

AUTOHARP



QUARTERLY

Spring 2020

Volume 32 Issue 3

AUTOHARP QUARTERLY

PERSON OF
THE YEAR

Cathy
Britell

COVID-19

Autoharping Under
Quarantine

A black and white photograph of a room. In the foreground, an autoharp is visible on a surface. Behind it, a dark wooden chair stands. To the right, a window looks out onto a bright, leafy outdoor scene. A plant is visible near the window. The text is overlaid on the image.

Cathy Britell

Autoharp Quarterly Person of the Year

By Judy Dugas

Photos by Keith Daigle



The staff of the *Autoharp Quarterly*, in its ongoing efforts to promote and showcase the autoharp community, has once again gotten together to recognize a person within our community who is currently contributing their time, their expertise and talents to promote the autoharp and encourage those who play this unique instrument.

This year's recipient has taught the autoharp at several community colleges in the Seattle area and continues to make private lessons available at local music shops and other venues. She has taught and continues to teach at many festivals both in the U.S. and at the Sore Fingers workshop in England.

She has won the Championship Autoharp contest at the Walnut Valley Festival and placed in the finals at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. She was the 2012 recipient of the Autoharp Hall of Fame for her laudable efforts in promoting the autoharp.

Over the years she has, to varying degrees, helped set up, design, and maintain some of our most recognized autoharp websites available, including Cyberpluckers, Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering, and the Seattle Autoharp Week sites. She is featured on the marvelous Autoharp Legacy recording album, as well as her own, *Songs: One Autoharp, One Guitar, Two Voices*.

She has published and continues to fine tune the very popular teaching book, *It's An Autoharp*. Her unique *Autoharp for Kids* book is an available free download for all who need help learning chords.

Autoharp Quarterly proudly bestows the Autoharp Person of the Year to the very talented and tireless performer, teacher and organizer - Cathy Britell.

AQ: Congratulations Cathy on your well deserved recognition. You have accomplished so very much in our community, and continue to explore new technologies for teaching our humble instrument. Can you tell us what has given you some of the warmest, "I am so happy I did this" feelings?

CATHY: Well, I am so very humbled. I truly appreciate all that the *Autoharp Quarterly* does in highlighting and promoting this amazing little instrument. It's all about the music. Playing and enjoying the music with others. And, for me, I guess it's all about saying "Yes." I am so very happy that I said yes when Bob Woodcock first told me about the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, and why I needed to go there. I said yes, packed up my tent, my autoharp, 16-year-old son, Patrick, and drove from sea to shining sea. That first yes started it all.

Then when Les Gustafson-Zook asked if I thought we could work together to build the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering, I said yes, and he, John Arthur and I put that together.

When some friends asked me if I wanted to bring my autoharp and help them form an Old-Time band, I said yes, and the Sound Crossing Band is still going strong after 25 great years.

When Jon ten Broek wanted to form a duo, I said yes, and we ended up making wonderful music in the Northwest and then traveling around the country seeing where we could make the autoharp shine.

When friends asked me to join them at Winfield (*at the Walnut Valley Festival*), I said yes, packed up my tent and my instruments and headed east again to join this amazing event.

When old college choir mate William Limbach asked whether I wanted to play and sing duets I said yes, and we did a lot of traveling, playing, singing, and recording. And again, when Bryan Bowers wanted me to help him set up an autoharp week in Seattle, I said 'Yes,' and SAW is still going strong 14 years later.

Yes often leads to a lot of work, but it's always been worth it for me.

AQ: Indeed. We are all very glad for your willingness to say yes and then follow through on those commitments. Our community is all the better for it. As you know, I love the stories of how we each came to the music. So, miss Cathy, how did you get into the music?

CATHY: Well, I guess you can say that I got into music when I was 7-years-old. The Minneapolis Symphony came to our small town in Minnesota; and while they were playing, I sneaked down from the bleachers where my parents were sitting and crawled into the middle of the orchestra while they were playing. Yeah. I wanted to hear what it was like from the inside.

I was lucky that the state of Minnesota had a program to promote musical education in the public schools to make sure all children received the joy and brain expanding experience of playing an instrument.

As part of that program, I became a clarinet player in my school orchestra. Later, I was awarded a music scholarship to college. That was so cool because I got to go to LA and see the big city and what the West Coast was all about. Without that music program I probably wouldn't have gotten the scholarship and gone to college. So that was neat I got to do that.

As a backup, I did take my pre-medical courses 'cause from the very beginning I thought I might want to be doctor if I could afford it. But my major was in music and that's why the college had me there in the first place.

AQ: I wish school boards across the country could take note here. Music education has been researched and proven to be a mind expanding, worthwhile educational agenda. So a program for music education ultimately enabled you to fulfill your dream to become a doctor.

CATHY: Yes. I started out working for the VA and was responsible for developing a lot of spinal cord injury programs. My specialty is rehabilitation medicine, but particularly sub-specialized in spinal cord injury and also ventilator care.

People who couldn't breathe.

So I had some post-polio patients from way back in the polio epidemic. And then I had a lot of high-level spinal cord injury patients. Just trying to make it possible for these people to live in a community, to have jobs, to survive and get a slice of life.

One of the reasons I did this was because nobody else wanted to deal with these people.

When you work with people who have lived with a significant disability, whether a long time or a short time, you see they've evolved a strength of character and personality.

We can learn a lot from people who live with a disability. I find them to be the most wonderful patients to take care of. Everybody has their own strength. My job was to help them find how to function as best they could.

AQ: That skill, that inclination, as well as commitment to do what you were doing seems to transfer to what you continue to do in the autoharp community. Helping others find their way to making music in the best way they possibly can.

So I guess you could say that what you did as a doctor seems to have "bled" over into the way you "operate" in the autoharp community. (*She groaned, we both laughed.*)

So you started in music and then became a doctor. I imagine that kept you busy. Were you able to continue making music in your work?

CATHY: I had been a professional orchestral musician before I went to medical school, but for a long time I had my physician career and the kids and had no time for any music at all.

Oh, I played the piano a little bit, but I didn't really have any time for music. When the boys were 12 and 14, I began working part time because, really, (she laughs) when your children are teenagers a parent has to be home.

John was very involved in his medical practice, and at that point I had cut back on my work significantly so that I could be home when the kids got out of school and spend time with them doing

In Search of the Next Generation of Autoharp Players

Do you know of a young (or young-at-heart) individual who would love to come to the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering but can't afford it? The Mary Lou Orthey Memorial Scholarship Fund provides financial assistance each year for several people (especially young folks) to attend the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in late June in Newport, Pennsylvania.

Visit the website to review the application guidelines and decide if funding assistance could encourage you or someone you know to attend the Gathering. Application deadline is April 1.

Become part of this program. Visit mlag.org/mloscholarship

You'll find all the details, guidelines, and forms for applications as well as how you can contribute to the Mary Lou Orthey Memorial Scholarship Fund.



*Mary Lou Orthey
Memorial Scholarship Fund*



Established by the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering to promote the development and growth of the autoharp.

The highly anticipated debut album from

Muriel Powers



Winner of
the 2019
Cohen-
Grappel
Recording
Endowment

THE BEST
new auto-
harp album
I've heard in
many years;
I have a new
favorite!

--Hal
Weeks,
*Stalking the
Wild
Autoharp*

Order from murielpowers@hotmail.com \$15 plus \$2 shipping
or go to store.cdbaby.com/cd/murielpowers



their activities.

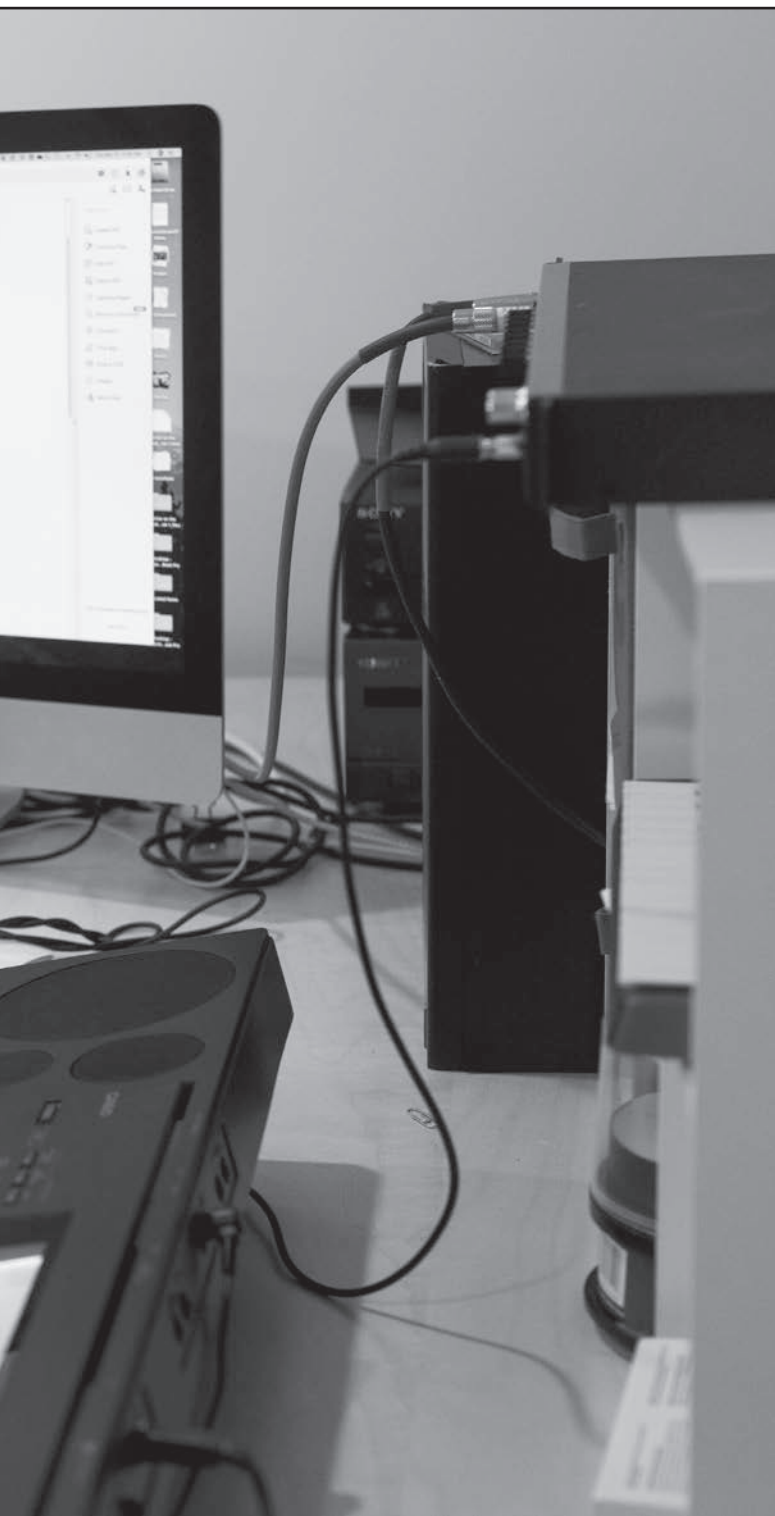
So I was only working half time at that point and that made it a whole lot easier to do this other stuff. When they went to college I didn't go back to work full time, and I got to do music.

AQ: I can see you going back to music, but...the autoharp?

CATHY: I got an autoharp at a used music store in 1985 when I was working on a research project in Denver, Colorado. But I didn't start actually playing 'til about 1987. I would just sit in the rocking chair and pick out melodies. I didn't know anyone who played the autoharp besides me.

AQ: Many of us know that feeling. We get the instrument

Autoharp Quarterly Spring 2020



CATHY: Yes, exactly. I was a classical musician and was not into Old Time music. Or folk. And basically, I only became serious about the instrument when I heard (*Bryan*) Bowers play at a local festival. That was about 1989. That was also the beginnings of the internet and I found Cyberpluckers and first ‘met’ other players across the country. But I knew nothing about Old Time music.

At that time I was working for the Veterans Administration in Washington, D.C. going back and forth between Seattle and D.C. One evening Neal Walters kindly picked me up and took me to dinner and then to an Old Time jam in the DC area. It was the first Old Time music I was ever exposed to.

I remember me asking him as he was driving me back to my hotel: “How do you figure out which chord to play? Everybody seems to know and you’re not using any written music.” And he said, “You’ll figure it out. Just keep playing.” And that was before my first Mountain Laurel.

AQ: Ah, yes, Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. The Mecca that draws autoharpers, new and experienced, from all over the world.

CATHY: Yes. By 1993 I had gotten more serious about playing. My son Patrick had just turned 16, and he drove me across the country with his brand new driver’s license (*she laughs*). He got a speeding ticket in Wyoming.

We drove up to George’s farm and got out and this guy came striding up and said, “Would you like help pitching your tent?” So he helped us find a place to camp and pitch the tent. And then he said, “Okay, now get out your autoharp. Let’s tune up and let’s play.”

That guy was Marty Schuman. Marty Schuman was the first person I met in Mountain Laurel who told me we have to play together. That’s so touching and so brilliant. Marty Schuman was a nice human being. Of course, then I heard him play, and I thought, OhMyGod!

My mind was blown with the possibilities I saw and my love of the autoharp blossomed.

And that’s the thing about the world of autoharp. The greatest autoharp players in the world, everybody, almost to a number, is generous of spirit. Generous and gracious. People were very kind and very supportive of each other. That’s what makes the autoharp community so very special. It’s not really competitive. Everybody tries to help everybody else have as much fun and make as much music as possible.

AQ: Yes, I have found that to be true as well. So when did you become involved with, fascinated with the color chords, or as Bowers calls them - your purple chords?

CATHY: (*sharing laughter*) Oh, my purple chords. Okay, well, see, I was a clarinet player and did quite a bit of jazz. So that’s all purple chords, so they were in my ear.

Of course on a clarinet, you’re not doing chords, you’re doing arpeggios. But for the autoharp, I always kind of longed

on a whim and then think, now what the heck is this thing? What do I do with it?

I was not familiar with any of the music normally associated with the instrument.

So not only was I learning to play an instrument I had not played before, but was learning from a repertoire that was not familiar at all.

for more chords than I had. Then John ten Broek, my first music partner, loved minor sevenths. And at first I said, "Oh, don't use those, they sound dorky."

But he said, "But listen to it here." Oh! Yeah! Okay. Let's use that there. And that's what got me started. And then, what happened was, it's all Mark Fackeldey's fault.

AQ: Oh, really now.

CATHY: Oh, yeah. When Mark first started building autoharps, we were sitting at Mountain Laurel, drinking lemonade talking about how it was going and he said, "You know, I've been making all these autoharps and I'm just not selling them. People don't know about them."

At that time, we didn't have the big internet, but we had Prodigy at that point. And then we had AOL.com. And I had just learned how to make websites. So I said, "Mark, let me make you a website on AOL. No charge of course. I'll just do the best I can and see what that does."

Well, that one website increased his sales by so much, he insisted on giving me an autoharp. And I said, "No, you can't give me an autoharp, you're trying to sell autoharps." But he persisted and we went back and forth and finally, I said, "Okay, but only if you let me pay for the materials."

So he made me an autoharp and he put ALL the Purple chords on it. And he said, "I just want you to try these out." So yes, it's all Mark Fackeldey's fault.

I still have that autoharp. One of these days, I want to find a way to pass that autoharp onto others to keep it circulating in the community, never to be sold, but to gift it for a couple of years then pass it on to another. I'll figure out how to do that one day.

AQ: What a great idea.

So, Cathy, with all the things you have done in the autoharp community, which was the most difficult for you to actually accomplish or put into action?

CATHY: One of my greatest joys is making music with others, but I think the biggest challenge and also one of the greatest rewards is creating opportunities for other autoharpers to meet up, play, sing, learn, and create together, and grow through community music-making.

It is hard to create the space for that to happen. Setting up those opportunities to be safe, comfortable, affordable, and fun is always a challenge. The music and the teaching and the entertainment are a piece of cake. The role of 'innkeeper' is another thing altogether, and something that takes a lot of time and energy from the teaching/facilitating/entertaining which is what I love.

AQ: Those of us who have experienced the joys of participating in the likes of MLAG (Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering), WVAG (Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering), CAG (California Autoharp Gathering), NWAG (NorthWest Autoharp Gathering) and SAW (Seattle Auto-

harp Week) are grateful for the time and energy that people like you put into creating those spaces.

From your timeline, even before you even went to Mountain Laurel – before your DC connection with Neil Walters and experiencing your first Old Time jam, you seemed to have been actively seeking connections to the autoharp community through the internet.

CATHY: Yes. I was fascinated by the internet. We didn't have the big internet early on, but we had Prodigy. Bob Woodcock had carved out a space in the folk music discussion group for autoharp. So he and I and a couple of other people were talking about autoharp on the net and Neil Walters was on there because he was a computer dude too.

So that's how I kinda go to know that group of people, and that convinced me to go to Mountain Laurel, which totally, totally ruined me forever.

AQ: You certainly are among those who embrace the use of electronic devices as teaching tools to make learning the autoharp more accessible to players across the country.

CATHY: Yeah, I think a picture is worth a thousand words. Initially, when I put my autoharp book out there, I made it because none of the books available fit my way of teaching. I did it because I was giving a lot of lessons, a lot of workshops and I wanted something to use with that.

I've done online courses on several platforms, always experimenting with what works. I've thought about that a long time; how to get teaching out there and make it accessible. The key is to get people making melodies and playing by ear. There's a way of doing that. It just takes a little bit of work, but that gives them so many tools to do so much more with the instrument.

AQ: So you are constantly trying to figure out how to best use technology to make that happen. I'm glad you are willing to take the time and effort to navigate those choppy waters. The ever evolving technology has to make it hard to keep up.

CATHY: Yeah. One of the things I did was an iBook that works on Apple iPad or a Mac, because our phones are too little to see what you're doing with the sheet music. So I did that, but not everybody has an iPad, and I wanted to make something that was accessible to everybody.

The one thing I'm doing now is I'm redoing my autoharp book to include videos. Videos on a thumb drive. That's what I'm experimenting with. So that anybody can plug it into any device and get the materials and also have the printed materials.

The nice thing about it is that I am going to be able to produce it for about half the cost of the old book. So it's going to be cheaper and more accessible.

I've been looking into an ebook with movies. Ebooks with movies are very very hard to get any site to take. Amazon won't take them with the number of movies I want. Even

Apple. I had to split my book into five parts to get the size that Apple would accept.

AQ: I am not so savvy about all the electronic devices, but I understand enough to know that it takes a lot of work and ingenuity to solve even simple problems that you come up against to make a new idea work, and then continue to work as the technology and platforms evolve. The technology itself presents crazy unexpected problems.

CATHY: I like technical challenges. I don't know that I'm that good at solving all those unexpected problems, but, for example, I'm making movies for my new book now and I was unhappy with how the background looked. It always looked, wrinkly. Ugh.

So two days ago I went to Jo-Ann Fabric and got two yards of wide black fleece. Fleece. And it works perfectly. It makes a wonderful background. So I solved that little problem. But now the problem is that (*she laughs*) I never look as good as I want to look.

Really, problem number one is to have the content come across. Second, to have the resolution good enough so you can clearly see what is being done. And third is to package it in a small enough package so that people can look at it on their computer or tablet. So. We'll see.

AQ: Solving problems. Reshaping the box. There you go. But that's an unending process. You solve one problem and then you come up with three more to solve before you can go forward.

CATHY: That's one of the nice things about being retired. You have the time to deal with those things.

AQ: Your energy is amazing. You are very active in the music community. What are some of the things you are doing these days? I suspect you have some ideas still perking.

CATHY: I love musical collaborations. Two of my women friends are wonderful singers, one plays guitar and the other banjo, and so it is likely that our new Salmonberry Jam band will be making wonderful instrumental and vocal arrangements over the next few months. Folky vocals and instrumentals.

My most active band is Sound Crossing, which is Old Time contradance music. We do some concerts, but mostly dances, and mostly I play the bass with that group. There are about five contradances in the Seattle area and we'll go from the border to Portland.

And there is Hjarta Herring which means Heart of Herring, a four person Scandinavian band with fiddle, and nyckelharpa. I play the autoharp with that usually at the Swedish Club or the Nordic museum, you know. Ya. We have a big Scandinavian community here and the people love the sound of the autoharp in the Scandinavian tunes. They always wonder, "What is that auto-harpa?" (*we laugh together*.)

The new new edition I'm working of *It's An Autoharp*, with a USB Card with videos (and also online), is almost completed. And my new book called *Autoharp Aids* is finished with recordings, but I have now decided to also add videos to that.

AQ: You have been involved in this community for many years. From your perspective, what changes have you witnessed that make you smile?

CATHY: More people are seeing the autoharp as a melody instrument, playing music from all different genres: old-time, folk, classical, country, pop, ragtime, bluegrass, as well as music of other countries and cultures.

More luthiers are tackling the difficult job of making instruments that reproducibly make beautiful music, each in their own characteristic way. I am seeing more young people taking the autoharp in new and exciting directions all over the world.

AQ: Is there something about or in the community that you would like to see happen?

CATHY: I would like to see women autoharp luthiers. I want players under 40 using the autoharp to create unique solo melody arrangements with other's or their own musical compositions. I want to see and hear more beautiful, elegant recordings where the autoharp is a solo or ensemble melody instrument. I hope to hear more original compositions written for the autoharp.

AQ: That's a lovely list. You are always busy, constantly doing, doing. What keeps you going? What are the things that feed your spirit?

CATHY: All we can do is the best we can do. What keeps me going? Humm. Well, I just got done singing with the a capella group, the North Seattle Community College. Adam, our director is also a professor at the college, and we sing for the students in the choir to show them we still can.

The joy of making music and sharing music with others keeps me busy. Over the years, it's become more fun, as I've become more skilled at it.

What feeds my spirit? I'd say my spirit is fed by the love I share with my husband, children, grandchildren, friends, and Vern the Corgi.

I love nature – and I live in a place that allows me to enjoy it all right here – the sky, the moon, the stars, the trees, the mountains, the ocean, smelling the fresh air after the rain, And of course, music, music, music of all kinds. Orchestras, choirs, jazz bands, kids' recitals, the guy playing guitar at the market, and the autoharp singing in my ear.

AQ: Thank you, Cathy for sharing your love of the music. The staff of the *Autoharp Quarterly* applauds your continuing efforts to keep the autoharp singing in ALL our ears.

North America's Autumn Autoharp Activity

In These Uncertain Times,



- Hold Close Those You Love
- Reach Out To Those In Need
- Tune
- Play Every Day
- Learn a New Piece Each Month
- Participate in Online Activities

We're About You

Learn more at

<http://seattleautoharpweek.com>



Let
Freedom
Ring

d'Aigle Autoharps
www.autoharp.com