

# My OctoberFest Dulcimer Experience

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I could have said no, and after I said that I would try, I immediately wondered 'What was I thinking!' The ladies at my church, a rural Lutheran church, were planning an 'OctoberFest' as a community outreach project, and had heard that I 'played the dulcimer'. A representative came to me with the big question: 'Would I play my dulcimer at the OctoberFest?' After stalling them with a 'Let me think about it.', I decided to go for it, because, what was the worst that could happen? I could freeze up and forget most of every song I had memorized, and people would walk away, shaking their heads, and think to themselves 'There's just no beginning to this guy's talent!' On the other hand, I might be able to stumble through my repertoire (whatever that means!) with a minimum of mistakes, and might entice some people to become curious about dulcimers, and maybe, just maybe, get some more people interested in playing this quaint folk instrument. The hopes of the latter happening overcame the prospects of the former.



Let me back up to the beginning of my dulcimer story. I am not a musically gifted individual, in fact before digital tuners, I had trouble keeping a radio in tune. I had not previously played any other instrument, although I fussed with a guitar for a while and never got to the stage of even playing a few standard chords adequately. So when my youngest son took our (his) guitar off to college with him, I thought briefly about buying a cheap one for myself, but I realized the futility of that idea. So the idea popped into my head that I should check out a dulcimer. After all, I had learned that this Jean Ritchie lady was possibly a distant cousin, as her mother and my grandmother were both Halls, from the Viper Kentucky area. And I had seen a dulcimer at our local music store, and it was supposed to be easy to learn to play. So, in June of 2001, I located and bought a dulcimer from an individual in Knott County, Ky. As far as I could tell, it sounded okay, and I was off and running with my cane noter, herdim pick, and a couple of beginners dulcimer books.

Things proceeded slowly, as I tried to learn the dulcimer by myself. I got great satisfaction playing and practicing in the privacy of my house, memorizing melodies and playing them over and over, trying to get them to sound right. Then, sometime in November, I got to thinking that my music didn't really sound that good. The instrument that I at first thought sounded okay, seemed to buzz and rattle too much. So it was off to the local music store, where they had a rack of about half a dozen dulcimers. I tried strumming each one, starting at the top of the rack. Some were in tune, some were not, but most seemed to sound better than my homemade one. Then when I tried the last one, the one at the bottom of the rack, I heard the sweet sound that I was looking for. It was a Folk Roots Dulcimer by Folkcraft, and I loved its sound. Even then I thought about it for a week or so before investing in it. After all, I was getting frustrated with trying to play the dulcimer, and maybe it would be better to just give it up and use the one I had as a wall decoration. Fortunately, my wife supported a decision to buy the Folk Roots model, telling me it could be my christmas present.

With the new dulcimer in hand (on lap?), I renewed my effort to play the dulcimer. I practiced the songs I knew, and worked at some new ones, as my wife and I agreed that the new dulcimer had a much better sound. I even tried to transpose some of my favorite bluegrass songs for the dulcimer, using the 'Bluegrass Fake Book', and writing in the fret numbers I needed. I discovered that songs come in different keys, and dulcimers don't easily adapt to different keys, at least in the hands of a beginner. So I continued playing the dulcimer for my enjoyment, and my wife began to even recognize what song I was trying to play.

By the time June came around again, I was comfortable enough with my dulcimer playing that I could play it for my family members and friends, and I did indeed play it some at our family reunion in Knott County, Ky at that time. But it was just for a small group, not a formal performance for the whole reunion group. Then my daughter called to inform us of her wedding date. Lori and Dan had been talking about getting married, and had set the date for late July. I joked with her about whether or not she had booked a dulcimer player yet, and she took that to mean that I wanted to play for the wedding. Soon I was ordering Larry Conger's book of wedding songs, only to realize they were beyond my current abilities with the dulcimer. So I worked instead on 'Ode to Joy', just playing the melody strings. I stumbled through the pre-service songs, playing the hymns that I knew, and we used 'Shall We Gather at the River' with some re-written words to match the occasion. I played and my wife sang the words in tribute to Dan and Lori. However, the wedding, which was to be outdoors at a park, had to be moved into a nature center, and the pre-service dulcimer music became just more background noise, as the guests milled about and visited. At the reception, held in a park shelter house, I got a chance to play the dulcimer some more to a smaller crowd, and we did an encore of 'Shall We Gather at the High Banks'. I was starting to get comfortable playing in public.

During a trip to the Smokey Mountains in early August, I got a chance to visit Jack Lyle's Dulcimer shop just outside of Waynesville, N.C. Jack played utilizing some chords, and I decided I needed to work on learning how to add chords. After buying several more dulcimer books at Jack's shop, I headed home to Ohio and started trying to do some chording. At first, the chords didn't make much sense, and it was difficult to memorize so much more stuff just to play a song. Then I stumbled across some information about how chords are made, something about intervals of thirds and fifths. So my DAA tuned dulcimer took on a new sound as I experimented with these intervals: Just fret the middle string two frets to the left of the melody string for a third and fret the bass string one fret to the left of the melody string for a fifth. Some of the chords in the books even used these intervals! I was actually learning some rudimentary music theory, and enjoying trying to apply it to

my dulcimer.



Then came that fateful request: 'Would you play your dulcimer at our OctoberFest?' I had no idea about how to approach this event, and so I turned to Everythingdulcimer.com for help. I posted a thread entitled 'Mountain Dulcimer at an OctoberFest,' and waited for suggestions. The good people responding to my plea had good suggestions, and their support helped me prepare myself for the experience. Gail suggested I should dress the part, and even though Ken disagreed with her, I decided to get some sort of 'costume.' I settled on a straw hat (99 cent closeout at a local store), a set of suspenders that I had never before worn (came free with a tool belt I needed), and a t-shirt with iron-ons from the everythingdulcimer website. I tried out this costume at a family gathering and my kids seemed embarrassed, while my wife said 'You aren't going to wear that, are you?' I prepared a list of the songs I could play so I could look at it to see what songs I was forgetting to do. And I kept on practicing, adding a couple of new songs to my list that I thought sounded good on the dulcimer: O Danny Boy and Morning has Broken.

Soon came the big day, and I set up a borrowed EZ-up canopy, made a makeshift stage from some pallets and plywood, put my old dulcimer on a Workmate Work Bench, tuned up both dulcimers, and practiced some songs until some people began to arrive. I taped down a tab copy of 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' by the old dulcimer for people to try. To try to keep the people there for at least a little while, I put out some candy corn and a box of chocolates to bribe them. And I played.

Amazing enough, some people actually sat down and listened to a couple of songs. Some asked questions about dulcimers. Several tried playing my old dulcimer. I had a nice discussion with an acquaintance who had a native american flute, which only played in one key, not the key I was using. I was surviving the experience, and when I messed up on a song, nobody seemed to notice. There was so much else to do at the OctoberFest that few people stayed long at my music tent, but quite a few stayed for a little while.



Then a friend showed up with a dulcimer. Kathie is an elementary music teacher, our bell choir director, and director of Women's Chorus, as well as being an accomplished organist and pianist. Her dulcimer, made by Homer Ledford, was under the bed at her mother's house for many years, until I heard about it from a friend who had been doing some painting for her. At my request, they got it out, and soon Kathie took it home with intentions of playing it. Due to her busy schedule, she had not spent any appreciable time with it, but here she was, willing to try it out with me at our OctoberFest. We tuned it up as best as we could (wooden tuning pegs that slip!) and she played it softly without a pick, watching my finger placements and also playing by ear. Then Amy showed up. Amy has, according to her older sister, perfect pitch. She has played piano accompaniment, and obviously does have a good ear for music. She started playing along on my old dulcimer. So, with me playing the 'lead', we went through most of the standard hymns that I know, and their playing along added an extra dimension to the music. We were jammin'! I guess it is true that you really can't hit wrong notes on a dulcimer if you are tuned to the same key. I have about three songs I can play with some chords, and Kathie wanted to play those over, because they just sounded better. So we enjoyed 'Ode to Joy,' 'Amazing Grace,' and 'Rock of Ages' several times. We were still enjoying playing when Pastor got out his guitar and started the sing-along by the bonfire. At first we were so absorbed in what we were doing that we didn't notice. When we finally realized he had started, we reluctantly quit our self-indulgent song fest.

Now in reflection, would I do it again? Yes! It turned out to be a pleasant experience in spite of my trepidation. If you ever get the chance to do something like this, go for it! I did, and I was able to 'Get by With a Little Help From My Friends.' Now there is a song I should try to get the music for so I can try it on the dulcimer.

The End. (But really 'Only the Beginning!')