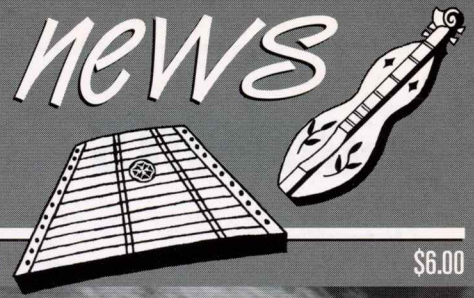


DULCIMER PLAYERS *news*

The Journal for Hammered and Fretted Dulcimer Enthusiasts

Vol. 27, No. 3 ★ August 2001—October 2001

\$6.00



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Heidi Muller

PHOTO BY SUSAN WILSON, WWW.SUSANWILSONPHOTO.COM

*Our
27th year!*

Under the spotlight, a puff of silver hair haloes her head, bent to the dulcimer's task. The voice is little-girlish, a mellow, wispy alto that threatens to drench the house in cloying sweetness, and the sandals and homespun plainness, the absence of makeup, reinforce the image—uncomfortably shifting husbands in the front row thinking, “Oh good Lord, another 60s leftover Pollyanna flower-child she’s dragged me to see.”

But then, the platinum head raises, the voice bites, the steel-blue eyes glint with impishness and mischief, and the lyrics snap home like bullets hitting your awareness. “Wait a minute! That song’s *not* about a groundhog! That song’s *not* about baseball!”

Welcome to the Heidi Muller club, pal.

In twenty-five years of performing, seventeen on dulcimer, Heidi has played venues from concert halls to living rooms throughout America, taught dulcimer to hundreds of Heidi-wannabes and produced four recordings which have given her a firm and respected place in the national folk community.

Bubbling with plans and bustling with activity, she’s just getting started.

“There’s so much I want to do. I want to make my own, personal contribution to music, especially with dulcimer. I want to make my tunes and music available in books and play the German folk music that was around when I was a kid and try to do some Gypsy jazz on dulcimer and...and...Yes! swing music! I’m looking for tunes that work on a diatonic fretboard, and I was listening to some Chopin the other day and thought, ‘That would be good on dulcimer! And more research! I’m looking into the music of the Moravians. And I want to know more about scheitholts!’”

She taught at the Northeast Dulcimer Symposium this year and several other festivals and wants to produce a book of songs of one of her mentors, the legendary songmeister Bill Staines. She will be included in the second edition of Susan Trump’s *Masters Of The Mountain Dulcimer*, (due out sometime

this summer) and....and...and...Oh yes! I love to teach! And I’m in process for a new CD, something with more dulcimer so I can record my new tunes. There’s so much to be done!”

Heidi’s tale begins in Washington, New Jersey, with her East German uncle Gerhard Roscher, who would strum zither tunes from his native Erzgebirge region. “He always wanted me to play zither, and I felt badly because I picked up a guitar and a dulcimer instead, but then I realized that the dulcimer is a zither! So I was playing one all along!” On a trip to Germany at age eleven, when she heard a young woman playing guitar and singing at a wedding, she was truly hooked.

“I had to have a guitar when I got back! We retrieved my mother’s old no-name guitar from the closet and fixed up the badly warped neck.” Full-tilt into the folk revival of the time, she played Dylan and Judy Collins, Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell, started all-girl rock bands in high school, entered talent contests, sang “The Circle Game” at her high school graduation, and played open mike nights in the Boston area. She heard Bill Staines in 1975, an epiphany that led to writing her own music. “We were really young in the folkie days, and it sparked an idealism. The music was listened to. The lyrics meant something and it showed us it was possible to get out and play this kind of music.” In 1984, she bought a used Jay Leibowitz dulcimer in a Boston music store.

“I was captivated by the sound of the dulcimer and the repertoire, Celtic songs and delicate things, that my friend Gail Rundlett played. Finally, I couldn’t live without one. I learned dulcimer by pushing myself to perform with it, and was pretty much self-taught. For years, I played in four-equidistant-string style, like Lorraine Hammond, revelling in the lush chords and finger-picking. Then, I discovered traditional and fiddle tunes at contradances, and I went back to playing three-string style because it seemed cleaner and crisper for fast tunes.”

AN INTERVIEW WITH



THE HEIDI MULLER



Having moved to Seattle in 1981 she hooked up with Victory Music, a musicians' co-op, playing open mikes and producing concerts. But writing and performing always beckoned. "There are always walls to overcome in performing. For me, it was shyness. Performing is not easy for me, or anyone else—it takes courage, commitment, a belief in one's self and persistence. And there's no way to get over those walls without pushing through them."

Somewhere along the line, she realized that with concert production, performing, writing and recording (plus jobs on the side), she could forget her BA in psychology and go pretty much full time into music. She could use her own lyrics like telepathy, her dulcimer like a ventriloquist's dummy, to speak her heart and resonate with the hearts of others, in ways that conversation could never achieve.

"It takes courage. When you write about your own feelings, you expose who you are. You're letting complete strangers into your deepest thoughts and emotions. But if you write with truth, and write songs with universal meaning, it connects you to your audience. That's the most important reason for performing—self-expression and expressing the truth that is within you. Otherwise, why do it?"

"The weird thing about this is that you end up feeling the audience knows you better than they should, and you don't know anything about them! People fall in love with you because of your songs. They make assumptions based on their own interpretations. They think you're a 12-stepper or a lesbian or you want to go out with them. 'That song sounded like you're looking for somebody. Are you looking for somebody?' That song is ten years old!"

*How many times have I given my heart,
On the wings of a song,
How many times have I made a new
start,
That didn't last very long?*
—Rising Dawn

Her CDs—*Giving Back*, *Cassiopeia* and *Matters Of The Heart* and her first cassette release *Between The Water And The Wind*—are expressions of her spirit and resonate with those who hear them. Audiences keep coming to listen, and coming back for more. She's been from coast to coast, sometimes making money, sometimes losing money, not often caring about money but always about the song and the connection.

*My final destination doesn't matter
anymore,
Somehow it's more important just to
leave the safety of the shore*
—Sometime Next Summer

She has shared stages with Nanci Griffith, Tom Paxton, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Jean Ritchie and other giants; sipped icy blue margaritas by her tent at Camp Coho at the Kerrville (Texas) Songwriters' Festival for years, and last year was a featured performer there; founded the Washington State Mountain Dulcimer Society; had her song, "Good Road" chosen as the theme song for Northwest Public Radio's Inland Folk Show. She's taught dulcimer for fifteen years and played it for audiences of from 6 to 6000, from folk clubs to Seattle's symphony hall. And the facts tell, and mean, little. What Heidi Muller on her road is doing is crafting a life of music and amassing a heritage of meaning. They will last, long after her road comes to an end.

*There's an edge out here, I'm trying to
walk it
A story to tell, I've been trying to talk it
Facing into the wind all day
You get a little stronger, climbing this way.*
—The Edge

Living in New Jersey after so many fruitful years in Seattle, she is planning her future, and knows there will always be a future for her in her music. "Thank heavens for house concerts! We're really not in a folk era right now, but the music continues, whether mainstream America pays attention or not. There is

continued

a very strong network of homegrown folkies, and house concerts keep it going. They're close and personal, and involve a lot less effort than going into a club. Most of the time, you don't need a sound system, and you have 30 to 70 people who really want to see you and listen.

*I'm somewhere between the old and the new
Trying on the faces and heading off to places that I never knew
I dance between the darkness and the light that blinds
Following the answers I find between the lines.*

—Between The Lines

“My favorite song so far is ‘Gypsy Wind.’ It’s about to come out on a Seattle Folklore Society CD. It came as a surprise, from having time on my hands and sitting in a cafe with a glass of merlot and writing it on a napkin. It has a sense of mystery about it. “Songs sometimes can change people’s lives. Some songs can help somebody get through a hard time or give them the answer to a tough question. Sometimes songs move somebody along the path of life, and that makes it worth it. It gratifies me to know that when I perform, other people resonate with the song and are touched and moved by it. It’s communication and sharing, and that makes it all worth it.

“I’ve started writing instrumental tunes too. I wrote a waltz one day when a student didn’t show up. Next thing I



Heidi performing at the Greatful Bread, Seattle, WA, in April 2000.

knew, I had two jigs! Then another waltz. I’m beginning to realize I can write new music for dulcimer, not just songs. I hear them in my head as fiddle tunes, and then I fix them up to work under my fingers. It would be really great to hear one at a dance! We need to reach out to younger players and increase our numbers, so we don’t become an aging population of players and let the dulcimer fall into obscurity! We need to encourage new music to be played on the dulcimer, and take the dulcimer into new places, whether it’s adding new frets or playing nontraditional music. Dulcimer music has to be relevant to the player.

“What we love about the dulcimer is that it brought something out of us—it made our own music come out of us. It gives every player the chance to bring their own music out and have it heard, and everyone should have that opportunity to develop their own expression. We can’t take the 60s and repeat them—they’re gone. But if we push our local public radio stations to play dulcimer CDs, keep dulcimer growing in ever-new directions and draw in new players with our performing and teaching, the dulcimer will survive and thrive.

“This instrument has given me so much beauty—I like to give it back.”

*The reward isn't only in the finding,
It's the steps that you take each day
The joy isn't always in the things you hold
But in giving back in some small way*

—Arrowhead



Heidi can be contacted at (206) 528-2526, or by email at HeidiMul@AOL.com. For more information, visit her website at www.heidimuller.com.



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