

"What If I Lose My Pick?"

A Mountain Dulcimer Workshop on Playing In The Finger-Picking Style by Steve Smith

Finger Assignments. I "assign" my thumb to the melody string, my index finger to the middle string, and my middle finger to the bass string, holding my hand above the fretboard so that my fingers are relatively straight. When you hold your fingers over these string, it is very natural for your thumb to pick away from you and your other fingers to pick toward you.

(On a four-string dulcimer, I use my thumb for the melody, my index finger for the second melody, my middle finger for the middle string and my ring finger for the bass string. I can then switch to a three-string dulcimer using the same finger assignments, but without using my index finger. This makes it much easier to go back and forth between the two.)

Finger-Picking Patterns. Finger-picking can be done using the same patterns you use for flat-picking such as "melody middle bass middle" or "melody middle melody bass" or "melody bass middle melody bass middle melody middle", but with some helpful variations. You will have more flexibility in what you play than with flat-picking since you won't be as limited to "one string at a time." I also think you can put more dynamics into a song with your fingers than with a pick, and you can always use your finger-nail as a flat pick, and pick or strum away!

"Pinches." An advantage of finger-picking is that you can pluck more than one string at a time. You can "pinch" with your thumb and a finger, you can pick toward you with more than one finger, or you can pluck all of them at once in a "grand pinch." Often if my picking pattern covers an entire measure of a song and starts on the melody note, I put pinches in on other important notes of the measure to keep the melody line going. An example might be to pick the "melody middle bass middle" pattern as "melody middle melody/bass middle" to pick up a melody note on the third beat.

Breaking Out Of The Pattern. You will find that when you are picking a melody with a certain pattern "behind" it, you occasionally need a melody note when the picking pattern calls for a middle or bass string note. No problem! Just play a "pinch" with the melody and the picking pattern string. Try not to let the pattern govern your playing, but let your thumb work independently of the others, besides taking its regular place in the pattern. This frees you up to play odd rhythms without trying to force them into a fixed pattern.

Varying The Sound. Don't always pick over the same spot of the fretboard. Pick toward the middle of the dulcimer for a more mellow, harp-like sound, or toward the tail for a sharper, more nasal sound. You can vary this between or even within verses. Changing the way you pick within a song will also affect the sound you get. Instead of plucking the strings with a "pinch," try occasionally using your index finger to pluck toward you across one or more strings as if you were playing a harp.

Also, remember to vary the pattern from time to time. Throw in spots with simpler patterns (and even some empty spaces) allowing some "breathing room," rather than "wowing" your listeners with a super-fast pattern that never varies and may become boring or lose the melody. One thing to try is strumming across some or all of the strings, as a fast strum or slower, almost as an arpeggio.