

How I “Caught the Dulcimer Bug!”

by John Knopf



Jeff Lambert of Jenny Wiley Dulcimers (left) and me in his shop in Kentucky

Folks like to ask me lots of questions when they see me at a craft show or a performance. One question that usually arises is “How did you get started making and playing the dulcimer”? That’s a logical question, since I live hundreds of miles from the probable birthplace of the mountain dulcimer. Well, here is my dulcimer playing and building history.

It all started for me back about 1972, when I was in junior high in metro Detroit. Our family in Michigan would travel down to visit my grandparents in Clinton, Mississippi at Easter-time. (Somehow I don’t think of *Mississippi* now when I think of dulcimers!). My grandparents had a young friend down there who was a graphic artist, and he made and played mountain dulcimers as a hobby.

One day he came over to their home to meet us, and he brought one of his dulcimers. He played and sang some folk songs for us, and it was fascinating to me. That odd instrument seemed easy to play, and made such exciting music with just 3 strings!

I determined to get one of those things for my own somehow. I was a teen and had no money, so I didn’t know how I was going to ever get a dulcimer. So I asked this guy

how he built them, thinking that maybe I could build one as well, since I already had a little woodworking experience. He obliged by sending me a letter detailing how he went about building dulcimers, and ended it by saying that I really should start with a kit so that much of the hard work would already be done. He advised me to buy a kit from The Dulcimer Shoppe in Mountain View, AR (better known as McSpadden Instruments.).

When I was finally able to save up enough money, I sent away for the kit and built it. I didn’t get the finish right, so it had a glossy peghead and a dull body, but it played! It was completed in May of 1974, and I remember taking it to high school to show it off. I learned how to play it from a cassette tape that this friend made for me with traditional songs on it. I just tuned to his dulcimer and copied his songs note-for-note until I learned them. I only had the “Four and Twenty” songbook back then—the one that came with the dulcimer kit.

I played everything in the Ionian mode when I started. Then I learned three basic chords—C, F and G—and played as many songs as I could in the key of C. That gets old after awhile, so I then learned additional chords and different modes.

Now whenever my family drove down south for Easter, we would stop in Berea, KY to visit Warren May in his woodworking shop. Warren is a gifted woodworker who makes fine hardwood furniture, and has made *thousands* of fine mountain dulcimers. He’s a friendly guy who likes to jam with me sometimes to

demonstrate his incredible instruments.

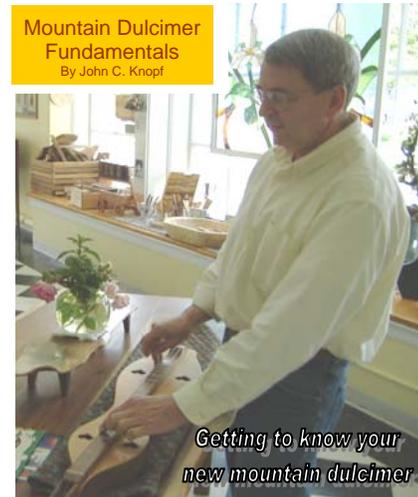


Warren A. May demonstrates one of his dulcimers

I started assembling McSpadden kits for friends of mine, after they saw mine and noodled around on it a bit. I ventured out eventually into designing my own dulcimers, and building with different woods. The prettiest one I think I've ever made was a birds-eye maple teardrop, with walnut accents and a spruce top. I sold it to a buddy, and have since regretted it!

Building and selling mountain dulcimers helped finance my college schooling, and I've sold them to classmates, my old high school English teacher, a museum director and a lady from Jamaica, among others.

Back in the late 1970s, I had put together some crude 12-page booklets to give out with each of the dulcimers I sold. They gave some background information about dulcimers and how to play them, just to get the buyer started out on the right foot. Late last year I revised these little booklets on my computer, and now give these much-improved ones out with each dulcimer I sell. Here's what they look like now:



My newly-revised introductory booklet

I researched, designed, and built two solid-body electric mountain dulcimers in the late 1990s. The first one was built out of basswood and walnut, with two humbucking pickups, and it worked marginally well. So I guess that one was "just for practice"!

Then, after much more research into electric guitar technology, I built one based on the Fender Stratocaster. It used many Strat guitar parts, but I built a dulcimer around them. What a great project that was! It turned out very well, and it plays nicely.



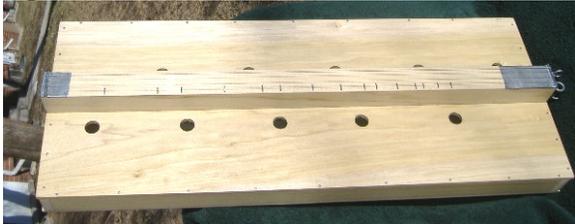
The Dulcimaster: A solid-bodied electric dulcimer

Of course, I then had to make a fitted case for it, so that was another learning experience. Incidentally, I have yet to find a book written about building instrument cases. Have you ever seen one?



My Dulcimaster electric in its custom-fitted case

Last November, I contracted a strong case of “dulcimer-itis”, and built a historic reproduction of a **Tennessee music box**,



a Melton-designed **Galax-style dulcimer**,



and I completed an **unfinished hourglass kit** I bought cheaply at an eBay auction.



It was on this dulcimer that I first installed traditional wire “staple” frets, which extend only under the first 2 strings. The wood of this dulcimer kit was badly discolored, so when it was finished, I just painted it black! That grand old man of Kentucky hourglass dulcimer tradition, “Uncle Eddie” Thomas, used to do that sometimes, so it wasn’t an original idea with me.

So, I’ve been building, playing, and experimenting with dulcimers, and meeting

many dulcimer friends (who I’d previously only read about) for 34 years now.

I hope you have as much fun as I have in dealing with these fascinating mountain dulcimers, and that you’ll “catch the dulcimer bug”, too...if you haven’t already!



An assortment from my dulcimer collection (2007)