

# "This Thing Has 4 Strings!"

## A Mountain Dulcimer Workshop on Four-String Playing by Steve Smith

### IN GENERAL

Most dulcimers you can buy now have extra notches cut in the nut and bridge so that you can separate your strings into four individual (or pairs of) strings, rather than just "melody," "middle" and "bass" strings or pairs of strings. Several years ago I reasoned that since the McSpaddens had gone to this trouble on our dulcimers, I would at least try out the four-string configuration. Because of the extra fullness of the chords and the added picking pattern possibilities, I've never switched it back!

### SPECIFICS

**Finger Assignments.** As with three-string configurations, I almost always "assign" fingers of my left hand to certain strings:

**Bass string:** Middle finger.

**Middle string:** Index finger.

**Second Melody string:** Ring finger.

**First Melody string:** Little finger and Thumb. (Generally my Thumb if the fret number in a chord is higher than the fret numbers of the other strings, otherwise I use my Little finger.)

These assignments work for all chords where the middle string is fretted at or above the fret of the bass string, or is open. A chord like "3-3-3-5" will mean "crossing" your fingers and might be uncomfortable at first, but give it a try! Practice sliding "2-3-2-4" to "3-3-3-5" back and forth to get used to it.

If the bass string is fretted higher than the middle string, I switch fingers and use my index finger on the bass and middle finger on the middle... As in everything, rules are made to be broken. Be flexible!

**Tunings.** "D-A-d-d". This tuning is just the same as you use for 3-string "D-A-d", with the doubled melody string "opened" into two separate strings. This is the tuning I use most of the time. In this tuning, I usually fret the second melody string with my ring finger on the same fret my middle finger frets on the bass string, or I leave it open as a drone. This has the advantage that you can take any song written for a three-string "mixolydian" tuning and bring it straight to a four-string dulcimer. Just "track" the bass string frets on the second melody string and play the song as written!

**"D-G-d-d".** This tuning is an "opened up" version of "New Ionian." It has the advantage that you have a three-string "Ionian" "G-d-d" on the top three strings if you ignore the bass, and you have "New Ionian" on either the bottom three strings or on all four.

**"D-A-A-d".** This tuning is fun because it gives you BOTH "Mixolydian" and "Ionian" in one tuning! If you play on just the bottom three strings, you have "Ionian." If you play all four, however, you have "Mixolydian!"

**"D-A-c#-d", "D-A-A#-d", etc.** With a four-string dulcimer, you have more options to go beyond the traditional modes and find chromatic and other tunings. Janita Baker likes "D-A-A#-d" for finger-picking, but tends to ignore the A# string except to pick up odd chromatic notes. I prefer "D-A-c#-d" because you still have the chromatics, but I think it's easier for working up nice chords for picking or

strumming. If you find an unusual tuning, work up a chord chart as best you can, but also just sit down and play with chord patterns and you'll be surprised what you can do!

**Finger-Picking Patterns.** Start with some basic three-string "cross-picking" patterns ("melody bass middle," "melody middle bass middle," "melody middle melody bass", etc) and develop your own four-string variations. Often I'll use the pattern as-is, and play a "pinch" of the two melody strings where the melody string is to be picked ("melody1/melody2 middle bass middle", etc). Also, you can use a pattern on the bottom three strings as-is and use your thumb to play the straight melody line. Four-string is also nice, though, for the "rolling" patterns you can play. I often use a variation of the pattern "melody/1 bass middle melody/2" in my picking, adding the melody notes on the first melody string when needed with my thumb.