

# Chordish Drones For The Mountain Dulcimer

by Dave Murray

*Fiddlers and banjo players have been known to roll their eyes and gaze into space when a dulcimer player pulls up a chair. Sometimes, after doggedly playing along and gaining their acceptance, I ask them the reason for this prejudice against dulcimers. They tell me that they worry that the dulcimer will only be able to play in the key to which it is tuned, that the drones will be discordant with the chord shifts of the banjo and guitar, and that the bomp-biddy-bomp strumming may obscure melodic subtleties. --Holly Tannen, the Dulcimer Chord Book*

**Objection # 1: Only play in one key.** Although it is true that the modal nature of diatonic instruments pose a difficulty for key changes, the advent of the popular 6+ fret does a great deal to reduce the problem. The most popular tunings for the mountain dulcimer are the 1-5-x tunings; 1-5-5 (DAA) and 1-5-8 (DAd).

With the DAd tuning, playing from fret 0 provides the 'D' Mixolydian major interval. With a 6+ fret you can also play the 'D' Ionian major scale. Placing a capo at fret 3 provides the 'G' Ionian major scale. Placing a capo at fret 4 provides the 'A' Dorian minor scale. With a 6+ fret, you can also play 'A' Mixolydian major. It just so happens that D, G, and A are some of the most popular keys for old-time and bluegrass jam tunes, with A being a popular key for Mixolydian fiddle tunes.

Two other popular keys, if you include folk and pop, are C and E. As we will see later, the circle of fifths is F-C-G-D-A-E-B, so tuning CGc will give F, C and G, and tuning EBe will give A, E and B. DAd does the most for us, but there is always the option of retuning.

The *chordish drone* system that this article is about will work with 1-5-5 (DAA) since both have DA drone tunings, but that tuning is a bit less capo friendly. For one thing, you must play much closer to the bridge with the capo. The other issue is that DAA provides 'D' Ionian major. Capo 3 gives 'G' Lydian major where an 8+ fret is required to provide an Ionian major interval. Since many DAA players find a 6+ fret to be controversial, they are even less likely to have an 8+ fret. Capo 4 provides a Mixolydian interval where a 13+ fret would provide an Ionian major interval. If you plan use a capo, it might be more practical to choose DAd.

**Objection # 2: Discordant drones.**

Someone used the expression "chordish" in a discussion on Everything Dulcimer. I like the word and use it here. Part of the charm of the mountain dulcimer, are it's drones. Unfortunately, there are times when those drones are discordant and clash with the chord changes of modern music.

These are the times when we might like to be able to make a simple adjustment to the drones to make them "fit in".

This article is not about accompaniment chords, or finding the most elegant way to arrange a song. It is simply about finding a way to make those charming drones sound harmonious.

A small amount of very basic theory is included. No doubt, every musician who plays the mountain dulcimer already knows it. Many people who play the mountain dulcimer are not musicians and roll their eyes at the mention of theory, and don't know it. I highly recommend that you not skip it since it is helpful. There is a reason why musicians learn the basics of music theory. If after you read it, it's not your thing to "study", fine, at least you'll understand the logic of this approach. I promise, it is only a small amount of very basic theory.

### **Objection # 3: Only play one rhythm.**

This article does not address that issue. It is a topic that sorely needs a good article by someone qualified to write it.

## **Chord Basics**

The most basic chords are also known as *triads* because they are made up of three notes with a specific interval. A **major** chord has a root, a note two whole steps above it, and a note one and a half steps above that. A **minor** chord has a root, a note one and a half steps above it, and another note two whole steps above that. Something that they have in common is that the first and third note for both chords are the same. They are an interval known as the one-five.

A chord is often extended to a **seven chord** (I7, IV7, V7, etc). This means that the seventh degree is added to the chord. There are Major and natural seventh chords, with the natural seventh being more common (and pleasing in most cases). The major seventh has the fourth note two whole steps above the third note (5th), while the natural seventh has the fourth note one and a half steps above the third note (5th).

Major chords have a **relative minor** chord. The circle of fifths section that follows shows an easy way to determine what it is.

**Inverted** chords do not have the root note as the lowest note. There's more to it than that, but that's enough about it for this discussion.

## **The Circle Of Fifths**

G	D	A	E	B	F#	C#
IV	I	V	ii	vi	iii	vii <sup>o</sup>
			rel IV	rel I	rel V	

The table above shows the notes of the D Major scale as it appears on the circle of 5ths. Since it moves by 5ths going CW (right), and by 4ths going CCW (left), one of the things that it shows is

what the IV and V chords are for a key. In the example, for the key of D, the G (IV) is to the left and the A (V) is to the right. This gives us an easy reference when we change keys with a capo.

Another thing it shows us is the relative minors. Just move three steps CW (right) to find the relative minor. **D G A E** indicates that the relative minor of D is E.

## Chordish Drones With I-V-x Tuning

### Four Drone Notes, Key of D Example

<b>D (I)</b>	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	A#	B	C	C#	<b>D</b>	D#	E	F	<b>F#</b>	G	G#	<b>A</b>	A#	B	<b>C</b>
<b>Em (ii)</b>	<b>E</b>	F	F#	<b>G</b>	G#	A	A#	<b>B</b>	C	C#	<b>D</b>	D#	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	A#	B	C
<b>F#m (iii)</b>	E	F	<b>F#</b>	G	G#	<b>A</b>	A#	B	C	<b>C#</b>	D	D#	<b>E</b>	F	F#	G	G#	A	A#	B	C
<b>G (IV)</b>	E	F	F#	<b>G</b>	G#	A	A#	<b>B</b>	C	C#	<b>D</b>	D#	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	A#	B	C
<b>A (V)</b>	E	F	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	A#	B	C	<b>C#</b>	D	D#	<b>E</b>	F	F#	<b>G</b>	G#	A	A#	B	C
<b>Bm (vi)</b>	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	A#	<b>B</b>	C	C#	<b>D</b>	D#	E	F	<b>F#</b>	G	G#	<b>A</b>	A#	B	C

### DAx keys of G, D, and A

key G	IV ii	I vi	V iii	key D	IV ii	I vi	V iii	key A	IV ii	I vi	V iii
capo 3	C Am	G Em	D Bm	no capo	G Em	D Bm	A F#m	capo 4	D Bm	A F#m	E Dbm
<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>

The heart of the *chordish drone* concept is that we are not actually trying to create chords, but are creating drone intervals that are not discordant with the chord changes. The most common drones are the root-5 of the I chord, but there is no law saying that that must be the case. The root, and octave of the root (D-d) for a D chord works quite well.

The charts above show that in theory, we only need to change the pitch of one drone to get the root-5 of the IV chord, and only need to change the other drone to make the root-5 of the V chord. In some cases this will work for us, but due to the layout of the mountain dulcimer fret board, some reachable areas of the fret board require us to fret two strings, inverting the drones. Fortunately, when this is the case, they are generally adjacent, or separated by one fret, and are therefore doable.

The second key concept is that when minor chords are being played, we do not need to create a root-5 interval of the minor chord. The most likely minor chords are relative minors of the I, IV, or V chord. Since the relative minor7 chord has the 3-5-7 of it's major, if we play the root-5 of

the I chord we are also playing the 3-7 of the relative minor chord. It does less to imply the chord since it is missing the root, but most importantly, it will not be discordant. This simplifies things greatly. If you are playing a song where IV chord is replaced by the vi chord, treat it like the I chord. Example: B-D-F#-A works for D (D-F#-A) and Bm7 (B-D-F#-A).

**Note:** The root-5 interval is neither major or minor, but the minor3-natural7 interval is very minor. You can use the root-5 where the chord is either major or minor, but that is not the case when using the relative minor substitute.

## No Capo, Key Of D

### I (D) & vi (Bm) -- B-D-F#-A

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### IV (G) & ii (Em) -- E-G-B-D

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### V (A) & iii (F#m) -- F#-A-C#-E

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

## Capo 3, Key Of G

### I (G) & vi (Em) -- E-G-B-D

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	A	B
NA	NA	NA	0	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### IV (C) & ii (Am) -- A-C-E-G

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	C#	D	E
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A	B	C#	D	E	F#	<b>G</b>	G#	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	<b>G</b>	G#	A	B
NA	NA	NA	0	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### V (D) & iii (Bm) -- B-D-F#-A

D	E	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	<b>D</b>	E	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	<b>D</b>	E
A	B	C#	<b>D</b>	E	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B	C#	<b>D</b>	E	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B
NA	NA	NA	0	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

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## Capo 4, Key Of A

### I (A) & vi (F#m) -- F#-A-C-E

D	E	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	D	<b>E</b>
A	B	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B
NA	NA	NA	NA	0	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### IV (D) & iii (Bm) -- B-D-F#-A

D	E	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	<b>D</b>	E	F#	G	<b>A</b>	B	C	C#	<b>D</b>	E
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B	C#	<b>D</b>	E	F#	G	G#	<b>A</b>	B
NA	NA	NA	NA	0	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

### V (E) & iii (Dbm) -- Db-E-G#-B

D	E	F#	G	A	<b>B</b>	C	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	A	<b>B</b>	C	C#	D	<b>E</b>
A	B	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	G#	A	<b>B</b>	C#	D	<b>E</b>	F#	G	G#	A	<b>B</b>
NA	NA	NA	NA	0	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15

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## Summary

This is a hybrid compromise system where we get all we can from the drones and do as little as possible while eliminating dissonance with other players who are following the chord changes to create harmony.

It provides a simple method for dealing with music that includes relative minor chords.

It is a capo friendly system that allows us to play in multiple keys and facilitates retuning while maintaining a familiar fret layout with the same patterns.