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Making Music the Old Fashioned Way

**by
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While I was at Merlefest in the spring of 2007, I wandered into one of the *Pickin' Tents* to see what was going on. This particular tent that I entered had an old-time music jam going on among a group of festival attendees. I looked around to see and hear the usual guitars and banjos galore as well as two fiddles going strong. However, off to one side, I heard the singing sound of an Appalachian Dulcimer. Even here in this Mecca of Americana music, the Dulcimer is rare. The guy playing was so in tune with what was going on that the sound was magical. Hoping that I was not being too rude, I crowded close to him and peered over his shoulder to watch as he strummed the strings and slid his noter (actually, a wooden stick) up and down the frets. When the song ended, I interrupted him for information. What I found out was very interesting. He told me that he could *chase* (his words) the fiddlers as they played melody with his noter on the dulcimer's melody strings and that this was something the other stringed instruments could not easily do. He demonstrated for me his strumming technique and noter positioning, and needless to say I was hooked. Fast forward several months to find me standing in a curio shop in Shepards town WVA. The shopkeeper was holding court in the center of the store playing a custom made dulcimer with the effect of a pied piper on the shop's customers. If I was hooked earlier, I was reeled in that day.

I just had to have a dulcimer. Several weeks searching on Ebay yielded for me my very own Appalachian Dulcimer. It was inexpensive, it was old, and the quality was suspect; however, the strings were fairly new, and it stayed in tune. I downloaded information from Internet web sites and begin the agony of self-teaching. Discouraged, I was about to throw the instrument in a closet, when I happened upon a newspaper article. Dinah Ansley was preparing to hold a dulcimer workshop at Waynesboro Virginia's Stone Soup Books and Café. I discovered that Dinah Ansley is a performer, teacher, and recording artist. She has studied dulcimer at Appalachian State University and Western Carolina State University as well as having taught at Warren Wilson College. This appeared to be someone to be reckoned with. I didn't know but maybe I was going to be in rarified company if I attended her workshop. Nevertheless, I went by the Café one day to hear her play a noontime concert and to maybe make arrangements to attend the workshop. In meeting Ms. Ansley, I discovered a gracious, down-to-earth lady in whose presence I immediately felt comfortable. She assured me that her workshop was for folks who couldn't even play a radio, and that no musical experience was required. She said that she was going to "let the instrument play the player."

The fateful Saturday morning soon rolled around. I ambled onto the Café patio with noter, pick, and dulcimer in hand, and took a seat not really knowing what to expect. Gathered about me were folks of all ages. We ranged in age from a child of 10 to folks in their 60's and 70's; and we all had that gallows look of people not sure of their fate.

Ms. Ansley bounded into our mist and, with her able assistant Emily, immediately tried to put us at ease. Her first task was to get us suited up so to speak. Those of us who were not packing our own instruments were quickly equipped with the most clever of dulcimers constructed of cardboard body and hardwood fret board. The next step was to tune us up.

Armed with an electronic tuning device we all were quickly synced into the DAA or Ionian Mode of tuning. Dinah told us that this is a musical fifth and that information was about all we needed to know about music to be dulcimer players.

I remained quietly skeptical that within the confines of a 90-minute workshop I would learn to play anything. Nevertheless, we quickly learned the basics of strumming the strings with our pick. From that skill set, she quickly got us to posturing our thumbs properly over the melody strings (no noters allowed in this lady's class), and pressing down to fret the strings and affect the tone the strings made as we strummed them. We accomplished these amazing preliminary feats without loss of fingers, toes, or having knots thumped upon our heads. All of which Ms. Ansley had promised to administer if we didn't do to suit her.

Next, Dinah had us fret the strings at particular points on the fret board as we strummed. Our faces all brighten at once as we recognized the melody that was forming. Some of us couldn't contain ourselves and attempted to finish the tune on our own risking another head thumping or loss of more fingers and toes.

Needless to say, there was no turning back for us now. We, laboriously at first, and as we gained skill, confidently stepped through the tune repeatedly. Ms Ansley had us do it all together and as duets and solos. She told us of an old Native American saying that holds if one repeats an action three times, it is his or hers to keep forever. The class collectively hoped that that is a true saying.

After this first session, we all examined our worn thumbs for wear and proudly showed one another our deep string marks. We took a short break to stretch our arms and backs and settled in for another go.

The second session was more of the same but with a different tune. Dinah stopped at one point and asked us if we thought this was going any better. It was. We suddenly realized that we were now building upon learned lessons and not starting from zero.

Before we wanted it to be, our time was up, and we had to pack up our stuff and review our accomplishments. In less than two hours, I had gone from knowing nothing about a dulcimer to having the rudimentary skills needed to strum and fret two recognizable tunes. I was impressed not so much with myself as I was with the abilities of my knowledgeable, delightful, humorous, and patient instructor.

If I was hooked and reeled in before the workshop, I was boated and creeled now. Before the summer was out, I had made myself the proud owner of a brand new TK O'Brien Walnut Creek mountain dulcimer and tried another of Diane's workshops. I think it just might be time for some private tutoring whenever Dulcimer Dinah can fit me in her schedule. By the way, I've become so proud of my string grooved thumb, and how well I got it to perform that Saturday morning, that I tossed my hand-carved, solid-cherry noter stick to the bottom of my pack where it might just remain as I hone my left thumb's fretting and chord forming abilities.