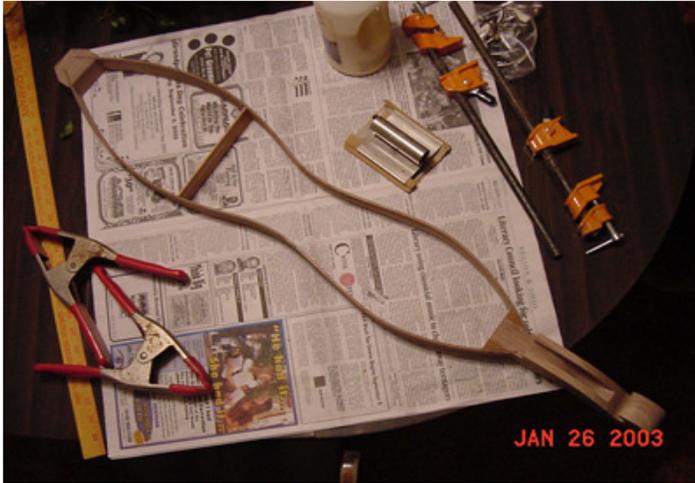


Building a Kit Dulcimer

by Larry Hicks



Betcha can't play just one! Remember the old TV commercial for a popular snack item: "Betcha can't eat just one!" Owning and playing a dulcimer is just like that, you gotta have more than one.

Actually, I already had two, but my first one is best used as a wallhanging. This 'homemade in Appalachia' dulcimer just doesn't have a good sound for various reasons: strings are too high above the fretboard, frets are not as straight and level as they should be, a crack developed in the back along the seam, and so on. As you might guess, I bought this instrument before I knew anything about dulcimers, or obviously about instruments in general. My thinking was that if I couldn't learn to play it, it would look good hanging on the wall!

My second dulcimer was acquired after I wondered if the poor sound coming from my dulcimer wasn't just due to my poor playing, and so I visited a local music store and tried out every dulcimer they had, which was about a half dozen. The last one at the bottom of the rack had such a sweet sound when I strummed it, that I knew I had to get it. After thinking it over for a week or so, I sprung for the \$300 and acquired my second dulcimer, a Folkroots with mahogany body and spruce top, and a long 29.25" fretboard. With this dulcimer, even my mistakes sounded better, and it re-energized my efforts to learn to play.

Playing in DAA, I actually played some at my daughter's wedding and our church OctoberFest, as chronicled in my article about that experience. Then I became interested in learning to play in DAD, due to a workshop that 'forced' me to retune my Folkroots to DAD. I soon found out that I needed to restring the melody strings to go up the DAD, and going back down to DAA made the melody strings too loose. At about this time, I started attending a dulcimer club that meets in a nearby town, and they played in DAD. If I was to learn this other tuning, and still be able to play all the songs I had memorized in DAA, I clearly needed another dulcimer.

I knew that dropping hints to my wife about the need for another dulcimer would not be especially well received, so I came up with a plan. If I built a dulcimer from a kit, not only would the cost be considerably less, but also I would be developing my woodworking skills! She fell for it, knowing that I enjoy building things, although the things were usually a little larger, like sheds and garages, or entertainment centers, and more recently a pulpit and altar for our church.

I emailed Dennis at Folk Notes in Ft. Wayne to see what he had in stock, and he was getting in a walnut

Folkcraft hourglass kit, which was what I had decided on. Meanwhile, I started a thread on everythingdulcimer.com about whether a kit dulcimer had a chance of sounding good. My dulcimer friends in cyberspace were supportive, encouraging me to go for it, and I did, picking up the kit a few days later. Then, after I got it home and started looking at the many parts, someone on ED related a bad experience about building a kit dulcimer, one made with some plywood parts which did not turn out to be good sounding. It was too late, I was already committed to making this dulcimer, and I hoped that my kit being all solid woods would make my kit dulcimer one that sounded good.

So, I set about the task, first doing some preliminary sanding of parts, which I thought would be easier to do before putting it all together.



Then I started the actual task of putting it together. The sides have to be sanded some to make them fit into the slots of the scroll head and tailblock, so I sanded away until the sides would fit into the slots properly. Then when I dry-fit the sides together with the head and tail blocks, I noticed a minor problem. In my process of sanding and fitting, I had reversed one of the sides and had a strange looking dulcimer frame, with a large bout paired up across from a small bout. And it was like this at both ends! (I can't believe I am admitting this.) With a little more sanding and fitting, I had the parts in the proper places, and soon had it glued together.

Next, I needed to cut the soundholes in the top. I had ordered a spruce top to contrast with the walnut body and fretboard, so I had to wait a few days for it to arrive. Meanwhile, I thought about and decided upon a soundhole design: a set of varying sized circles arranged in a sort of cross design. Following instructions to put the two halves of the top together and cut the soundholes for both sides at once, I laid out the locations of the holes and started to drill them into the delicate spruce. Up popped minor problem number two. The soft spruce started tearing out between the holes, making a mess of my beautiful spruce top. Trying some more practice holes on scrap parts of the spruce, I decided I needed some new and different drill bits. I located and bought some forstner bits, hoping that they, by their design, would be more gentle on the spruce. After practicing some with the new bits, I turned my top boards around, laid out the design, slightly different this time, and was able to successfully drill the holes this time. Luckily, I was able to salvage the top pieces by turning them around so that the old holes would be in the part to be trimmed off after the top was glued on.

After drilling the holes, I glued and nailed the top boards to the fretboard, and then glued the top assembly to the frame. Then, I followed the instructions to scribe and trim off the top using a utility knife. To my surprise, I discovered that trimming the top off with a utility knife actually worked, and I further discovered that I could 'whittle' the top on down with the knife, closer to the final fit, and not have to spend days, or perhaps weeks sanding the edge of the top down to size. With a little sanding and fitting, I next glued on the one-piece walnut bottom. After allow it to dry, I likewise trimmed it off with a utility knife. I also made a small oak piece, with a strip of walnut glued down the middle, to glue in place on the tail end of the dulcimer. The fretboard had a small overhang past the end of the tailblock, which instructions said to cut off. I decided instead to fit this oak block beneath the end of the fretboard for a little contrast to the walnut, and a little personal touch for my new dulcimer. Now it was time to sand, and sand, and sand, and

I had only a little 'fixing' and filling to do before applying the finish. The top assembly had slipped/floated a little during assembly, so I had a small gap between the scrollhead and the fretboard, that required some fixing. I carefully glued some walnut strips into the gap for structural integrity, and finished that fix off with some walnut wood filler. I also found a couple of little gaps between the sides and bottom. These I fixed by working some glue into them, and again using some wood filler to finish the job. Then it was back to sanding, and sanding, and sanding, and

Then it was time to apply the finish. I chose to use a Min-wax Antique Oil finish that I have used on furniture projects. It is brushed on, then after 10 or 15 minutes, you wipe it down with a clean cloth to leave a nice satin finish with no runs. It normally takes two or three coats, but this time I put on four. I would apply the finish in my workshop, warmed up a little with some heatlamps and worklights, and bring it into the house to dry overnight. I had the perfect place to hang it: On the fan/light over our dining room table. This was most appropriate since I had done most of the glueing, cutting, and sanding on the dining room table also. Had the temperature not been constantly below freezing, I could have and would have done all the work in my shop, and I would not have had so much sawdust and wood chips on the dining room floor.

Finally, I was ready to to install the nut and bridge and other hardware. It took a little sanding of the nut and bridge pieces, as well as some sanding and fileing of the slots before they fit satisfactorily. I carefully drilled the holes in the tailblock and tapped in the pins for the ball-end strings. Then I installed the tuners as per Folkcraft instructions, which just happened to match the impassioned instructions from KenH, and also resulted in my preferred orientation of 'righty-tighty'. So clockwise rotations will tighten the strings, and they will stay in tune due to the proper orientation of the gears, as KenH explained so carefully to me and others. Then, I was ready to put on the strings, and bring the dulcimer up to tune for the first time. Ken was right about that being a special magic moment when a dulcimer first comes to life. I tuned it up to DAA, and first played Amazing Grace, and it sounded good. Playing other songs I had not been playing since my Folkroots had been tuned to DAD, I enjoyed Rock of Ages, Shall We Gather At The River, Sweet By and By, and so on. It's a keeper.

I will try to explain how my kit dulcimer sounds, as it is really different in sound from my other two dulcimers. I think it has a more primitive, or traditional sound when compared to my Folkroots, which sounds very 'sweet'. It is more 'twangy', or perhaps I should say more 'metallic'. It is much quieter than my Folkroots, but then it is smaller in size and made of totally different woods. It sounds good played dronal style, and sounds very good played with some 'chords', as I am able to do with some songs.

I took my new kit dulcimer with us to the hospital for its first trip out of the house. We were visiting my wife's sister, currently hospitalized in the coronary care unit, and knowing we would be there for some time just sitting in a waiting area or elevator lobby, I thought I might be able to show off my new creation and play it a little for practice. My in-laws were impressed with the looks of my dulcimer, and also thought the sound was very good. Other people passing through seemed to enjoy the sound, and I was able to explain what it was to some people who had never seen one before, or who had seen one but didn't know what it was called. A nurse passing by wanted to know when I would be coming to her area to play some songs for them. I even made contact with someone whose mother plays dulcimer with some friends in a nearby town, and I hope to get together with that group sometime.



So, would I build a kit again? Yes, I found the experience rewarding. Does it sound good? Yes it does, although not as good as my commercially built Folkroots dulcimer. I can see that someone might find dulcimers in a dealers showroom that sound better, but I feel it is just right for what I intended it for, that is for playing DAA, mostly with drones, and mostly for my own pleasure. My Folkroots would be better for playing for others, due mainly to the better volume.

I have heard that new dulcimers sound even better as they are played more and age a little, so I know that as I enjoy playing it now, I am adding to increased enjoyment of the sound in the future.

Larry Hicks