

# Review: Doug Pratt

## *You Can't Play that on the Autoharp!*

### Doug Pratt shows you *can* play that on the autoharp

By Nan Bovington

Hello again from Nan Bovington in Snowed In, Montana (ever been there? It's a nice place to visit but you probably wouldn't want to live here...).

The recent CD by Doug Pratt, Walnut Valley 2006 International Autoharp Champion, features a set list lengthy and varied, as the album's title, "You Can't Play that on the Autoharp!" would suggest. Besides Doug, there are eight capable family and friends backing him up and rounding out the tunes and harmonies.

If you enjoy a considerable amount of variety when you listen to music, you will find it here. My own preference in natural music, or music that is played on honest instruments by real human beings, leans toward shared music. Those songs and tunes we might hear a few bars of, grab an instrument and join a playing circle. So it was pleasant to hear some familiar old friends such as "Brown's Ferry Blues," the 1930's Delmore Brothers Classic.

Doug is ably assisted in his arrangement of this tune by banjo, mandolin, bass, and guitar playing friends, respectfully credited with notes and photos on the CD back cover, and his own singing is appropriately folksy.

Another nice oldie, though I'll confess to not knowing it by name before, is "Farewell Blues" reminiscent of "Gonna Lay Down My Old Guitar," but not quite; though enough that I recognized the chord progressions and wondered, "why don't I know this good old song?" No singing on this, just some old-time banjo/bass fun and a tune you will sort of know, even if you've never actually learned it. And remember, 'Row Row Row' (right up that river, he would row row row...). Probably not from its first time around, since it was written in 1912, but from a subsequent revival; I'm sure I heard it in high school in the 1950's (were you some of you reading this alive then?). Doug's sister Julie sings very nice harmony with him on this; her tone is mel-

low and blends perfectly with her brother's vocal.

A few standouts: "When You're Smiling," from 1929. This one bounces infectiously, aided by friend Trent's banjo, David's lead guitar, and Doug's autoharp twinkling through. "Til There Was You." This lovely Meredith Wilson tune from *The Music Man*, was my favorite instrumental on this CD.

A nice bass back up by friend Larry, interesting chords, pretty tune, delicate and soulful guitar by friend Dave, "Sweet Georgia Brown" showcases a nice driving tempo, friendly instrumental interaction with competent guitar and banjo leads, and autoharp which does not take a back seat to their musicality and enthusiasm.

In Alabama Jubilee the autoharp and banjo are a perfect duo—who knew? With Doug and Julie's very pleasing vocals—is it that sibling blend thing? "Up A Lazy River" can't go wrong with Hoagy, and especially as this one begins with a nice, easy swing and well-defined relationship between the autoharp and guitar. The first chorus is lazy as the title, but nicely so.

As widely spaced in time and different as these songs and tunes are, the last cut, "El Cumbanchero," is the most different. This is another one of those songs you knew without knowing you did. I don't remember hearing it the first time, but I could have

played along anyway. With its rousing, melodic, chordal and interesting, yet somehow familiar sound, I found myself wondering, 'was that the theme from Rawhide?' The correct answer is no, but I think you will find it familiar and lively.

The melodies on this CD range from way back in the 1800's to the fairly recent. Doug and Julie's grandmother, also named Julie, inspired several of the songs. She was the first person Doug ever heard playing melody on an autoharp!

What a privilege. Most of us have come to the autoharp later in life, or even if earlier, we were amazed to learn that it could actually be a melody instrument. The track entitled, "Maw Maw Played the Autoharp" is a homemade song in which Doug and Julie sing a tribute to their first musical influence, interspersed with some of the songs she played: "In The Sweet By and By," "Golden Slippers," "When The Roll is Called Up Yonder." These are all very nicely harmonized.

Doug's liner notes mentioned that he was able to make this CD because of a grant from Lynda Cohen and Robert Grappel's generous recording grant. What a marvelous gift to the autoharp community from two active harpers, who have put their money where it does the most good, getting our beloved autoharp out there! Thank you to them, and to Doug for this CD.



#### ~ Seeking Applicants ~

Have you dreamed of making an Autoharp CD but dismissed the idea because of cost?

Lynda Cohen & Robert Grappel have generously created a Recording Endowment to be awarded to a recipient to record an Autoharp CD. This program is administered by Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, Inc.



For eligibility, project criteria and application, visit [www.mlag.org](http://www.mlag.org) (choose Recording Grant), or email [mikeherr@comcast.net](mailto:mikeherr@comcast.net) or write:

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Applications are due by June 1st. One award will be announced each year at MLAG.

Contributions to the Endowment Fund are very welcome and are tax deductible.