet! The advent of that particular device really did assist in bringing autoharp players in from the cold.

On the tape you hear me kick off the first of those two tunes and there's a lovely moment as you hear Kilby enthuse with an approving "Yeah" as he comes in and takes over! "Pretty good, pretty good!" responds Stuart at its conclusion.

John Kilby Snow was born 18th May, 1905 near Rock Creek, about four miles away from the Grayson County seat at Independence, and would relate the story of how his father traded an ice-cream freezer for an old five-bar Zimmermann autoharp on which he scratched out his first tune, 'Old Molly Hare'. as a child. What really impressed me about Kilby was the diversity of his repertoire to which he adapted the autoharp, drawing upon strands of old time, gospel, bluegrass, blues, country, folk ballads and contemporary sources. I'd heard from Pete that Kilby could really tear it up on the tune 'Yakety Sax', later recorded as 'Yakety Axe' by Chet Atkins and also adapted as a theme for 'chase scenes' in Benny Hill's TV show. You hear the imperious opening chord from Kilby signalling the tune with the power of an electrical charge, then in response to my request, says "...but we'll try it!". He runs it four times through, providing some contrast by playing it in two different octaves. I was always interested, right from the start of my autoharping, as to how you could make use of those strings that lay 'beyond the chord'. Those strings that just lay there as dead wire under the felt while you played. Now here was the answer right in front of my eyes and ears, the runs and slurs under a melody note that took you right into the blues! I have never recovered. You hear me on the tape asking, "Where did you learn that one, Kilby?"

"Well, I learned that from Boots Randolph." Sure thing. The saxophone virtuoso. A hit tune, a no.35 peak on the USA Billboard charts, April'63. I did suggest that Kilby had a very eclectic approach!

I loved Kilby's singing too. There's something wonderful about a 'non-singer's' style, a natural, untrained ability, a gruff mountain manner characterised by an eminent listenability that just draws you in, with the texture of slightly-used sandpaper. There's just one vocal by Kilby on the tape, 'My Filipino Rose', which I never heard anywhere else for years. On enquiring of Kilby as to his source, you hear him say, "I learned that song from a cousin of mine down at Galax." A week later I was to learn scores of new songs and tunes down at Galax! I learned much later that 'My Filipino Rose' was from the pen of Hank Snow (I saw Hank on stage in 1971 in Cheltenham) - Kilby gave the song a slow bluesy treatment with a gutsy rhythmic drive powered by his drag-note style, rather more to my taste than Hank's brighter, sweeter version.

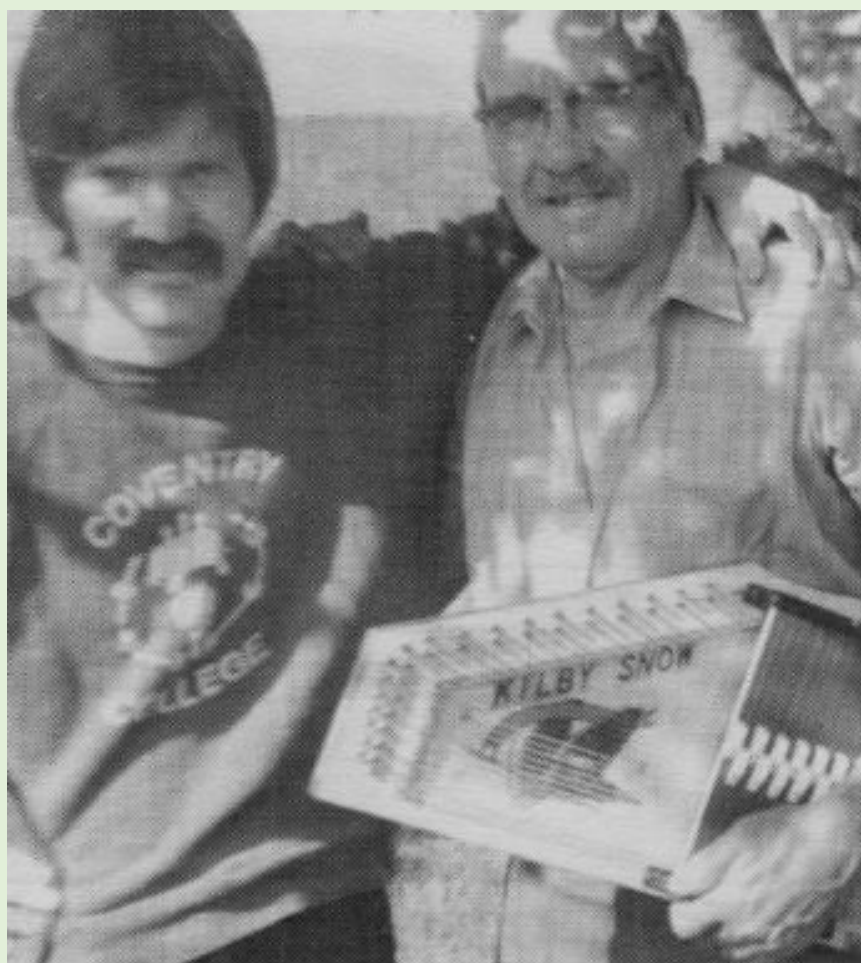
There were just two more tunes on the recording - Kilby's singing of the Hank Snow song must have triggered some kind of familiar ring as he follows it with an instrumental rendering of the old Cowboy Copas hit, 'Filipino Baby.' I knew the song 'Crazy Arms' from the country singer Ray Price, and Jerry Lee Lewis's first disc for Sun Records, but it had never occurred to me to play it instrumentally! I was also impressed by the way his busy forefinger did the bulk of the work. Kilby felt that the secret of his method was playing close to the

bridge ("I cain't git any music there at the top!"), where it was easier to effect the drag-notes and bluesy rolls by virtue of the strings being stiffer and more resistant there.

The visit concludes with a "Well, Kilby, we'd better be moseyin' down the road?" from Stuart. "Yeah, I guess we had," agrees Kilby. And that was it. Just time for a couple of photographs out in the front garden, and they were gone. But not before Kilby had complimented me on my autoharp pickin' and offered not to compete at Galax so as to give me a chance of winning! He didn't either, although thinking back, there was no autoharp contest at the Galax Convention in those days (not until about 1980), so maybe he was referring to the Folk Song competition, which had a huge entry and was where autoharpers had to enter in those days if they wanted to compete solo, and put the emphasis on vocal ability and the content of the song, rather than the dexterity of the playing.

I did not see Kilby again for three years, but that hour in Independence and the Folkways album in my collection had already left its mark. One of my regrets about those days is that time was always so short and I had no transport and was dependent on folk giving me lifts to places I needed to be. By the time I was on the road with the autoharp fifteen years later, self-employed, no school term contract hanging over me to force me back, and in the USA regularly, with my own transport, my hero Kilby had long passed away (20th March, 1980). I just wish there had been more time for me to spend quality time with this autoharp genius, maybe record him and

record with him, but I just have to be grateful that he felt inspired to visit me the way he did, that I was there.



Years later, I was one of the judges at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering when Kilby's son Jim won the autoharp contest there with his four tunes including a sizzling re-creation of his father's arrangement of 'Yakety Sax'!

Mike with Kilby. His autoharp was a modified Oscar Schmidt 'B' model.

I believe that Kilby was aware that he was onto something special, something unique - on the notes in the booklet with his Folkways album, Country Songs & Tunes with Autoharp (FA 3902), there's a significant quote; "I have many different slurs on the 'harp...that many people never heard played on the 'harp, all of my own making in sounds and times."

As one of my Galax friends once said to me, "Yeah, Kilby.... when the Lord made him, He threw away the mould!" Another memorable comment was, "He plays a mean autoharp, and he looks like part of it!" And, do you know, the autoharp was not even his favourite instrument - he loved the sliding Hawaiian sounds of the dobro, but played autoharp because he could "get to this one much easier."

There was to be just one further visit with him, in 1975, but that's another story.

On my CD Olde Time Journey (Heritage HRC 1291) of 2002 you can hear Kilby and I playing together on the tune 'Galax Blues', he on electric autoharp, me on guitar.

Mike Fenton

PROGRESS IS A TWO-EDGED SWORD **by Hilary Robinson**

We practice in order to improve, right? Well, those of us who do practice ... ahem. I'll not ask.

We work day after day at tunes and techniques that are beyond us. Sometimes the learning curve is very steep and seems endless, and just as we are convinced that we are stuck in a rut and will never master the next step, bingo! we wake up some nondescript day, pick up the 'harp and find we can do it! Haltingly at first but with - what was that p word again? - it gets easier. It's nice when others notice, but as long as WE notice, that's all that matters. Everything's wonderful.

Isn't it?

Here I pull a face. Those of you who know me need no further description. For friends I have yet to meet, it's a cross between a scowl and a grimace of pain. I play a tune I've

known for several years. I used to be so pleased I could play that! Now I think it sounds awful. Maybe it's just that one ...?

Nope.

They all sound terrible, and now I have to go back and re-learn every tune I've ever played in my six years as an autoharper. I know that's not a long time compared to some of you, but it's a lot of hard-won songs and tunes for me.

Bother.

And so it goes, one Great Leap Forward, followed by many back-sliding, slithering, slipping and staggering steps to play everything up to the new standard. Consolidate. That's a good word. I need time to consolidate before I even think about the next hill in front of me. Sound familiar?

Go on without me, I may be some time ...

Hilary Robinson

My Journey with the Autoharp. by Tony Archibald

In my third year at college, I was in a hall of residence in a block of ten rooms. In the same block there was a 35-year-old mature student, Eric Payne, who had been a cabinet maker by trade and had decided to train to be a teacher.

He had made himself a classic guitar which he allowed me to use to learn folk-style playing. He also had a 12-bar autoharp which fascinated me, and I often used to borrow it as well as his guitar.

Eric procured for me a student sized EKO guitar, and from such humble beginnings, I began to improve to such an extent that I used my guitar to accompany songs which I played and



sang with children in my classes. After leaving college, I taught in Leeds for a couple of years, then in 1969, I returned to the Isle of Man as a fully qualified teacher.

On visiting the Music Box, the only music shop in Douglas at that time, I bought an EKO Ranger guitar and at the same time, saw a 12-bar autoharp for sale and bought it and along with the guitar, I began using it in my classes, especially at Christmas time.



Of course, that autoharp did not have built-in electronics, so on one occasion, when we were having a carol concert in a local church, I placed my autoharp on top of the font and

played it flat, the foot creating a perfect sound box. (The instrument was set up in the old style for strumming on the right-hand side of the chord bars.)

I parted with that instrument, giving it to one of my pupils who had shown an interest in it and bought a 15-bar Chromaharp which I had for many years.



I had thought that I was the only person on the island who played autoharp until I met up with Beastie Dovey, and Jan Brodie about fifteen years ago. I was so impressed with their playing and their 21-bar instruments that I bought my first 21-bar autoharp, an Ashbury, and soon began to learn to play it not only as a strumming instrument, but for melody playing as well.

While I do not consider myself to be any more than a mediocre player, I do feel that I have improved considerably in the last half decade especially having had the opportunity to attend workshops with so many good tutors both here in the Isle of Man with Mike Fenton and Nadine Stah White and at Moniaive with Karen Mueller, Patrick Couton, Bob Fish and Heather Farrell-Roberts et al.

As some of you may know, I have a YouTube channel, "Threelegsoman", and have been putting videos on it for the last fifteen years.

I often get requests from subscribers and on one occasion was asked to sing a song called "Old Pendle". I did not know the song, so looked on YouTube for it to be able to learn it by ear. I also looked for the lyrics which I found on Mudcat café, and as is often the case, discovered in a thread there an extra verse which had been written by an E. Payne.

I sent a message to this person explaining that I had been introduced to folk music by my friend, Eric Payne and wondered if by any chance he was that E. Payne.

It turned out that it was the same Eric Payne, and so after 44 years we were able to converse initially via email and then telephone. Sadly though, Eric passed away just over a year later.

Tony Archibald



CIRCLE OF FIFTHS CHORD PROGRESSIONS MADE SIMPLE FOR AUTOHARPERS

by Charles Levy

I WANT TO DE-MYSTIFY a phrase commonly bandied about in our autoharping world: the circle of fifths. Are you music theory averse? Worry not: I'm going to talk about things you already know. The Circle of Fifths is frequently illustrated as a circle, resembling a clock face, with the key of C at top dead centre. (Google "circle of fifths" for a rich harvest of images.) All

twelve keys are represented. Moving clockwise, to the right of C, are the keys of G, D, A, and E. To the left of C, moving counter-clockwise, are the keys of F and Bb. If you have a standard 12,15 or 21 bar autoharp, these are the only keys you ever play in.

WHY IS IT CALLED "CIRCLE OF FIFTHS"? If I had named it, I might have considered something like "These Really Cool Chord Changes". Anyway, what are fifths? (No drinking jokes please.) You probably know that many folk and popular songs can be played with just three chords.

In C, the three are C, F and G (or more frequently G7.)

In G: G, C, and D or D7.

In F: F Bb and C or C7.

In D: D, G and A or A7.

In each of these four examples, the first chord named is the one chord (often shown as roman numeral one: I), the second is the four (IV) chord, and the third is the five (chord). The five chord is the fifth. That's what we're talking about in the circle of fifths. The numbers derive from the scale of the key. In the key of C, the first five notes of the scale are C, D, E, F, and G. Count 'em: G is the fifth. In tunes in a major key, the fifth is important: it creates the expectation that the melody will soon return to the one note. In C, G or G7 will work to get you back to C. In D, A or A7 will perform the same function. So that's what a fifth is in music.

What then, is a circle of fifths? In the key of C, G is the fifth. But G has a fifth of its own: D. (G, A, B, C, D). In the key of C, D is a "five of five", or V of V chord. The Hank Williams' standard, "Hey, Good Looking" is an example of a song using the D chord in the key of C. Here's the start of that song, in the key of C, with rhythm accompaniment chords:

C
Hey, Good Lookin', what'cha got cookin'
D7 G7 C
How's about cookin' something up with me?

The D7 chord, not part of the standard C, F, and G chords, provides a bridge to the G7 chord.

But this is just the beginning of the way circle of fifths chord progressions can work. We have just seen that we can use a D or D7 chord in the key of C to get us to the G7 chord in a more interesting way. But the fun does not stop there:

! Use the A7 chord to get to the D chord (A is the five of D)
! Use the E7 chord to get to the A chord. (E is the five of A)

For a 21-chord autoharp laid out in a "Bryan Bowers" type of arrangement, there is usually a row that is only, or predominantly seventh chords. These chords are laid out in the same order as the "circle of fifths", and may include some or all of the following chords: F7, C7, G7, D7, A7, E7 and B7. You don't have to memorize the order of these chords: they are right there on your 21-chord autoharp.

A widely known song from a century ago, "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" makes the unexpected jump from C to E7, and then proceeds from right to left along your sevenths row:

C E7
Five foot two, eyes of blue
A7
Oh, what those five feet can do
D7 G7 C
Has anybody seen my gal?

This isn't a complete discussion of all the cool tricks based on the circle of fifths, just lesson one. Although I gave my examples in the key of C, the same arrangements could be transposed to the keys of F or G. You might want to do that for extra credit ... and to become the teacher's pride,

Print out and study several different images of the circle of fifths, and work out what information has been included. It's a great aide-memoire!

Charles Levy

The Autoharp... & That Sound!

by Doug Harbour



It was an unusual hankering after a Sound – emanating deep down in my sub-conscious I believe – that lead me to take a fresh turn musically, in early 2014. Until that moment, I had been content to strum the guitar when accompanying myself singing solo or playing worship music in my church music group. The singing had started when three mates in my church youth group in Coventry had formed a three-piece guitar group, and they thought it would be good to have a vocalist. One of the group separately had started singing unaccompanied duets with me, and so it seemed natural to merge with the guitar trio. Then, aged 17, I started going out with a girl with a nice voice in our youth fellowship, so she hitched on and we became a 5-piece group, playing mainly from a set of American books called “Western Style Songs”- country style, though we also mixed it with UK Pop, plus a few American old-time hymns. Known initially as “The Holbrooks Guitar Group” (the district where we all, and the church, were located), we adopted the name “Evangelors”, and soon were performing in large gatherings of young people under the auspices of “Youth for Christ” (a movement founded by the evangelist Dr. Billy Graham). Our high point was performing on a Sunday evening in Coventry’s (then) revolutionary new shopping precinct. A record company came looking, and liked our sound, but, unfortunately, two of the band dropped out – including the rhythm guitarist. This prompted me to do a crash-course in rhythm-playing on a new Hofner guitar (cello-style with f-holes), so that the remainder of us could fulfil our bookings, mainly at the city’s youth clubs. We had to change to an acoustic group, and when we sent a demo-disc to the record company, they didn’t like it, so that was the end before the beginning of my recording career!

A year out of school and I was off to theological college in the heart of London. For one year I joined with other singers and musicians, now playing an Aria folk guitar. One day a student showed me a strange instrument I had never heard of or seen before. I don’t remember if he gave it, or sold it cheaply, to me, but I was now the possessor of a black German Rosenharp. I did not keep it for long, as I probably could not envisage how to use it as a band member. So, someone else had it from me, and that, I thought, was the end of that brief dalliance with the strange Autoharp, but for That Sound that lodged itself in my memory-banks ...

By now I had changed my guitar for a 12-string, and was using that as a pastor in my 4th employment in Baptist churches at Wallingford, following Romford (Youth Pastor), Cardiff, and Ashby-de-la-Zouch. It had served me well doing songs about Jesus with kids and playing in the worship services. Maybe it was the full-sounding “chang” of this acoustic instrument, and as I searched my memory, up emerged the word AUTOHARP. That was the Sound I’d been hankering after! So - as you do - I searched Google, and I was hooked! I discovered UKA, and a source for my new instrument – a music store in Kentucky, available on eBay. It was an OS “Americana”, with a pick-up and fine tuners, and strung with an E-chord (which Mike Fenton soon informed me was a bit of a waste of a chord bar - or that’s how I understood him) supposedly for Bluegrass. Without delay I was attending UKA gatherings and my first “Sore Fingers”, and soon appreciating Greg “Mr Fix-it” Schreiber who replaced a broken string and a sheared-off fine-tuner stud - the result of my unscrewing the stud before reducing the tension on the string (first lesson learned!). There I was the sole beginner student of Heather Farrell-Roberts. We just had one session, because, after struggling to play anything, I suddenly offered Buddy Holly’s “Every Day” – with that walk down the 7th chords – I had just learned from Mike; so, Heather decided I was already too advanced for a Beginner. But being then pitched into the main group – tutored by Karen Mueller – I was floundering for most of it, apart from “Ring of Fire”.

I made steady progress for the first few years, attending the tutoring weekends. Mike sold me a rebuilt OS “Wildwood” GD Diatonic. I noted comments about this model being nowhere near as good as the original, which I decided must have been some super instrument, as I love the sound of mine. Then, briefly and unusually enjoying being financially ‘flush’, I decided to ask Alec Anness to build me a second Chromatic ‘harp. I had read an article about the usefulness of two complementary-chorded chromatics if you were playing in a band using a wide variety of keys. So, I adapted my original OS to major on keys Bb, F, C & G, and asked Alec to build the new one around G, D, A and E, adding a couple of extra strings to help fill out the thin E chord range. This allowed me to add several ‘colour’ chord bars to each harp. I love this second harp, and particularly appreciate the flip-top chord bar sides to enable quick chord –bar changing mid-gig,

My retirement in 2009, after which my late wife went into a nursing home with dementia in 2014, opened up for me a social life which would be filled with Photography, making stretched-canvases for sale, and joining the local Photographic Club, where I became Chairman in 2018. My ailing wife’s visits by a Social Worker qualified me to join a team of people who would go into two academic institutions in Oxford to help train Social Work students.

I also joined an a Capella choir, and would occasionally sing solo parts and, of course, I continued with the autoharp, attending UKA Days, playing in church and open-mic evenings with my mate Trevor, who in the past had played session bass with the original Fleetwood Mac and also a little with Mike Batt (of the ‘Wombling Song’ fame). After my wife’s passing in 2018, I met a lady who would become my new wife a year later. This was the start of a series of life-changing experiences, which began with an unknown-to-me African prophet in a South London black congregation delivering a personal calling back to

Christian ministry, specifically divine-healing. This took off immediately, encouraged by my successor at Wallingford. By now the a-Capella choir had folded, I had quit the ten years of canvas-printing, and I had left the Photo Club, selling most of my kit. Then Covid-19 hit, and the change in my life was almost complete. I wrote a book about the experience, entitled "My Late Harvest (An old man dreams)". * A second book followed*, and I am now on a third. Like so many, I discovered Zoom, and soon everything – church services, family meetings, social work training and autoharp sessions – were accessible only through that medium. In May last year, a stocktake of my life and interests took place, and mostly it centred on "Where to go with the Autoharp?" UKA meetings were suspended, Church services were beginning to open up and there might be opportunities in the worship band. But the monthly Friday evening 'open mic' sessions were still off-limits for me. I took notice of the novel approach taken by Todd Crowley and Hal Weeks with the 'Prizm' chord layout on the chromatic instrument, with no major chord bars, but with use of two fingers to form major and various other chords. Was this worth trying? I didn't really want to disturb my two 'workhorse' chromatics; so then I discovered Bay Allen (a fellow Church Minister) who had produced a similar arrangement for Diatonics, called the 'Dia-Tandem'. With his online guidance I recut my D/G Diatonic bars, and we arranged for him to make me a new set of chord bars so I could employ it fully, but this did not happen. So, I am currently in limbo with my Diatonic.

What do I really enjoy about the autoharp, and what gives me a kick? First, I've always been about playing Rhythm, and I enjoy playing it quite loudly – amplified of course! The mistakes I make are usually overlooked because folks in church and at the open mic love the unusual and full sound. So, I eagerly lap up the sessions Mike gives on rhythm. I also enjoyed Karen Torrel-Hoffmann's session on Rock Rhythms on the recent Free UKA Day. I've decided plucking melodies is not for me – because I'm just not interested; but I will need to work on interspersing pinching & plucking between rhythm chords. I'm into pop and rock, ballads, a bit of country, and of course, modern Christian worship music, which some time ago was categorized as 'Earnest Soft Rock'! The other thing I love best with the Autoharp is making and using new Chord Bars (cutting the felts, that is) to add some colour. I have all three Diminished sevenths, a few Minor sevenths (which I tend to keep on rather than the Minors), and the odd Augmented and Major Seventh. Once again, I find Mike to be the best encourager for doing this, so I always make a beeline for his sessions.

As most of you know, I am on the UKA Committee, and have served as Membership Secretary for a few years (a capacity in which I served at my Photo Club). I grew unhappy with the system – if you can call it that – I inherited; so when I heard about the aforementioned club's switch to the automated MemberMojo platform, I persuaded the committee to adopt it for UKA, and it has worked very well for two years. I try to be patient and helpful for the few who seem to struggle with it.

To end with, I will tell you the favourite pieces I have sung and played: (1) "Just when I needed you most", sung by Randy Van Warmer, with an autoharp break by John Sebastian (so Mike informs me). I started singing this while my late wife was 'leaving' me through Alzheimer's Disease, and some listeners commented that I was expressing my grief through it; (2) "Goodnight, my Angel" (Lullaby) by Billy Joel became a favourite piece of my acapella choir, and they kindly made a special recording of it to be played at Linda's funeral, which

was very touching. I have sung and played this with the autoharp, but there are lots of challenging chord changes; (3) to give a balance on my emotional states, "You Raise Me Up" (Westlife), which I dedicated to my new wife Ingria; (4) "Scarlet Ribbons", as sung by Harry Belafonte – a song which is full of tender emotion, but also with a message about the power of simple faith – so typical for a child; (5) my own take - one of hundreds – on Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" having a tune loved by everybody, and lyrics seemingly understood by nobody (it's about Sex in the Bible – and there is rather a lot of the one in the other!), So my version takes the mickey out of it); finally (6) "Bless the Lord, O my Soul" – a double Grammy award winner for its author and performer Matt Redman, now established as one of most popular worship songs in the UK churches. You see, it's all because of THAT SOUND...

To me

Doug Harbour (Rev)

*You can obtain a copy of my first book "My Late Harvest" (paperback or eBook) from www.lulu.com and searching with my name Doug Harbour. (There's not much about the autoharp in it, but it does get a mention! And if you see next to it a book entitled "Perverts for Christ", it's not by me, but all efforts by me to have it shifted have fallen on deaf ears at Lulu!)

*"A Socially-distanced Healing Ministry" also available from lulu.com

**Please send your contributions for the
Winter Edition of Autoharp Notes to
me before 1st November, 2022**

**All contributors will be included in the
draw for FREE UK Autoharps
membership for 2023, which will be
drawn during our November UKA Day**

Thank you!

SHEET MUSIC RESOURCES

by Helen Slade

Like many of you, I suspect, I am always on the look-out for free sheet music that I can adapt or use to play on the Autoharp. I have got quite good at finding things, but sometimes there seems to be no option but to buy it, so then comes the hunt for the cheapest option.

I recently thought I would explore a resource that I had seen mentioned in Autoharp Quarterly in the past, and also referred to in YouTube videos I have watched by Tom Schroeder.

Charles Whitmer and Tom Schroeder run the Midwest Autoharp Academy in Kansas and Tom makes many instructional YouTube videos. Charles Whitmer also has an impressive CV and has spent a lifetime teaching and arranging music. His scores are all available on the website for JW Pepper (https://www.jwpepper.com/myscore/Charles_Whitmer) and are available as digital downloads. They are very reasonably priced at \$3 for a 'fake book' which can be downloaded and saved to your computer and then printed out as single sheets or as a booklet. I have purchased four of them: two Irish Fiddle Tunes and two Irish Waltzes. There are 12 pieces in each book which makes them very good value in my mind. And you can be sure that they will work well on your instrument as they are arranged for Autoharp. No adaptation needed unless you have non-standard chord bars.

There are literally hundreds of other tunes in a wide variety of genres, and you are sure to find something that you like and which fits your style. He includes his own tablature which is clearly explained in the front of each booklet. Since they are copyrighted, I cannot reproduce any of them here, but if you have access to the Autoharp Quarterly for Winter 2021, the only piece Charles

Whitmer ever actually composed himself, called Autoharp Breakdown, is included in that edition, and it is quite fun to play. He also has a YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Li_omR7exb7iZnHXbHERQ/ where you can hear him playing.

Helen Slade

FACE TO FACE

by Heather Farrell-Roberts

The week before Easter I went to Sore Fingers Summer School at Kingham Hill School in the Cotswold near Stow-on-the-Wold.

It was the first one for 3 years and it was so lovely being around other musicians, talking face to face, laughing together and just enjoying being together again and great workshops.

During that week I was teaching 1:1 classes and it reinforced the need for actual face to face time. My students came with many questions like 'What is home position?'

'How do you do that when you play?'

'How can I make my playing more emotional?'

And many more questions that are impossible over Zoom.

For instance ...

One played a tune they had learnt and wanted help with an arrangement and how to be more accurate. I had to quickly learn the tune to help with that one.



Another was how can I improve my accompaniment when singing. So, it meant listening to not just the singing and accompaniment but also the words and asking what they felt when singing the song.

So why am I telling you all this?



Class photo with tutors Les Gustafson-Zook (front left), Lyn Jones (next to Les) and Heather Farrell-Roberts (2nd front right or 4th front left – you choose).

Well, Sore Fingers also runs a Sore Fingers October Weekend from 21st to 23rd. Arriving Friday afternoon/evening and running through to about 5pm on the Sunday.

The tutors this year will be Lyn Jones and myself sharing the teaching.

We have not fully planned the weekend, that will happen at the beginning of September, but I do know I will be teaching a class on open chording on a diatonic harp. If you do not have a diatonic 'harp I am sure we can sort that one way or another.

So why not book a place. You can stay on site with full board and bed, or stay in a B&B, or caravan/camper van, if you have one, or if very brave you can camp.

There will be a concert on the Saturday night and the bar will be open Friday and Saturday night. It's always fun jamming in the bar.

We would love to see you there and it's great to be around other musicians and soak up the atmosphere.

TEMPTED?

Go on do it ... you won't regret it.

To book go to the Sore Fingers Summer School website and you will find all the info there. <https://www.sorefingers.co.uk/>

Happy Harping, Heather x

BBC Last Night of the Proms 2021

What a difference a day makes ...

by Anne Pyne

Monday morning Sue Edwards sends out a Facebook message - the BBC are making a short film for 'Last Night of the Proms', looking for anyone who's taken up a new instrument in Lockdown, the film to be shown IN 5 DAYS TIME ... That's me. Just don't give it any more thought, respond now otherwise you'll chicken-out. Monday evening, I compose a witty response. Surely The likelihood of getting a reply is minute.



Tuesday morning my iPad pings: a message from the Producer. I am with Artist friends and drop my cup of coffee in shock. I have to provide 5 photos of myself, in different poses, with the harp, preferably outside and will I come to the Royal Albert Hall to film? Or I can make a film at home with whatever equipment is available...COVID caution and much-cancelled trains dictate I'm not going to London.

PANIC! My husband was a film-maker but I've never made a video of any kind, never even held a video camera. Have to use my phone or iPad. The only friend available takes 5 photos - she's never even done that on an iPad before. I have no head in any of the pictures! It's a big worry particularly when she falls over backwards on my steep garden. We repeat and it's OK.

I send in the shots with answers to their list of questions - such as why did I take up a new instrument in lockdown? How did I teach myself? What benefits were there?

Another message from the producer: they love the shots in my flower-filled garden, full-length, in sunny, idyllic Summer weather. Please film myself full-length, same outfit including shoes, playing the 'harp. Damn, I have a much-needed haircut booked: have to cancel, wrong for continuity.

Day of filming: weather is atrocious: windy, intermittent showers. NO FRIEND AVAILABLE

AT SHORT NOTICE TO FILM ME. BIG PANIC: how the devil am I going to film myself - How will I know how far away I need to be to get a full-length shot? And the wind is blowing a Gale.

All day I wait for calmer drier weather. At 4 o'clock The light it's beginning to cloud over and I've no choice but to rehearse quickly and get it done. I Try to find the correct position – have to hang iPad over the fence and walk backwards UP A SLOPE. I fall over and nick my chin on 'harp. BLOOD everywhere. Run into house to sort out. Big bruise tomorrow. Tomorrow doesn't matter - get to it NOW.

It's done. Here we go. Send off the film - wind howling in the background. Surely, I'm too far away for the 'Harp to be heard? This'll never be any good. But they have all sorts of magic they can do with editing, don't they? They probably will not use me now. Feelings of sadness at a lost opportunity ... BUT it's good news! they've said it's, OK.

No-one has yet said I'll get past the final cut ... I don't know I'm 'IN' until 1.5 hours before the program starts. At the news I shout with glee in my kitchen - luckily only the blackbirds and robins can hear. I send emails to all and sundry 'Watch tonight at 20.45 BBC 2'

Open bottle of Prosecco. 20.45 at the beginning of the interval, Katie Derham introduces the film. They've kept in the backwards wobble, 'I look like a very ancient lady but I don't care - I have 2 whole minutes of fame at last - and all because of the Autoharp!

Anne Pyne



A 52 Year Love Affair Finally Embraced by June Barke

Some background first ...

Born into a musical family, I was always singing and dancing. At 9 or 10 years old during school holidays, I organised concerts at our local OAP club, some friends sang with me and I 'made up' simple dance routines. The OAP's loved it. So did I.

I joined the Junior section of Lochgelly Cooperative Ladies Choir, a Scottish Country Dancing group and Lochgelly Ladies Pipe Band where I had lessons on the side drum, I took to the drum like a duck to water, I loved the rhythms, the more complex the better. When I was about 11, I heard Shirley Abicair playing a Zither - I fell in love with the sound and

pleaded for one for that Christmas and for a couple of Christmases and birthdays afterwards - but to no avail. When I was about 13, I was bought a Hohner Button Accordion (Melodeon) - I think my parents hoped for a female Jimmy Shand - I didn't love it, but I did learn to play it. Now at about 13, I was singing, dancing, playing my melodeon and learning to play the side drum. I also sung solo pieces and danced competitively winning prizes and medals. Life was indeed sweet. However - my life was about to undergo a fairly drastic change! When I was 14, in order to get my younger brother into a 'good' school, we moved to a 'new town' quite a distance away. This meant that my singing, dancing, pipe band and friends were no more as it was much too far to travel on public transport. All of my musical interests were killed at that moment ... the new town had nothing like that to offer. I don't know how I survived that.

What happened later...

Over the many years that followed, I had a go at lots of instruments, sort of liking them all but not loving them and I sung with many choirs and amdram groups, even writing five and six part harmonies to existing melodies.

About 9 years ago, after telling my husband Peter about how I had wanted a Zither when I was a girl – he said he'd buy me one for my birthday and after much research, I discovered that there was now a 'chorded zither' which had been renamed "autoharp" - weird name really as it absolutely doesn't do anything automatically. Anyway, a 30-year-old OS21, bought on eBay duly arrived, it was shiny and looked OK, but it didn't sound so great and I had no idea what to do with it anyway. I'd read about Mike Fenton who was a UK autoharp expert, so I asked Mike if he would look at my autoharp. We travelled to Mike's home and he moved the chordbars around a bit, showed me how to tune it, then he played it - WOW! I absolutely adored the sound and the very first time I held it properly and strummed it, then felt the vibrations from the sound - I knew that this was, without any doubt whatsoever, the instrument I'd wanted my entire life. It was a beautiful, gentle sounding instrument but as I was to play it in my Folk Band, I needed it to be able to sometimes sing a little louder, so a passive pick-up was fitted. And so, my journey with the autoharp began, it's quite a rare instrument – with not a lot of players in the UK. I taught myself to play - I



could read music so maybe that helped. I joined UK Autoharps and signed up for a workshop where I learned that there was no right or wrong way to play, and that, like me, most people were self-taught. However, my instrument didn't sound quite so good when compared to some of the fabulous instruments at the workshop. I had my first attack of Autoharp envy! I had bought an entry level instrument but as I was progressing, I knew that, as there were better sounding instruments out there, I wanted one.

I bought a fully electric autoharp on eBay USA - a 'Lancer 85C' which had been used by a rock band in the 70's - It has a most unusual sound and is apparently quite rare. However, on arrival, it was completely unplayable, it was just a mess with chord bars stuck down with glue,

some of the strings were, I think taken from a very old piano and there were many springs missing - I complained and the seller offered a pretty hefty refund, or I could send it back. I decided to keep it and sort it out as by this time, I had done some work on my own instrument and sort of knew my way around it. I mended the Lancer over a period of weeks and have played it quite a few times in concert - it has a really big sound so is great to accompany my choir. Some body once said, a bit fancifully, that it sounded like a heavenly choir. Maybe it does just a wee bit.

I was happy with my 2 autoharps until two years later, when Sue Edwards offered to let me try her Luthier built instrument - Wow! That was an eye opener. Luthier built instruments are indeed fabulous but expensive, however - honestly, autoharp envy is definitely not something easily ignored, so once again, lovely hubby said, I'll buy one for your birthday, I hesitated for a whole nano second, then ordered a chromatic Desert Rose from Pete d'Aigle. Five months later it arrived and even after it had travelled all the way from Seattle, it was still perfectly in tune - impressive! I now had three autoharps, all of which do sound quite different. Another couple of years later, I learnt that Pete d'Aigle was experimenting with a carbon fibre bodied autoharp. I already owned a carbon fibre ukulele so I knew that the carbon fibre helped to make a fuller sound. The new instrument was launched, I rather liked how it sounded. So, yes, you've guessed, yet another autoharp arrived from across the pond in time for Christmas.



I really don't intend getting another instrument (honest) but, I did suggest to Pete d'Aigle that (in theory) a sixty-three-string chromatic instrument might be possible, by utilizing the closer spaced strings such as on the Sparrowharp, but on a full-sized autoharp body. Now if that did happen, well I reckon the old Autoharp envy bug would probably strike again and I'd just have to have one. Hey ho! We only live once.

June Barke

How I Got My Autoharp

by Janice Rock

I decided during the COVID lockdown that I needed something musically related I could learn and practice while isolated at home.

I played folk guitar while in high school, but I did not continue playing guitar through the many years following high school because it hurt to try to play without callouses on my fingers.

When the COVID lockdown started I researched instruments online which could accompany my old folk songs and camp counsellor song collection. I came across the autoharp and ordered one. I had never even held an autoharp before ordering one.

Buying that OS 21 chord autoharp was great therapy for the stress of the past two years and I happily practice daily for 1/2 hour.

I am not musically talented, but I enjoy playing it and that is what matters. I am grateful for the Quarantunes lessons and UK Autoharp sponsored Karen Mueller lessons for instruction and new music to play.

Janice Rock

Casting My Memory Back

by Karen Torell Hoffman

There's a great line from a Van Morrison tune called "Brown-Eyed Girl". It's a wordy-bit to say in the context of singing the tune, but I feel it's a good descriptor for the article I offer here.



Van Morrison recalls "making love in the green grass", I recall rekindling my love of making music on a remembered instrument from my short "semi-hippy" past. (Whoa, a bit of rhyme there!)

"Casting My Memory Back" I remember discovering an old black, Oscar Schmidt autoharp in a garage sale. I tuned it up with a socket wrench using my

questionably tuned upright piano at the time. It sounded good enough to my ears given my love at that time of playing guitar and singing folk and rock tunes. It's 1969. I put that autoharp to good use for a Christmas show.

I was assisting my 1st spouse through college, and supporting our young son working at a British-Styled Prime Rib Restaurant The place was called Five Crowns. We waitresses were dressed as English Serving Wenches complete with tight bodices, push up bras, and crinoline petticoated skirts while serving up slabs of beef and Yorkshire puddings to primarily wealthy Newport Beach folks. The show was a farce for the Van Franks's owners of Five Crowns and of Lawry's Prime Rib in Los Angeles California. I got myself nearly fired for inviting the Mexican kitchen help out to sing the John Lennon tune "Imagine" with me. Yes, rock and roll were always my favourite music to play and sing.

Moving fast forward some 36 years through returning to college myself, practicing as a Chiropractor, the usual "laundry list of life", and it's 2006. I've just survived cancer twice. My left hand won't behave from Chemo so guitar and piano playing is frustrating me. I need an instrument that I can sing with and play rock and folk on again! Casting My Memory Back ... I recall playing the autoharp and how much fun and how simple it was, or so I remembered. So begins a second ongoing journey with our marvellous "box of strings", The Autoharp!

Since 2006 I have played all types and genres of music from fiddle tunes, to

O'Carolan, to Old Timey, and of course my first love Rock and Roll and Folk Rock. Performing in sets and offering classes at California Autoharp Gathering since 2011 or so and attending Seattle Autoharp Week, and several other West Coast events has been just a joy. Classes with wonderful players/teachers like Karen Mueller, Cathy Britell, Les G., Charles Whitmer, Gatherings, and many others and now ZOOM. You can never learn too much, play too much or sing too much!

ZOOM online has given me the opportunity to host a 3rd and 4th Saturday of each month open mic called Rock Mostly which starts at 9:30AM Pacific Daylight Time and is open to everyone. It was tremendous fun to do an online Rock and Roll workshop for the prestigious Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in 2021. Many of you have honoured me by attending the UK Day workshop where I did a two-hour Rock and Roll workshop this past June 18th. Hope you had a good time with the materials presented.

It's said that even the most accomplished musicians never stop taking lessons to improve, be inspired, stretch their horizons and just share knowledge. So many tunes, so many songs, so few waking hours in a day. Hope to see all of you folks some time, some ZOOM, keep "pinch, pluck, strumming and pressing those delightful chord buttons"!

Your Fellow Autoharper and Partner in Lifelong Musical Immersion

Karen Torell Hoffman ktorell@ca.rr.com



So Many Things Are Happening in Our World by Marcia Dungan

So many things are happening in our world. Some good and some bad and some just plain confusing. Just a minute ago I got an alert on my cell phone. There is a wildfire out of control about 10 miles from our house. People living in that area have just been given a level 3 evacuation notice, which means – GO NOW. We've had unseasonably cool rainy weather in our dusty little central Washington town. This is only our third day of typical hot weather. I've settled into a bit of a lull – a contentment - and I'm feeling unprepared for the fire season.

Once again, it's time to think about the things that are important to me and to my family. What do we value the most? What do we not want to lose? I'm sure it is no surprise to anyone that my autoharp and mountain dulcimer are on the top of that list. They will be sitting right next to the "GO NOW" box containing my Bible and my girl's baby pictures.

As I look back over the last few years, I've come to realize how much I have been blessed by music. The dictionary definition of gratitude is "the feeling of thankfulness and appreciation." That's a good description of how I feel when I pick up my autoharp. I'm not a master at either instrument, but I totally enjoy the variety of sounds I can make, and I know a positive experience is about to happen. I sense the world cheering me on. It is not only a comfort to me, but it inevitably draws others in. It's like a mini environment that allows me to deal with stresses, express emotion, and share experiences that will create memories for a lifetime. I've also been told that I can look forward to better sleep, better immunity, higher self-esteem, lower blood pressure, less anxiety and depression, stronger relationships, and higher levels of optimism when I play music.

So, while I'm not necessarily looking forward to the fire season, or the next pandemic, or baby food shortages or high gas prices, I am looking forward to spending time with my best friend – my music. If something awful happened and I don't have my autoharp or dulcimer, I will simply sing the tunes that I now play. It won't be as pretty and may not draw a crowd (at least a friendly one), but the autoharp and dulcimer have become such a part of my life that I know music will ALWAYS be in me.

Happy playing!

A Personal Autoharp Memoir

by Bob Lander

The tale starts more than 65 years ago when I discovered an instrument belonging to my late father: one of those old black harps with 12 bars and a distinctive floral decoration that I subsequently understood to be of pre-war East German manufacture. I remember strumming the thing using a spent match as a pick. As the youngest child in a God-fearing family my playing attempts were probably limited to corny Sunday School tunes – no gramophone or TV in our home then!

Fast forward to March 2016 when my wife was seeing out her time as an Anglican priest in the Canterbury Diocese in Kent and we were one day browsing in the Hobgoblin Music shop in the city. I chanced upon a new Ashbury 21 bar "De Luxe" autoharp and without

having any real clue whether it was good, bad or indifferent, was persuaded to part with £399.00 for the harp and a further £46.95 for rather dismal "Ashbury standard lightweight foam case" This instrument reignited my interest and I still have it in pristine condition although today it is never played.

My wife retired in 2017 after the sad death of our 33 years old daughter who had studied and lived in Glasgow; playing and touring with a well-known Scottish band. We moved to Scotland that same year to be near other family members. My wife quickly got involved with several ukulele groups and can rightly be termed a uke enthusiast if her swelling collection of instruments is an indicator.



Now resident in Scotland I wished to develop my autoharp skills and over the past 3 years have commissioned two bespoke harps from Cambridge luthier Alec Anness, one a resonator lap harp (pictured below).and the other a more conventional instrument that I still prefer to play cross handed lap style although this was not the intention. Both

instruments have become treasured possessions, play well, sound good, look good and hold their tune remarkably.

Recently I have been welcomed into the bosom of the thriving Livingston Ukulele Club (as the sole autoharp player) and although not much of an extrovert or singer (as M, G & W regulars have already discovered) I have been roped in to play with the group at various local gigs which is proving most enjoyable.

My grateful thanks to Jan and all others behind UK Autoharps who facilitate activities and keep the show on the road.

Bob Lander

An Acrostic Poem for the Autoharp

by Jane Reynolds

An instrument for all

Unique

Terrifying to tune

Orchestra on its own

Harping is happiness

Absolutely celestial

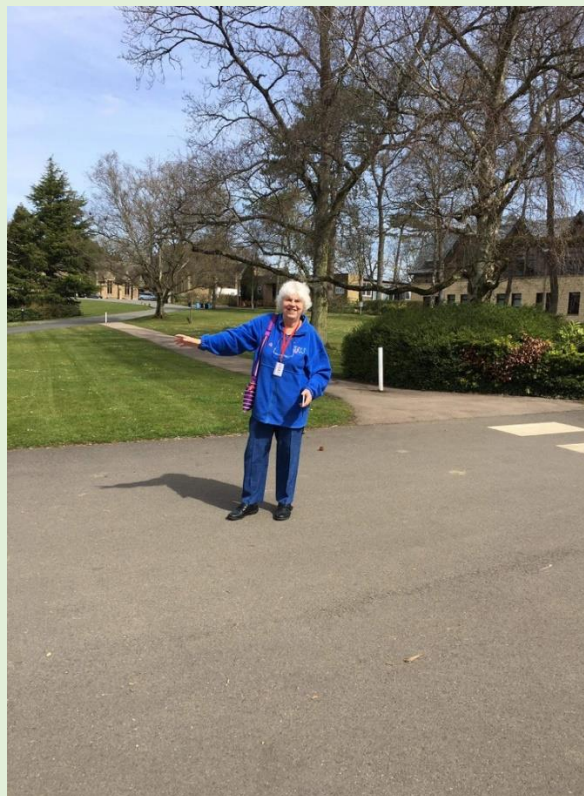
Resonant

Play it with friends for fun!

Jane Reynolds

Sore Fingers Summer School 2022

by Sue Edwards



Well, I was so looking forward to SFSS 2020, my 20th year in a row!

Alas, it was not to be then, but like so many others, I was thrilled to learn it really was going ahead this April – providing I could prove my status was negative at the gate! I was even more excited to realise that I was able to share transport with Heather and arrive a day earlier :D

After holding our breath on the Saturday morning, watching the little test strips, we were both very relieved to see just the correct single Control lines, and soon finished packing Heather's car, and whoopee, head off to Kingham! This time, I had decided to take the Songwriting class, but naturally, brought along a few autoharps – what else!

Heather and I explored the accommodation which had altered, sorry to see we no longer had the usual lounge/kitchen available, but there was a kitchen area available for teas etc. It was lovely to meet up with the tutors and the regular SFSS staff, and we had a very posh meal Saturday evening on site.

Sunday, whilst the tutors caught up with jet lag, we were able to relax for a while, and take in the atmosphere of the return to Kingham. It was lovely to keep meeting friends as they arrived, many not seen since 2019.

The hard-working staff who were up late sorting out theatre problems, accommodation problems and the usual last-minute snags that they have to deal with, were still very busy, but helped me to set up a charity stall in the main hall. I had an idea to see if we could raise some money with donated music items being available to buy, to fund some school rucksacks from a great Yeovil charity, School in a Bag – these will be sent to help Ukrainian children who had escaped to other countries, like Romania. This idea was enthusiastically taken up, and as students enrolled Sunday afternoon, the number and variety of items donated to my stall

kept on filling the table! Some folk started buying things straight away, also donating money – a great start to the week.

I did enjoy the songwriting class, and of course, joined a scratch band, so the week just flew by. I was greatly helped with running the charity stall by Martin Froud, Heather, and Ishbel, as it was continually busy at the morning and afternoon tea breaks – we surpassed the original

amount I hoped to raise of at least £200, ending up with £2040!! A wonderful tribute to the generosity of musicians, especially with the financial difficulties many had faced during the pandemic. Luke Simon of School in a Bag was thrilled, as this meant 102 filled school rucksacks were sponsored by our wonderful SFSS gathering.



Left to Right: John Wirtz, Heather Farrell-Roberts Sue Edwards & Martin Froud.

The concerts were great, even though I had a senior moment as our scratch band, Reverse Potatoes, started playing on Thursday evening, as I could not remember the very first line of the song I had written! Our fiddle player, Nick, whispered the words in my ear, and we were able to get going – what a funny moment, and a lovely, supportive audience too.

It was a great week, and I am now looking forward to the October weekend – autoharp class of course, and that just might keep me going until next Easter!

It is such a wonderful atmosphere with so many other musicians, many instruments, the jamming sessions, concerts, and the camaraderie, I do hope to see many of you there!



What am I?

By Christophe Amineau

People say that I am a harp.

I am as much a harp as the autoharp is automatic, but this allows me to write this quiz, as you might be interested by the great family of harps.

People say that I am French.

Yet, I and the autoharp are born in the same country and raised in the USA.

No frog chromosome.

People could as well say I am the Queen.

I and the autoharp can be played on the same time by the same player.

I and the autoharp:

can be chromatic or diatonic,

have roughly the same notes,

make newbies wonder how to carry me with hands (or not),

drive newbies willing to play single notes crazy

Guess ...



Instrument Maker & Furniture Restorer

Based in the Cambridgeshire Fens, Alec Anness makes Autoharps, Hammered Dulcimers and Banjos. Use the links below to view examples of his work.

<https://www.alecanness.co.uk>

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Email: info@alecanness.co.uk

Postal address: 7 Ely Road, Sutton, Ely Cambridgeshire, CB6 2QD

A Useful Idea

From Christophe Amineau

In case this might help, as I play lap style without crossing my hands (left-handed on a right-handed autoharp), I find useful to read quickly the string I pluck, but the chart printed on the bottom is inconvenient. So, I have stuck under the strings, in the middle of the autoharp, next to the chord bar set, a little "ribbon" of paper on which I typed the name of each string. See attached.

Background colours code used (because see colours is faster than read letters)

Black for not flat notes, like piano

Red for C, like the classical harp

Blue for F, like the classical harp

Green for A

White for the other notes

Hap-ping, Christophe (See spreadsheet link on next page)



Heartstrings at St Nicholas Church Hardwicke

by Pat Gilbert

On 25th June Heartstrings Autoharp Group from Gloucestershire were joined by Mike Fenton to play for a fete at St Nicholas Church, in Hardwicke. It was the first time we had all played together since before the Pandemic and it was well received by those visiting the church.

We played a variety of folk tunes including Polly Swallow, composed by Mike, who also played some solo pieces.

Pictured from left, clockwise, are Wendy Taylor, Pat Gilbert, Mike Fenton, Pauline Phillips, Paul Roberts and Sue Edwards

Pat Gilbert

