

AUTOHARP QUARTERLY®

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Meg Peterson

Meg Peterson Revisited
by Carole Outwater

Verla & Kathleen teach the
children about the *Friendly
Beasts*

Mike Herr gets ready to jam
with *Blackberry Blossom*

Haydn's *Surprise Symphony*
is Linda Huber's Simply
Classic selection

Eileen Roys answers a
request with the Sacred
'Harp selection, *There's a
Song In the Air*

*Bring a Torch, Jeanette,
Isabella* is Mary Parks'
beginners offering

Bud & Karla make *Oh, Little
Town Of Bethlehem* a color-
fully chromatic tune

Carole Outwater and The
Carolina Gator Gumbo band
take us to the *Audubon Zoo*

Todd Crowley gives us Part
1 of the *Floating Diatonics
Chromatic Autoharp*

Lucille Reilly gives us a
diatonic slant on *Arkansas
Traveler*

Meg Noble Peterson: Revisited

An interview with Meg Peterson by Carole Outwater updating a two-part article written for AQ in 1994

Part Three

In order to revisit Meg Peterson, one has to catch her. Literally! Since I wrote the earlier articles about Meg, she has: traveled the world a second time, concentrating on Malaysia, Indochina, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand; completed the 190-mile Wainwright Walk across England; trekked over the Thorong La at 18,000 ft. on the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal; hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu in Peru; circumambulated Mt. Kailash in Tibet; visited Prague in the wintertime; climbed for a month in Sweden and Norway; and hiked for two weeks on Mt. Rainier and the White Mountains of New Hampshire this past summer. She wrote three more autoharp song books in 2003 and was inducted into the Autoharp Hall of Fame in 1995.

Now her book, *Madam, Have You Ever Been Really Happy? An Intimate Journey Through Africa and Asia*, is published, and it is wonderful reading of Meg's adventures through four continents and twelve countries.

"Meg, so many of us learn to play the autoharp from your instruction books, I wonder how many people know about your other works? Tell us about your writing and this recent book?"

We went back to the time when the seeds of her writing were sown and began to flourish.

I laughed when Meg told me that when she was in the fourth grade she wrote and directed a play but wasn't at all interested in acting in it. She wanted instead to be the one who wrote what came out of her classmates' mouths. Later, at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, where she studied Political Science, Meg became fascinated with non-fiction writing. And it was only a few

years later, "Believe it or not the autoharp opened the doors for my own writing," she declared.

"At first, I didn't even like the autoharp when my husband, Glen, bought Oscar Schmidt International. I was a classical violinist. I would sit there like a pouting kid when I heard some of the early music on the autoharp. But my whole idea of the autoharp changed after Cecil Null and Mike Seeger came to our house and I heard them play! I couldn't believe the melodies that you could make with it and the variety of styles that were locked up in that seemingly simple instrument. The autoharp became my freedom and opened up a whole new world to me. I wrote instruction and song books for the company and later for Mel Bay and several other publishers, and my writing style began to take shape."

"I think my autoharp books are not just method books. I started doing a certain kind of writing where I'd talk a little about the history of the instrument as well as the type of music best suited for each strum pattern. Later, I could branch out from this initial type of writing into something broader for me in my life and I combined it with my love of travel and the discovery of other cultures."

Meg has written 38 instruction and song books for the autoharp, and numerous essays and articles for other publications. A play of hers, *Thank You, Dear*, has been performed and now her recent book, *Madam Have You Ever Been Really Happy?* is taking center stage. This memoir tells of her solo eight-month backpacking journey across Africa and Asia. Here's an excerpt from the back cover.

"She is...armed with an open ticket and a camera, and takes off, making plans as she goes. She rides

on dilapidated buses through Egypt and Zimbabwe and squeezes into hot, crowded trains in India. She views a sunrise from the summit of Mt. Moses in the Sinai and a private cremation on the banks of the Ganges."

"In Kenya Meg encounters roadblocks and Masai warriors, and in Nepal she finds romance with an Austrian scientist. Abandoned at 14,000 ft. by their drunken guide, the two climb to Everest Base Camp through the snow, traversing the Khumbu Glacier and struggling up Kala Pattar (18,500 ft.) to gaze on Everest, Nuptse, and Lhotse."

Some pretty exciting doors opened for one of our Autoharp Hall of Famers, eh?

"Meg. Tell us something about the music you find in your travels."

"Everywhere I go in my travels, I always take along a little tape recorder and I tape the music – singing, dancing, celebrating. I have it from all my trips, along with my journals. Yes, I have songs and music from all over the world." And she immediately thought of this example.

"In Nepal, as we crossed a patch of the Khumbu Glacier and started up the brown-tufted trail to Kala Pattar at 18,298 feet, our guide, Passang, kept singing a Nepalese folk song over and over."

Meg jumped up and thumbed through the pages of her book until she found the passage she wanted to read aloud to me. "Here it is on page 372."

Passang trudged ahead, singing to herself, oblivious to our misery. It was a plaintive tune, "Resham Firiri," I'd heard Putti sing many times and would never forget. I watched her move up ahead of me, and concentrated on the steady

crunch of her feet on the frozen scree. I marveled at her stamina.

A sudden idea hit me. "Stop, Passang!" I said, forcing myself to run to catch up. "I must record your voice." I was holding the tape recorder toward her and taking deep breaths to steady myself.

She turned around, blushing crimson, and laughed, shaking her head so fiercely that her entire upper body moved. "No, no Madam."

O.K. I thought. I'll do it without her knowledge. I dragged myself over the never-ending pile of rocks as if in a dream, holding out the recorder to capture the singing, accompanied by the crunch, slide, crunch of our steps. Her clear high tones never wavered.

I urged Meg to make her taped recordings available to accompany her book!

"I know you didn't pack an autoharp in your backpack, Meg, but did you see any autoharps or meet autoharps along the way?"

"I was in the Amboseli Game Park at the Kilimanjaro Safari Lodge when a woman called out to me." "Hey, Meg...aren't you Meg Peterson?" The young woman walked toward me, hand outstretched. "Oh, I'm so excited. I've always wanted to meet you. I saw you at the Winfield Folk Festival. Maggie Finch. You didn't see me, but you were judging my autoharp playing. I lost, of course, but I didn't blame you." She stopped for a breath. "Why do you say 'of course?', " I asked? "You had pretty stiff competition. Try again. You must be dedicated if you came all the way to the Amboseli to meet me." We both laughed.

And another story followed quickly...

"Talk about doors that opened for me because of the autoharp. I was on my way to Wellington, New Zealand, and I struck up a conversation with a young black woman sitting next to me on the bus. We were both going to the same international conference." "You've got to be Ken-

yan," I said. "I'd know that radiant smile anywhere."

The story that followed seemed almost too coincidental to be true. But Meg swears by it.

In beautiful English, the young woman said, "If it hadn't been for the missionaries who came to our village, I might still be back in the bush. Because of them, I got a scholarship to Syracuse University in a place called Syracuse, New York. I am a therapist and I had a small office in the Noble room of Hendrick's Chapel." I caught my breath and said, "You won't believe this, but that room is named for my father." "Dean Noble was your father?" replied the Kenyan woman. And there's more, I continued. "Did you do any music while you were in America?" I inquired. "I got very interested in your folk music. I discovered this little instrument called the autoharp." "How did you learn to play it?" I asked. "With some books by somebody named Meg Peterson." I was stunned. "Do you know who you're sitting next to right now?" I said. "Meg Peterson!" How we laughed...and hugged and hugged.

Meg, you have amazing stories! We never realize whose lives we touch, do we? You mentioned being a classical violinist earlier. Tell us what you're up to musically these days.

"I'm very involved with the Plainfield, New Jersey, Symphony and that's very important to me. I play the violin. I also play with string quartets when I have the time."

Meg flashes me one of her golden smiles and begins to tell me that she's just started playing her violin in a rock band.

"My new son-in-law has an acoustic rock band called Walk the Dog, and he thought my fiddling would be a great sound on some pieces."

I could tell Meg was excited about this new musical adventure.

She goes on to say that, "The first time I played, it was for my daughter's wedding and it was pouring rain. We played under this tent outside and I thought the bass guitar player would be electrocuted. Thunder and lightning everywhere! We played one of Floggin' Molly's tunes, *If I Ever Leave This World Alive*. It's kind of cute with some wild parts where I can play way up high and jazz it up! As Neal Walters can tell you, I'm no country fiddler, but I've been asked to play in a bluegrass band, and the leader is coming over with a bunch of tunes to get me started. Maybe next summer at Mt. Laurel I'll be able to jam with the rest of you. I think that would be exciting."

And the autoharp?

"I still play and I still love to come to the Mt. Laurel Gathering, and I listen to see what all my 'babies' are doing. I enjoy that thoroughly."

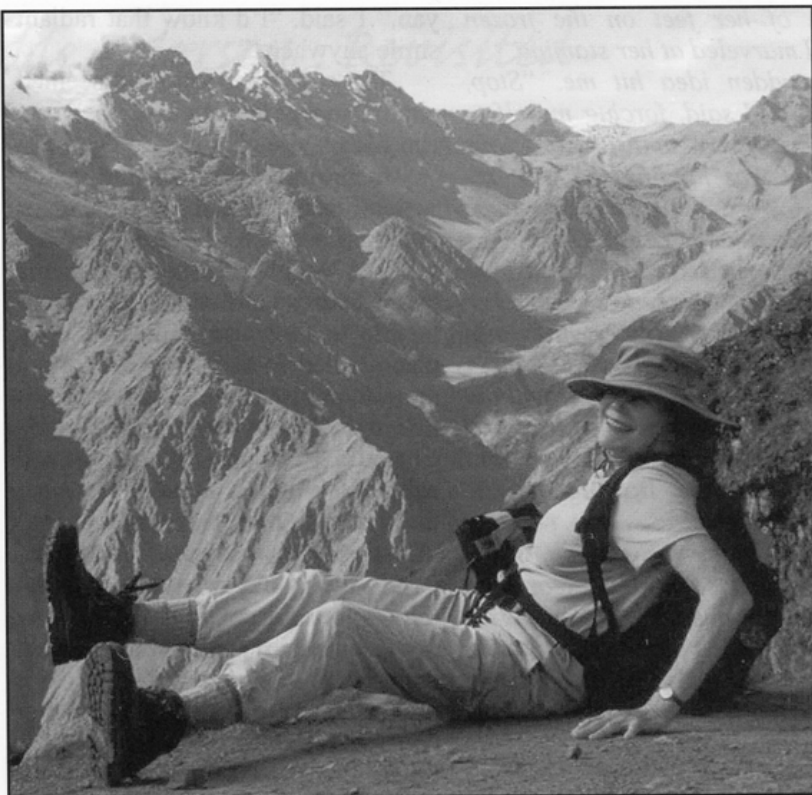
"I'm incredibly happy and gratified to see how the instrument has developed. It would really make Glen very pleased after all the work he put into resurrecting the instrument." She credits today's luthiers and technicians "with making innovations that open the door to the playing of a much broader selection of tunes on the autoharp, and allowing it to become a dynamic solo instrument. Lyman Taylor, Will Smith, Ron Wall and the late Marty Schuman have pushed some of the boundaries in recent years."

Meg, I wanted to write Part Three of the earlier articles because you continue opening doors for people through your autoharp books. In Madam, Have You Ever Been Really Happy? you've given us a look inside Meg Noble Peterson, adventurous person. Thank you for allowing me to tell more of your story. Any final words to share with us about opening doors when they present themselves?

"Perhaps these. If you have a

driving passion, a real yen, and most people do, I'd say start now, don't wait. If it's travel, which is what I enjoy, and you're a musician, take your instrument with you. Let it be part of your life. Walk with it and play it. Just sling it over your back and you'll find that it's like a magnet and a good way to meet people."

If you want to read more about Meg Noble Peterson's travels, she has a great website complete with photographs of her journeys. If you want to discover why her book has such an unusual title, read it. I believe you'll enjoy reading the story behind one of our Autoharp Hall of Fame members. Visit her website at www.megnoblepeterson.com.



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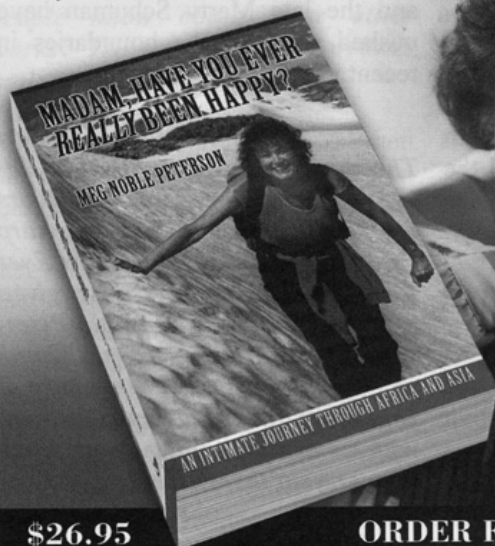
MADAM, HAVE YOU EVER *REALLY* BEEN HAPPY?

An Intimate Journey Through Africa and Asia

The book, in a lively voice, speaks to anyone who, like Ms. Peterson, has ever daydreamed over the inviting pages of National Geographic...

The New York Times

If you have ever used one of Meg's many autoharp books, you will enjoy this trip into her "other" life.
Mary Ann Johnston, Editor, *Autoharp Quarterly*®



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