

How to Get More Music From Your Dulcimer (An Introduction to 1-3-5 Tunings)

by Merv Rowley

We all enjoy the many old folk songs and other tunes we have learned to play on the mountain dulcimer, using either drones or chord accompaniment. It doesn't take a beginner very long to realize that this simple instrument with only three or four strings and a diatonic fretboard can do some amazing things! I know that, even after more than twenty years, I keep discovering hidden secrets of the dulcimer and what it can do!

Eventually, though, we come to realize there are lots of songs the dulcimer doesn't seem able to handle. Notes are "missing" when we try to play melodies like *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, *Shine on, Harvest Moon*, or some of the beautiful old hymns like *Old Rugged Cross*. The problem here is that these songs require notes that just don't exist on the dulcimer fretboard (at places where we see the empty "gaps"). This is the limitation common to all diatonic instruments.

Even though we've added the 6+ (and maybe the 1+) frets, extra strings and even the use of capos, this problem still exists for many songs. Of course, we could make our dulcimers chromatic, adding all the frets we see on guitars. This is perhaps the best solution, but many players are reluctant to tackle the chromatic fretboard, even though it is really not that difficult to master. Within the past several years a lot of players have begun to learn that there is a way to provide all those missing notes on the diatonic dulcimer fretboard ***without adding more frets and strings or using capos***. The answer lies in the use of a unique tuning, called the 1-3-5 tuning system.

Among those who have already been using this system are folks like Rob Brereton, Neal Walters, Connie Allen, Sue Carpenter, Anna Barry, Rosamond Campbell, John Sackenheim, Ruth Randle and myself. Until about two years ago, only a limited number of tablature arrangements for 1-3-5 tunings was available, particularly for music in the public domain. There are now three such books, containing a total of 45 arrangements in standard music notation and tablature. Hundreds of dulcimer players across the country are already playing and enjoying many of these old music favorites for the first time ever, using 1-3-5 tuning arrangements.

What is a 1-3-5 tuning?

The 1-3-5 tuning is one for which the three open (unfretted) strings are tuned to form a major chord. Perhaps this is why it has often been called an "open" tuning. As an example, consider the tuning for the key of D major:

The notes of the key of D are:

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D

If we select the first, third and fifth notes and tune the bass, middle and treble strings to those notes, in that order, our “open” strings, when strummed together, will sound the notes D, F# and A. These are the notes of a major D chord. In fact, *every* fret, when all strings are fretted and strummed, will form a major chord. The best way to see this is in the form of a picture of our fretboard, as shown below:

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E	F	F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#

Notice that our fretboard has three strings and includes the 6+ fret. You will see that each fret sounds a major “barre” chord when all strings are fretted and strummed. The chord on each fret is named by the note on the bass string. This is unlike the situation for any modal tuning, where the bass and middle strings are tuned to allow drone accompaniment. THE 1-3-5 TUNING IS NOT MODAL. We must use chord accompaniment.

If we look closely at the notes on the treble string, we see that we can play melodies on that string in the keys of A, Bm or D without capo or any retuning at all. Notice also that we can find all twelve notes of the chromatic scale on this fretboard! Not only can these notes be used in melodies when needed, but they are also available to form “color” chords that are impossible with other tunings.

Bear in mind that we are not limited to any given tuning such as D-F#-A. We might just as easily have chosen another 1-3-5 tuning such as Eb-G-Bb, E-G#-B, F-A-C, etc., restricted only by string tension limits and tone quality.

The best way to judge what the 1-3-5 tuning can do is by playing something for yourself. Attached is a 1-3-5 arrangement of “When You Wore A Tulip”

Enjoy! For further information, contact:

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