

Notes on Getting Started with the Mountain Dulcimer

by Ken Hulme

- Lesson #1 -- to learn to play, you actually have to play. Looking at your dulcimer hanging on the wall, or sitting in the corner, doesn't help.
- When you're just starting out, repetition is the key. Pick one or more times each week – anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour – when you sit down and practice. Then do it.
- To begin with, pick two or three songs that you can hum or whistle really well. Pick simple songs you know and love. Too many people try to learn Old Joe Clark, Go Tell Aunt Rhodie, or Boil Them Cabbage Down because that's what it said to start with in the one book about dulcimers that they could find. It also helps to pick songs that you *like* and won't mind hearing over and over and over again... It *really* helps if these are songs that other folks in your household can also stand to hear repeatedly <GRIN>.
- Dulcimer playing is all about coordination. Your right hand and your left hand have to do two different things at the same time. This takes practice... see above. Don't give up...keep practicing.
- When just beginning, if your dulcimer has two melody strings, you may want to remove one of those strings until you gain a some confidence and experience. Getting two strings to do what you want is four times harder than getting one string to work right. Don't use wire cutters! Loosen one of the strings until you can slip it off the rear peg, then continue unwinding the string until it comes off the tuning peg.
- Right hand. There are lots of ways to make noise with the strings. The simplest way (recommended for most beginners) is to "strum" – move your thumb, a finger, or a pick across *all* of the strings, sequentially. Most people strum in two directions... forth and back, and back and forth. Some people strum in one direction (forth) with their thumb, but do it as quickly as those who strum in two directions. After a year or so of practicing and perfecting the strum, you may want to learn to 'flat pick'... using a pick to 'pluck' individual strings in different patterns (bass-melody-mid, mid-bass-melody for example) to achieve a unique sound. "Finger pickers" do the same sort of thing, but wear (usually metallic) picks on two or more fingers and the thumb.
- Left hand. Here again there are several ways to choose which notes or sounds that the right hand will play. Many people learn to play with a "noter" first. Noter is just a fancy name for a stick held in the left hand, which you press down just on the melody string(s). If your dulcimer came with a ¼" dowel about 2" long, throw it away and get a ½" or larger dowel at least 4" long – something you can actually hold in your hand. The advantages of a noter are that you don't have to build up calluses on your fingers, and you get some really interesting effects with noters of different materials sliding up and down the strings and stopping at the frets. The disadvantages are that if you don't press down correctly you get a real ugly twangy sound instead of a clear note; and you are 'restricted' (some of us say 'challenged') to only the notes available from the 'straight scale' on the fretboard (Do-to-Do plus the few notes above and below those frets). Some people use their thumb or a finger instead of a noter to 'fret' the melody strings. Still others use multiple fingers of the left hand to play 'guitar-style' chords. However, while Finger Chording does give

you access to more notes than playing with a noter, it (chording) is much less simple than the more traditional fretting of just the melody strings while the middle and bass strings drone.

- Mode? Key? Tuning? What is a "mode" anyway? Basically, a mode is a way of playing a scale from one arbitrary note, increasing in pitch until you reach a note one full octave above the original. Another way of saying it is that a mode is an arrangement of whole and half steps (the wide and narrow spaces between the frets) that starts at some note, and ends up an octave higher after seven steps. A Key or Key Note is the specific note to which your bass string is tuned. A Tuning is the list of actual notes to which your dulcimer is tuned in a particular mode. For example: Ionian Mode, in the Key of D, has your strings tuned DAA.
- Want to start a lively argument? Ask a room full of dulcimer players which is the best mode to learn or play first! There are seven traditional modes, plus a number of more modern tunings. No one mode is "best". The two modes most commonly taught to beginners are Ionian and Mixolydian. Both have advantages and disadvantages. It really doesn't matter much *which* mode you start with -- just pick one. Learn lots of songs in that mode. In the process you will be familiarizing yourself with where on the fretboard the various notes or chords are *for that mode*.