

Undiscovered musician? He's unbelievable

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By **TOM BERG** / THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

GARDEN GROVE – You probably never heard of Ray Choi.

He runs a little music shop in Garden Grove, where he sells an odd instrument with 37 strings. It looks like a zither, which is to say it resembles nothing you've ever seen. Or maybe something your grandmother strummed last century.



Search: June

Ray Choi, 52, owner of Grace Music in Garden Grove, was named the Mt. Laurel Autoharp Gathering champion in June 2011. Choi opened Grace Music in 1991 and soon became the nation's top autoharp salesman. He also builds custom autoharps, the Song Bird Autoharp, and is now considered one of the nation's best autoharp luthiers.

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But when Choi hugs it to his chest and plays?

Magic!

That's because Choi plays his autoharp 10 hours a day. Sometimes more.

He's on a mission to win the Super Bowl of autoharp – the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship, in Pennsylvania.

"One time, my daughter asked, 'Why don't you go to the movies? Or talk with friends? Or travel? Why are you always playing autoharp?' I told her. 'I'm going to be champion.'"

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That would be something – since autoharp is used mostly in American folk music. And Choi was raised in Korea and plays mostly in church.

How could he even come close?

The first time he tried, in 1991, he didn't. But Choi vowed to return someday and claim the title.

"He has no other life," says his wife Jane, standing behind the counter at Grace Music as Ray practices. "He plays on the sofa. In bed. Anywhere. Any time. You can't imagine. It drives you crazy."

Last year, he entered again. Lost again.

But this time he has a secret weapon.

SOMETHING UNIQUE

Age 9 was a turning point for Choi.

It marked the first time he sang in public – at school with Mom.

"All the kids were cheering," he says, touching his heart at the memory. "It made me feel, you know, that I'm good for music."

It also marked the first time he dreamed of coming to America. To sing.

He learned to yodel from watching old Tarzan movies. And he learned to play his brother's guitar – eventually winning a couple of singing contests in Chung Joo, a city of 200,000.

When Choi moved to Orange County in 1984, he wanted to be a yodeler like Slim Whitman. He was shocked to learn it was no longer popular.

So he settled for playing autoharp at church as he struggled to get by as a maintenance man. By the time he and his wife opened Grace Music, in 1991, Choi thought he was pretty good at autoharp.

Then he entered an autoharp competition in Kansas.

"Oh my goodness," he says. "I saw what a great, great instrument it was. And I was just a beginner."

He started practicing more. Teaching more. Playing in more churches. One day, the vice-president of the world's leading autoharp manufacturer walked into Grace Music and asked, "Who's Ray Choi?" It turns out Choi was the #1 seller of Oscar Schmidt Autoharps in the nation.

By 2006, Choi had become a student of American folk music and a renowned builder of Autoharps. Still, he felt his technique lacked *something*.

That's when Ray Choi began to play autoharp like no one in the instrument's 129-year history.

BUTTERFLY TREMOLO

There's a running joke among autoharp players that goes: "People make dozens and dozens of dollars doing this!"

In other words, it's not about the money.

Autoharp is largely a forgotten piece of American folk music. Its popularity peaked around 1900 as a parlor instrument. Easy to strum chords. But difficult to pluck melody lines. Its most celebrated player, Maybelle Carter, rose to country fame in the 1950s.

Over the last few decades, however, autoharp stars like Mike Fenton and Ivan Stiles mastered fingerpicking techniques that incorporated melody and chords. To compete, Choi knew he'd have to do the same.

He began using two fingers – then three, then four – to alternately strum up-and-down, in rapid succession, creating what he calls his "butterfly tremolo."

It took years to hone.

"While driving, I'd practice," he says, demonstrating the strum. "In church, I'd practice with my hands in my lap."

When not practicing, he listened to recordings of himself.

"I talk to him, and he doesn't answer me because his ear was plugged with the music," Jane says. "I have to give up!"

In 2010, Choi returned to national competition for the first time in 19 years.

In two separate contests, he reached the semifinals. Then things fell apart. In one, he used picks on his fingers, and they nearly fell off. In the other, he played without finger-picks and messed up his own strum.

The technique he'd practiced 10-hours-a-day, for four years, failed him.

THE REMATCH

Soon after, Choi walked into a nail salon.

The trouble with his technique was that it either pulled his finger-picks off or it wore his fingernails down.

His solution? Artificial nails. Longer and stronger than natural nails. Like permanent finger-picks.

For a year, he practiced with them, up to 13 hours a day. And in June, he returned to the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering.

Waiting back home were family, friends and members of two autoharp groups he'd created.

"Ray Choi is on the brink of becoming a star," said his autoharp student Dana Whitney, 66, of Huntington Beach. "There is nobody like him."

True. No Asian American had ever won the prestigious, folk-music contest. And no one had ever attempted his complex strumming technique.

"I don't know when, or if, anybody else is ever going to master that," said contest director Neal Walters.

On June 24, in Newport, Penn., Choi again made the semifinals. Then the finals.

On the drive back to his hotel, Choi called his wife with the news.

Finally, alone in his car, he allowed himself to scream.

With joy.

"I did it!" he yelled.

It was never about money. Or fame. It was about setting roots in a new land and feeling part of its culture.

"This is an American instrument," he says, back in his small shop. "With it, I finished what I started in Korea.

"That's what we call the American Dream."

Ray Choi has since won the Walnut Valley International Autoharp Championship, in Kansas, too, becoming just the 4th person to win both contests.

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