

This article by Laurie Riley was first published in the May 2015 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Laurie's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Riley

Most of my earliest memories were of music-making. Music was the soundtrack of my family's life. My brother and sister and I sang together formally and informally; I played several instruments and had my first professional gig at the age of ten. I spent my teens and early adulthood playing concerts and music festivals.



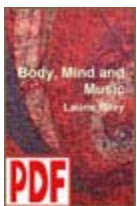
In about 1977, at a venue in New York State called the Towne Crier, I first saw a lever harp. It was being played by Sylvia Woods, with a wonderful group called Robin Williamson and His Merry Band. (I was on tour with the band Frostwater, and we were the warm-up act.) Playing the harp looked so complex that I assumed I would never be able to do it.

But play I did. I got instruction from Kim Robertson, Chris Caswell, and Sylvia. My first solo tour was in 1986. In 1987 I met harper Michael MacBean and we toured together for the next ten years.



Under Chris Caswell's influence I played both wire-strung and nylon-strung harp, and acquired a triple-strung harp as well, but none of these did everything I wanted. My friend Liz Cifani (Chicago Lyric Opera harpist) and I used to discuss at length our various harps and what we wanted to achieve with them, and we decided there should be a harp with two rows of strings and two sets of levers. We each asked a few harpmakers to do this, and though some said it could not be done, Triplett and Stoney End took up the challenge, and the designs they came up with have since influenced other harpmakers. Liz and I named these "contemporary double-strung harps". They became my specialty and, though I teach several types of harps, my concerts are on double. There are videos in which I play three sizes of double-strung harp on my website at www.laurieriley.com.

In 1988 I wrote *The Harper's Handbook* (now re-titled *The Harper's Manual*), which became a staple in the lever harp world. It's a handbook of information every harper needs: how to practice, how to choose and maintain a harp, traveling with a harp, ergonomics, harp history, performance skills, teaching skills, and much more.



Many other books followed: *Body, Mind and Music*; several books on therapeutic harp; books of music for beginners, intermediates, and advanced players, and also books for double-strung harp, and two books of my compositions. Dusty Strings had me do a series of instructional DVDs: *Play the Harp Today* (beginner), *Beyond the Basics* (intermediate) and *Secrets of Celtic Style*.

In about 1987 I started leading workshops on injury prevention and pain relief for musicians. Back then this subject was not being addressed, and I'm glad it has become mainstream now. Currently I train people to become Certified Music Ergonomists, so they can teach this essential information to others.

In 1991, my father became gravely ill and was not expected to live. What happened in the following week as I played at the hospital for him and for other patients was inspiring to me and to the hospital staff. Back then, music was unheard of at the bedsides of the very ill, and training programs didn't yet exist. I decided to learn everything I could about this phenomenon. I had an extensive medical background (yes, I'd had a life apart from music), and combining that with being a professional musician allowed me to say yes when I was later asked to

co-create a training program for bedside musicians. The Music for Healing and Transition Program (MHTP) was created by Mary Radspinner, Maryann Schulz, Martha Lewis and myself. Among our students were Stella Benson and others who went on to become trainers themselves. Meanwhile, other programs grew simultaneously; it was a calling whose time had come. After retiring from MHTP I also created the Clinical Musicians' Home Study Program. Both programs are accredited.



My 2011 book, *Harping with a Handicap* came about as I was teaching students with various physical issues who wanted to play the harp. I've consulted and worked with students on each of the issues in the book, and they don't have to prevent you from playing! This book is geared to both students and their teachers, to help them get the most out of playing the harp, despite their individual challenges.

Some years ago I did some geneology research, and discovered to my surprise and pleasure that my mother's ancestors, the McGraw clan, were the hereditary bards to the Irish king Brian Boru's descendants, the O'Briens. So . . . harping is in my blood. I certainly can't claim it gave me any edge skill-wise, but I am certain that to some degree genetic memory gave me a passion for playing.

It's been a long and rewarding career, and now I get to watch younger harpers come to the fore. I'm currently writing a series of articles called "Harping as we Age" for the **Folk Harp Journal**. Besides lessons at home and on Skype, I also write a popular blog to provoke thought and enthusiasm, and to inspire musicians at all skill levels.

What I love most about teaching harp is seeing the lights turn on when a student focuses on doing their best. I love seeing the level of harping skill rise as new players take the ball and run with it! And I'm thankful for the family of harpers around the world who, because we share a common passion, are able to support and encourage each other.

-- Laurie Riley