New Felt For A Dollar And An Hour

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Silicone application, the alternative to re felting your worn chord bars, works wonderfully when done right. For much less time and money your autoharp can have top notch damping once again. I call the process "New Felt For A Dollar And An Hour". But when I do a workshop on the process, I let folks know that I only lie a little.

Years ago George Orthey taught me how to apply silicone to felt, and he wrote an article for AQ in volume IV, number 4. It is worthwhile revisiting the process now, because over the years there have been little improvements which make the process even easier and faster. In my shop, it takes about an hour of labor, and because I have the materials on hand, less than a dollar will be spent on materials. For the average person, you'll spend more because you'll need to buy supplies in larger quantities than you will use. Save money and have a good time by getting together with friends for a silicone party!

The materials you need:

– One tube of 100% silicone, clear, non-paintable. Get it at any hardware store, and use a major brand such as GE or Dap.

-A plastic bottle of white carpenters chalk, such as is used in a chalk line, also available in most lumber and hardware stores. You can get away with blue, but don't use red or some of the florescent colors now available. The color in these is permanent and will make one heck-of-a mess.

-A sheet of waxed paper about 18 inches long. This is available in grocery stores. And you will also need a sheet of white paper to draw a straight line on.

The tools you need:

-A pencil or felt pen.

-A pair of small scissors such as embroidery scissors.

-A sharp utility razor knife.

-A very flat work surface is required. Most flat kitchen counters are good.

-You will also need a clean cutting board. I use a quilting cutting board.

Remove the bars from your autoharp and lay them out in order. It's a good idea to take a digital picture, or write down your bar layout. Make sure the bars are marked.

Now draw a straight line on a sheet of paper, a bit longer than your chord bars. In my shop I actually use dedicated pieces of melamine with 21 pre drawn lines for my bars. You can use just one line and move the sheet of waxed paper across it, to apply the silicone as in the next step.

Lay the waxed paper over your straight line, and squeeze a bead of silicone onto the waxed paper. The bead should be about ¼" in diameter, and follow the straight line. Move the waxed paper over ¾" or so and repeat this line four or five times. You will apply silicone to four or five bars at a time, making sure you have time to do it before the silicone begins to skin over.

Now here is a point which George always emphasized as one of the most important parts of this step, and I re-emphasize here. Take one bar at a time and lay it into a bead of silicone, then press down very hard as though you are trying to squeeze the silicone out completely. You are not trying to create a layer silicone on your bar. You are trying to fill the worn gaps, and trying to impregnate the felt with silicone. You do not want to increase the depth of the bar at all. Once this is done, leave that bar alone for twelve to

twenty four hours (not longer) so that it can cure. Repeat this process until all the bars are done.

Twelve to twenty four hours later, carefully peel the waxed paper from the bars, one bar at a time.

Now you will cut away the excess silicone. With a sharp utility razor knife, cut along each edge of felt on each bar. This will leave long strips of silicone dangling. If the felt was factory applied, it will be in little blocks. With your scissors you will find it easy now to cut off excess silicone, leaving your new, flat felted bar with no grooves. If your felt is V notched such as a luthier-built 'harp would be, this clean up is most easily accomplished with the utility knife. Just slice down the V as though you are cutting it for the first time. Your knife will slice right through.

Now for another critical step. Spread out some chalk on the work table, or on a cookie sheet for easier clean up. Press the bars, one at a time into the chalk and apply a little pressure while rubbing the bar into the chalk. This step will permanently prevent the bar from sticking to the strings which can cause a "sproing" effect.

Now slap the bar onto a clean spot on the table to rid it of excess chalk. Put it back on your 'harp, and get ready to play a few tunes.

Keep in mind that this process works well only if the felt is securely attached to the 'harp to begin with. You can re-glue a few felts if you need to. When done properly, your bars will last longer than before, and you will not be able to distinguish them from fresh felt. This is possible because some felt fibers are still making contact with the strings, giving you the best of both worlds.

Enjoy!