

Greetings, Autoharpers!

Another successful [Gathering](#) has entered the Mountain Laurel annals. I had a lead prepared for this after-action report but, upon review, found the exact wording I intended to use had already appeared at the top of last year's report: "I must say it all seemed to come together more smoothly than I can remember."

I can only thank providence and the hard work of my fellow board members, numerous volunteers, performers, workshop leaders, the park service and, especially, the many enthusiastic attendees for making our festival appear to function so effortlessly, for such is far from the case, and I hope to sufficiently acknowledge that fact here.

It hardly bears notice that one gets occasional area thunderstorms in the summertime...and so we did, but no one got flooded out and shelter availed when needed for jams. Monday was a hot one for the early arrivers but then a blessed temperance descended for the rest of the week, for which we gave thanks.

We had three pre-Gathering beginning and intermediate classes led by **Les Gustafson-Zook**, **Adam Miller**, and **John and Heidi Cerrigione**. They were well-attended and, from my observations and others reports, were all well-received with much merry music-making. I'm sure the classes were instructive and fun. The Patsy Tressler Endowment, established by sister Ruby Morgan and providing a full tuition reimbursement to a lucky class attendee, was won by **Les Brooker**, who promptly returned it to benefit a future attendee. Very generous, Les!

RV's and tents began to situate themselves around the campground, many in long-familiar locations, to form our musical Camelot in the trees. I must say the Little Buffalo Park Campground is looking good with its improvements over the years—paving, good graveling, added hookups, maturing trees, and last year's new bathhouse. The enormous, air-conditioned Rec Hall and patio are the cat's meow to hang around for concerts and workshops (all held within or nearby to it), meals, browsing or chatting in the vendors' area, scoping out the Silent Auction offerings, or just chilling at a back table. Compared to some other festivals I have attended, everything is quite clean, comfortable, and convenient.

We take pains to ensure beginners feel included and looked out for. Thank you to **Phyllis Davis** for taking our newbies under wing in an Autoharp Bootcamp to get them on the road to success and to **Karen Daniels** and her Beyond Boot Camp sessions to keep them motoring along happily and prepare them for our regular workshop sessions. **Les Gustafson-Zook** also made himself available for a kids' autoharp workshop.

This year we prevailed upon our caterer, **Laurie Berrard** and Townside Café, to expand our meal offerings to run from lunch Tuesday to dinner Sunday. We are very grateful for the fine food so efficiently and generously served out by her staff, **Denise Litchard**, **Della Leisenringer**, and **Taylor Keirster**. Naturally, there was a good crowd on hand to help us with the Rec Hall set up when the starting signal sounded after Wednesday's lunch. It seems several veterans have a regular task they immediately take in hand while others pitch in where directed by **Rick Fitzgerald**, and the hall is transformed with a minimum of time and effort from an empty shell to the venue where the magic happens. Thanks to all those volunteers!

Wednesday night began with the opening ceremonies and installation of the official Presiding Peacock (attend and find out what's with that), followed by the board members' concert, which went out to the community via live-stream, courtesy of **Niels Jonker** and assisted by a video team consisting of **Josh Daniels**, **Isiah Arnold**, and **Holly Grable**. In fact, those unable to be present with us were nevertheless able to enjoy all our concerts, the contest, and the **Cohen/Grappel Recording Grant** release via internet live-streaming. We are very proud of that ability to bring the Gathering to even remote corners and schedule-conflicted members of the autoharp community.

Our vendors included luthiers **George Orthey**, **Pete Daigle**, **Tom Fladmark**, **John Hollandsworth**, **Greg Schreiber**, **Warren Fisher**, **Ken Ellis**, and **Chuck Daniels**. Additionally, on hand were **Emily Herr** with her incomparable applied acrylic artwork, **Drew Smith's** All-American Autoharp Emporium, and **Maureen Maxwell's** reflexology station. We are especially grateful to Maureen for her well-received, relaxing ministrations (I had three sessions!) and for donating her entire proceeds to the Gathering.

Thursday began our extensive program of [workshops](#) (see this link for details) led by **Doc Brose, Harvey Wagner, Chuck Daniels, Ken Ellis, Les Gustafson-Zook, Cindy Harris, John Hollandsworth, Lucille Reilly, Drew Smith, and Will Smith**. As well, all of the billed performers held workshops and there were several Soapbox Workshops volunteered by thoughtful and capable attendees.

The featured performers —**Cathy Barton & Dave Para, Carey Dubbert, Adam Miller, Doug Pratt, Doofus (Neal & Coleen Walters and John & Heidi Cerrigione)**, and 2017 Mt. Laurel Champion **Ray Choi**—appeared in Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday concerts, thrilling those in the hall or watching online with some virtuoso performances featuring storytelling, stirring songs, and amazing instrumentals. Thanks for their thoughtful sets and incredible musicianship as well as their many contributions throughout the week (can you say unforgettable campground jams?!).

A hale **Ivan Stiles** was his usual sassy self and immune to the good-natured heckling, often from backstage. His one complaint—it's been over 28 years, now; somebody send him some new material! He can only tease **Bill Belz**, our fabulous sound man, for so long.

The Friday night [Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship](#) is an annual highlight of the Gathering and this was no different. The overall level of competitive play was high, with all 19 contestants doing about the best I've seen them attain, which is to say, very, very good. Despite a sprinkling of past Mountain Laurel and Winfield champions, **Michael Poole** won out with some truly lilting, flawless, and inspirational diatonic play. The \$25 two-disk, [Contest CD](#) is worth it for those, alone, never mind the 44 other amazing tune performances. **Les Gustafson-Zook** placed second (again??) with his deft rhythms and **Harvey Wagner** third with some incredible bare-fingered lap-style work. Cindy Harris and first-time contestant Steve Braden filled out the finalists. Prize harp choices were: Michael-Hollandsworth, Les-Fladmark, and Harvey-d'Aigle. All three harps were beautiful 15-bar diatonics. A very deep vote of thanks to our prize harp donors—**John, Tom, and Pete**.

The [2017 Cohen/Grappel Recording Endowment](#) winner, **Jody Kruskal**, presented us with his new CD and an hour of music (and cake!). Jody is a music professional from Brooklyn and a virtuoso on the concertina, but the autoharp represented a new growth direction. He is a very amiable and charismatic personality and was a very visible and welcome participant in the Gathering. I was first in line for an autographed CD (and a corner piece of cake!). **Muriel Powers**, from Seattle, was announced as the 2018 grant recipient and we look forward to her successful project.

Saturday night saw the induction of the latest member of the Hall of Fame, popular, longtime friend of and performer at the Gathering and writer of its namesake song, **Judie Pagter**. She was joined onstage to accept her certificate by husband Carl and daughter, Alicia Contic, who had grown a bouquet of gorgeous white lilies in her garden to present at the induction. Judy made a brief, but characteristically, gracious acceptance speech and treated us to a song favorite in her trademark, driving style.

The Autoharp Toss and the Grand Poobah enjoyed a respite from either hot sun or rain showers this year. Some previous winners attempted to intimidate with their ostentatious and jingly hardware while others eschewed the attendant neck aches and balance issues. After the usual ribbing and teasing, the Grand Poobah pronounced himself pleased and coveted medals were awarded to **Doug White** (1), **Mike Herr** (2), and **Rick Fitzgerald** (3) in Combined Accuracy; **Doc Brose** (1), **Jon Wolkomir** (2), and **Les Gustafson-Zook** (3) in Men's Distance; and **Wendy Meredith** (1), **Maggie Dodd** (2), and **Mary Elkins** (3) in Women's Distance. Mary claims a medal at her first Gathering! Well done to all participants!

Open stage has become a highlight of pre-dinner afternoons and featured in one slot was The Incredible, The Incomparable, All-Luthier Autoharp Band, with Pete d'Aigle playing wire brush percussion on the autoharp from the toss and joined by all his brother luthiers on their respective instruments. The winner of the Leonard Reid Finest Open Stage Performance award, however, was the duo of **Lynda Cohen** and **Robert Grappel**, and well-deserved.

Post-concert jams were held in the Rec Hall following shows, led by volunteers **Doofus, Margaret Crowl, Al and Jean Lumpkin, John and Kathie Hollandsworth, and Karen and Chuck Daniels**.

Soundman **Bill Belz** is a virtual institution at the Gathering and turned in his typical, flawless job. **Frank Baker** has found a permanent new niche as Bill's indispensable assistant and stand-in. Frank also serves us as the official photographer of the Gathering. Thank you, Frank!

There are, as well, several volunteers whose contributions were vital to the smooth functioning of the Gathering and my brief mention, here, is inadequate to and, no doubt, incomplete for the praise merited but you should at least know so that you will have greater appreciation next time. **Marti Hudak** constantly at the Hospitality table and **Michael Poole** at Registration nearly as long (he took time out to win the contest!); **Coleen Walters** for even longer registration work; **Erina Fitzgerald** tirelessly at Performer Sales; **Deb Schreiber** in the Snack Bar and overseeing meals; and **Shirley Averett** at the [MLAG Cruise](#) desk; **Rick Fitzgerald** and **Tom Davis** handling stage setup; **Greg Schreiber** for his tireless hauling/loading/unloading of everything plus liaison with the park office; **Tom Fladmark** for bringing order and function in the campground and assistance in the Snack Bar; **Neal Walters** for his communiques and streaming links; **Maggie Dodd** for keeping up with the disbursements and accounting; **Warren** and **Ann Fisher** for constructing and erecting the Hall of Fame display; **Al Lumpkin** for handling the workshop tent sound system; **Les Brooker**, who did truly yeoman service handling way more than his share of trash, plus daily turns in the ice cream kiosk with wife, **Martha**; **Jim Adams** for his indispensable counsel and good humor throughout the year; the **park service staff** whose support and cooperation are crucial to our venue. And, lastly, all those who pitched in in so many ways—staging equipment, cleaning tables, checking meal lines, and more.

Finally, I want to acknowledge **George Orthey** who, together with his late wife **Mary Lou**, accepted the challenge and the burden of founding the gathering that is the preeminent celebration of the autoharp and its many adherents, which has inspired like festivals to feature and spread the word about our beloved instrument, and which continues to set the bar for excellence in all things autoharp. Thanks to you, George, for entrusting this board to preserve that legacy; differently from the old farm days, certainly, but with a clear sense of direction, purpose, and responsibility.

And, if YOU want to be a part of that legacy, join us in 2019 for the 29<sup>th</sup> annual Mt. Laurel Autoharp Gathering, where we will continue to make an indelible mark in the records, the memories, and the hearts of all who love this instrument. While with us, you will enjoy the music and talents of a terrific slate of performers:

**Bryan Bowers—Tom Schroeder—Bob Lewis—Allison Guinn—Rick Fitzgerald—Michael Poole**

If you don't remember or know Allison, she is the knockout professional vocalist currently touring the U.S. with Les Miserables who won the open stage award a couple of years ago... yes, playing autoharp and we're delighted she can make it. Rick is a Mountain Laurel Champion and perennial highlight of the board member's concert. It's high time we featured him again.

I would like to end with a couple of appeals. First, go to [this link](#) or the bottom of our [home page](#) and opt in to our email notification list. It is only for essential notifications regarding the Gathering and is a step required by new privacy laws.

Second, if you have pictures you took at the Gathering, please share them with our webmaster, Neal Walters, at [Neal@doofusmusic.com](mailto:Neal@doofusmusic.com) for posting on our website. He can lead you through the best way to transfer large files.

See you in 2019!

Gregg Averett  
Festival Director, Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering