

## The Appalachian Dulcimer, Its History — How You In the Tri-Cities (WA) Can Get Tuned In and Play!

By Rebecca S. Hoffmann and Harry (doc) Babad

### Introduction

The Tri-Cities (Three Rivers) Dulcimer Society has at times both shared concert gigs and actively participated in 3RFS events such as the Tumbleweed Music Festival. Their organization while alive, well, and growing is unique to my knowledge since it has no formal organization, rules or officers. Its just folks sharing their love for the instrument and the music they can play with it.



I've enjoyed the sound of the mountain (aka Appalachian) dulcimer since first hearing it played in concerts by Jean Richie and just plain folks in Washington Square Park, growing up in NYC in the 50s. It also helped that as a graduate student, at the University of Illinois, six short years later I became friends with Bill Godsey, a folk music loving hillbilly refugee from Appalachia. Bill is also remembered because he shot great film (sports cinematography), of all the *Fighting Illini* games. Bill and his wife Iska provided a home for folk music loving students, away from home, and on weekends the singing and pickin' often went on till dawn.

Although I did not mention the dulcimer, even briefly, in my Uncommon Strings eTalk article of September 2007, that was mainly because to me it was not uncommon. But then again, I was an Easterner, with a love for Appalachian song and stories. I grew up in the 50-60s, and somehow got caught up in the folk music revival - if only as a collector and listener.

With the invaluable guidance and input of the Tri-Cities Three Rivers Dulcimer Society's Rebecca Hoffmann, this is my chance to make good that omission. Our article is organized into two plus parts. We zoom from a short summary of the Appalachian dulcimer and its history; mostly captured from Google and Wikipedia, to a brief side look at the hammered dulcimer, a distant cousin. I don't spend much time on the hammered dulcimer, not to slight it, as it is a fine instrument, but rather because of space limitations.

But you can most easily learn more about these instruments at:

- Appalachian dulcimer, a fretted, plucked instrument, which is also referred to as a "mountain dulcimer" or just a "dulcimer."  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachian\\_dulcimer/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachian_dulcimer/).
- Hammered dulcimer, a hammer-struck, trapezoid-shaped instrument  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hammered\\_dulcimer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hammered_dulcimer) [Articles checked 03-10-08.]

*By the way, the word dulcimer comes from the Latin dulcis or "sweet" and the Greek melos, meaning "song".*



Then we'll segue to the Tri-Cities Three Rivers Dulcimer Society. It is a vibrant group, fast becoming a strong northwestern part of keeping the instrument alive and its music, old and new, alive. I've taken the liberty of using some of the fine

pictures from their professionally laid out and informative website found at [www.threeriversdulcimersociety.net](http://www.threeriversdulcimersociety.net) .

...And of course the timing is also right, since on the 19th of April, the 3RFS and 3RDS are honored to feature dulcimer playing, singer-songwriters and scholars Heidi Mueller and Bob Webb in concert at the Battelle Auditorium.

### **Part I: The History of the Dulcimer and Other Dulcimerish Things**

The website of the American Folklife Center website lists Local Folklife Societies including those that are dulcimer oriented.

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/source/societie.html>

In addition, some of the individual dulcimer societies post music and other playing formation. One of the most complete is found at Silver Strings Dulcimer Society, Wyandotte, MI - <http://www.ssdociety.org/sections/links/links.asp>  
You can find more fine music at the Maryland Dulcimer Society - [http://www.the-g2.com/mdmt/Club\\_Tune\\_List.htm/](http://www.the-g2.com/mdmt/Club_Tune_List.htm/).

Another good source of TABs is <http://www.the-g2.com/dulcimerInfo.htm> - [TabSites](#) - just follow the links.

One of the finest sites for both books, acoustic music, and instruments I've come across is Elderly Music, with whose permission I've used a number of the photographs not in the public domain  
<http://elderly.com/search/elderly?terms=Dulcimers&x=0&y=0/> .

### The Appalachian or Mountain Dulcimer

{With acknowledgement to Wikipedia and the History of the Dulcimer Sites}

The Appalachian dulcimer is a fretted stringed instrument of the zither family, typically with three or four strings, although contemporary versions of the instrument can have as many as twelve strings and six courses. A course is a pair of adjacent strings tuned to unison or an octave and usually plucked together as if a single string, in musical instruments such as the 12-string guitar, the lute and the mandolin.

The dulcimer's body extends the length of the fingerboard and traditionally has an hourglass, teardrop, triangular, or elliptical shape. As a folk instrument, wide variation exists in Appalachian dulcimers.

For example, a courting dulcimer has two fret boards, which allows two players sitting across from each other to perform duets, hence the name.

Jean Ritchie (*The Dulcimer Book*, 1974) and others have speculated that the Appalachian dulcimer is related to similar European instruments like the langleik and scheitholt.



Langleik



Scheitholt

There is a great deal of information we've not shared about the mountain dulcimer. One great source is the "A History of the Mountain Dulcimer" by Lucy M. Long. <http://www.bearmeadow.com/smi/histof.htm>;

More information can be found in "A Short History of the Appalachian Dulcimer" <http://www.bearmeadow.com/dulcimer-history/index.html> and in "Some Historical Notes on the Mountain Dulcimer" ["http://www.gilamountaindulcimers.com/pete.htm"](http://www.gilamountaindulcimers.com/pete.htm) Google away, there's lots more out there.



The Seegers: Ruth Crawford Seeger, Mike Seeger, Peggy Seeger and Charles Seeger, in a photo circa 1937

A detailed analysis of the roots of the dulcimer were made by musicologist Charles Seeger (father of Pete, see the photo) in an article published in 1958 calling attention to the dulcimer as a legitimate subject for study. However it wasn't until the early 1980's that research by L. Allen Smith, Ralph Lee Smith and Lucy Long challenged both the popular and academic perceptions of the dulcimer. The research data arrived at by these individuals established a wider variety of repertoires and playing styles than originally thought. Older instruments were

analyzed by these musicologists and those studies suggested that the dulcimer represents innovation rather than conservation in both its musical and physical development.

These studies substantiate a history of the dulcimer that is outlined as follows:

1700 to mid-1800s — The dulcimer was developed in the Shenandoah River Valley region of southwest Pennsylvania and western Virginia out of a blending of British (predominately Ulster Scots and lowland Scots) from a blending of the German scheitholt, Swedish hummel, Norwegian langeleik and the French epinettes des Vosges.

1800s to 1940 — Towards the end of this period the settlement school and crafts movement brought the dulcimer to the attention of outsiders. In the early 1900s popular literature adopted the dulcimer as a symbol of romanticized Appalachia and scholars and folk music enthusiasts further introduced it to the public.

After the 1940s — The dulcimer entered the urban Northeast folk music revival scene largely due to Kentucky-born musician Jean Ritchie who performed and recorded extensively and also published the first major instruction and repertoire book (1963).

Playing the Dulcimer — A traditional way to play the instrument is to lay it flat on the lap and pluck or strum the strings with one hand, while fretting with the other. The dulcimer may also be placed in a similar position on a piece of furniture such as a table or chest of drawers, to enhance the sound. There are two predominant methods of fretting. First, the strings may be depressed with the fingertips of the fretting hand. Using this technique, all the strings may be fretted allowing the player to produce chords. Second, the melody string, the string closest to the player, may be depressed with a noter, typically a short length of dowel or bamboo (see photo at left). Using this method, only the melody string is fretted and the other strings act as drone strings (the melody string may be doubled so that the melody can be better heard over the drones). In this second style of playing, the combination of the drone strings and the buzz of the noter on the melody strings produces its unique sound.



In practice, a wide variety of playing styles have long been used. Jean Ritchie's *The Dulcimer Book* (1974) has an old photograph of Mrs. Leah Smith of Big Laurel,

Kentucky, playing the dulcimer with a bow instead of a pick, with the tail of the dulcimer held in the player's lap, and the headstock resting on a table pointing away from her.

In their book, *In Search of the Wild Dulcimer* (1974), Robert Force and Al d'Ossché describe their preferred method as "guitar style": the dulcimer hangs from a strap around the neck, and the instrument is fretted and strummed like a guitar; they also describe playing "Autoharp style" where "the dulcimer is held vertically with the headstock over the shoulder." Lynn McSpadden, in his book *Four and Twenty Songs for the Mountain Dulcimer*, states that some players "tilt the dulcimer up sideways on their laps and strum in a guitar style." Still other dulcimer players use a fingerstyle technique, fingering chord positions with the fretting hand and rhythmically plucking individual strings with the strumming hand, creating delicate arpeggios.

Contemporary players have also borrowed from chord theory and guitar analogues to create a variety of more complex ways to play the dulcimer. Some dulcimers are constructed with four equidistant strings to facilitate playing more complex chords, particularly for playing jazz. In another line of contemporary innovation, electric dulcimers have been used in rock music.



The Appalachian dulcimer is both easy to learn to play, and capable of complexity, providing scope for a wide range of professionals and hobbyists.

Strings and Tuning - The frets of the Appalachian dulcimer are typically arranged in a diatonic scale. Traditionally, the Appalachian dulcimer was usually tuned to DAA, or notes with this 1-5-5 relationship. The keynote is on the bass string and the middle string is an interval of a perfect fifth above it. The melody string is tuned so that the keynote is at the third fret. This facilitates playing melodies in the Ionian mode. The melody played on the top string (or string pair) only, with the unfretted drone strings providing a simple harmony, gives the instrument its distinctive traditional sound. To play in a different key, or in a different mode, a traditional player would have to retune the instrument. For example, to play a minor mode melody the instrument might be tuned to DAC. This facilitates playing the Aeolian mode, where the scale begins at the first fret.

Modern instruments usually include an additional fret a half step below the octave position, the so-called "six and a half" fret. This enables one to play in the Ionian mode when tuned to DAD, the traditional tuning for the Mixolydian mode, where the scale starts on the open fret. This arrangement is often found to be more conducive to chord focused playing, as opposed to the more traditional drone-like style. Among modern players, it is fair to say that the instrument is most commonly tuned to DAD. So-called "chromatic dulcimers" are sometimes made, to permit play in any key without re-tuning.

Where Played - The Appalachian dulcimer is widely used in the American old-time music tradition. The instrument first appeared in the early 1800s from the Scots-Irish in the southern Appalachian Mountains, and is thus also called a mountain dulcimer. Although most likely based on some European instruments, it soon acquired a distinctive American flavor. The instrument became used as a parlor instrument, as its sound volume was well suited to small home gatherings.

The Appalachian dulcimer achieved a renaissance in the 1950s urban folk music revival in the United States through the work of Jean Ritchie, a Kentucky musician who introduced the instrument to New York City audiences. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Ritchie/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Ritchie/).

In the 1960s, the American folk musician Richard Fariña (1937-1966) became the first to utilize an Appalachian dulcimer in a less traditional way, pointing out its similarity in tone to some Middle Eastern and Asian instruments. Styles performed by modern dulcimer enthusiasts run the gamut from traditional folk music through experimental forms, although most perform in more or less traditional styles. Dulcimer festivals take place regularly in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, as the Appalachian dulcimer has achieved a following in a number of countries. Virtually every culture has an instrument based on the working idea of the Appalachian dulcimer.

## **The Hammered Dulcimer**

The hammered dulcimer (also known as the hammer dulcimer or four hammer dulcimer) is a stringed musical instrument with the strings stretched over a trapezoidal sounding board. The instrument is typically set at an angle on a stand in front of the musician, who holds a small mallet, called a hammer in each hand with which to strike the strings. The origin of the instrument is uncertain, but tradition holds that it was invented in Iran roughly 2000 years ago, where it is called a Santur. (See also Santoor, a folk instrument from the Kashmir region.)



The instrument has seen somewhat of a revival in America in the American folk music traditions. Even some rock bands employ hammered dulcimer as a primary instrument, including Macha of Athens, GA and Tulsa Drone of Richmond, VA. It is also still played in Wales, East Anglia, Northumbria, Southwest Asia, China and Thailand. It is also used in traditional folk music in Austria and Bavaria.

## **Part II: Rebecca Hoffmann on the Three Rivers Dulcimer Society (Tri-Cities, Washington)**

Rebecca Hoffmann and Margaret Lund founded the group in January 2003. Rebecca owned a dulcimer but had not really learned to play it. Margaret had some experience as a former member of the North Harris County Dulcimer Society in Houston, Texas.

And now from Rebecca: A couple hours and two lovely tunes later, "Lady Mary" and "Sweet Pepper," I was hooked. Since I was a member of Three Rivers Folklife Society, I decided to put a note in their next newsletter to the effect: Looking for a few good dulcimer players. Four more enthusiastic players showed up at the very first meeting, and Three Rivers Dulcimer Society was born. We are one of only a few dulcimer societies "out west." Mountain dulcimers are not as well known here as in other parts of the country. We like to think we've been helping to change that in our five years of existence. In fact, we have had folks travel a good distance to play with us: Boise, ID, Tacoma, WA, Spokane, WA, and Joseph, OR.

We agreed to meet on the first and third Saturdays of each month and we continue that tradition. We kept getting the word out, by mouth and handmade posters placed around town, and more players joined us. I created an email address list, to send jam reminders and other pertinent music information to group members, or as I address them in emails, "Music Makers."



Ray, Bill and Marve at the TMF 2007.

Just Playing – From the 3RDS Web Page

Just Sharing the Sound and the Joy — That first summer we showed up on Saturdays at the West Richland Farmer's Market because one of our members, William McKenna, showed his handmade garden iron works there. We hooked even more folks when they heard us play and found out what a gregarious bunch we are. I'd like to name the members who've been with the group the longest. These folks continue to keep the group going in so many ways: bringing new members, teaching folks to play, sharing instruments, finding jam locations. William McKenna, former bass drummer for Desert Thistle and Pipe Band, is one of our original members. Alan, Tracy, Hannah and Paul Horner were hooked that first summer at the farmer's market. Susan Turner turned up shortly after that, and has been working like a trooper for the group ever since. Tracy Horner is responsible for our clever and informative website.

Pass the Word, Lessons are Free — From the very beginning we decided that we would offer free lessons and really concentrate on those new players for the first hour of our jams. Many of our new players have not had the pleasure of playing a musical instrument, so we are not only teaching them what to do with the mountain dulcimer, but other things a good player will need to know. This includes how to count, how to read TAB, how to play in an ensemble situation; to name a few of the things a good player needs to know.

My background is classical piano, voice and pipe organ, with all the technique, practice and rich repertoire that goes into it is that there is a minimum of rules and guidelines to be able to get started and to have a satisfying experience. One of my goals in the group was for every player to have enough knowledge and confidence to be able to show another brand-new player how to do it. I believe that goal has been met: each one can teach another one.

After You Learn a Few Tunes — Of course, there is much more to the mountain dulcimer than those first tunes that make a beginner so happy, but the wonderful thing is that players can play along with the rest of the group from the very beginning, with a minimum of knowledge. Instant gratification playing the mountain dulcimer is what we offer.

After the beginner's hour, other players and instruments turn up, and we get down to business jammin'. The format for that is - we put our chairs in a big circle, and then one person chooses the first tune, \*any\* tune from our very large shared repertoire. That person is supposed to play the introduction and determine how many times we are going to play it.

My goal here is to get everyone comfortable leading a tune, or the group, for that matter. We then proceed around the circle, giving each subsequent person a chance to choose and "direct." We continue in this fashion until we mutually agree to take a break. We do get a workout during the jam and all of us would agree that we are pleasantly exhausted by the time we decide to disband for the day.

Most of us have "DAS" a somewhat incurable condition: Dulcimer Acquisition Syndrome. Thus, we have extra instruments, which we bring along to the jams for the purpose of lending during the jams. Sometimes we let folks take them home, but it's pretty much understood that if you want to play, you have to supply your own equipment: instrument, tuner, music stand, and music. Another wonderful thing about the mountain dulcimer is, for a relatively small amount of money, I would say less than \$300.00, a wannhabe music maker can get a decent instrument.

[Note: Elderly Instruments list mountain dulcimers in the \$200-400 range with a gig bag. Other sites I checked have less complete collections so I've not cited them.]

*More Pretty Girls Than One*  
Mountain Dulcimer: D-A-dd and D-A-AA Arrangement: Steve Smith

Notes	D	F#	A	B	A	F#E	D	A
D-A-dd	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
D-A-AA	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0
	0	2	4	5	4	2	1	4
	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	3	5	7	8	7	5	3	7

  

Notes	B	B	B	B	A	D	D	D
D-A-dd	3	3	3	3	3	0	0	5
D-A-AA	3	3	3	3	3	0	0	6
	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	7
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
	6	6	6	6	6	5	5	0
	8	8	8	8	8	7	7	10

  

Notes	D	D	Bm	D	D	D	D	D
D-A-dd	5	5	5	5	0	0	2	2
D-A-AA	6	6	6	6	0	0	1	1
	7	8	7	5	4	2	1	0
	9	10	9	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	6	5	0	0	0
	10	11	10	8	7	5	4	3

  

Notes	F#	A	A	B	F#	E	D	D
D-A-dd	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
D-A-AA	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	0
	2	4	4	5	2	1	0	0
	0	0	0	0	4	4	4	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	5	7	7	8	5	4	3	3

Instrument Sources, Repairs and More — We do not have a local mountain dulcimer maker, per se, in our midst, but some members have made their own dulcimers, from kits or from scratch. No music store in our area sells dulcimers. Out of necessity, several of our members have learned to do repairs and other "tending" jobs on our instruments. The closest store would be in Portland or Seattle. Some of us have "won the bid" on E-Bay to acquire our instruments. There are a number of well-known mountain dulcimer makers in other parts of the country who make and mail order stock or custom instruments. Talk to us and we can share what we know about getting a fine instrument to play.

Songs, Tune, and More Songs — Our giant tune list is contributed to by everyone in the group. One of us might hear, or \*somehow\* come across, a great tune they want to share. The "tune catcher" might then look on the internet for public domain TAB, or look for book that has usable TAB in it, or in some cases, will get pencil and paper, or use a program called TableEdit to TAB the tune for all of us. The document is then converted to a "page description file" or pdf, and sent to all the members. They are responsible for printing out this TAB and compiling their own notebooks of tunes. We recommend sturdy 3-ring binders and page protectors for assembling the tune books.

When the group started, we played mostly American folk tunes. Gradually, as we started to find out what resources were available, we have branched out into Celtic, gospel and hymns, and even popular tunes. We are careful not to violate music copyrights.

Susan Turner and I, in particular, are always acquiring mountain dulcimer books and previewing them for choice tunes to share with the group. If it looks like the book has likable tunes, good-sounding TAB, and we think it will appeal to the group, we play a tune or tune for the rest of the group. If they concur, we recommend its purchase. Those books are listed on our website.

As our group has grown and we all have listened to more instruments, some in the group have started playing other instruments. We have, or have had, hammered dulcimers, mandolins, fiddles, guitars, penny whistles, bodhrán's, flute, Irish harp, harmonica, cello and bass. We welcome all acoustic instruments, and we realize the variety of instruments provides a richness of sounds not



Harry {doc} Babad,

possible with only a few mountain dulcimers. Some of us even make our own dulcimers, often from available kits.

*Come Join Us!* — None of us is a professional musician, all of us have busy lives working and doing all sorts of other things. Making music is our avocation. We revel in it. Despite other obligations, we continue to have about 15 or more musicians at any jam. We take our music into the community at every opportunity. Our jams are held in public spaces around Tri-Cities, where other folks have the opportunity to listen and ask questions. We also play for senior living facilities, garden parties, art galleries, wineries, churches, farmer's markets, and civic events. We are a very welcoming, friendly group, and we believe that keeps people coming back.

We hold a "Jam in D" workshop at the annual Tumbleweed Music Festival on Labor Day Weekend. A note here, in defense of the key of D, and I am smiling as I type this. Some like to snigger that "those mountain dulcimers just play everything in the key of D." We believe it is a "foolproof" key because it's the only one where a strum across all the strings does not produce any dissonant sounds. Thus, newer players can be part of a performance where it is sometimes nerve-wracking to keep up with the tempo and the difficulty of the TAB.

*There's Lots More!* — Sharing potlucks and journeying to Wallowa Lake for a weekend retreat each year. We have had opportunities for workshops in our community, notably with Heidi Muller and Bob Webb, and several of us have journeyed to other music workshops, such as Spring Fling in Sandy, Oregon, where we had the good fortune to meet and work with Madeline MacNeil, consummate mountain and hammered dulcimer artist and founder of Dulcimer Players News. Our group was thrilled to be featured in a story in Dulcimer Players News in February 2007. Alas the copy is out of print so doc could not quote from it. Check out the *News*, it's a fine publication [<http://dpnews.com/issues/Spring08/Spring08.html>]

*Special Gigs and Concerts* — For those who are willing to work harder and put in extra time, we have created a performance group, Fine Fretted Friends. This group has performed in places where we feel a more polished presentation is called for, such as the Advent Festival at St. Joseph's Church and the Scottish Festival and the Wallowa Lake Lodge.

*What Do We Dream Of?* — Making a CD that we could share with family and friends. Every now and then, when we're jammin' we really do make some magic together! Some of us dream of attending one of the many dulcimer events advertised in Dulcimer Players News. We want to meet, work with, and listen to some of today's respected teachers and get to play with those folks on the other side of the continent! We would like to entice them to come in our direction but we haven't figured out how to do that as yet!

The contact person for Three Rivers Dulcimer Society is Rebecca Hoffmann at rshoffmann@charter.net. Rebecca maintains an email list of players and sends out a jam reminder prior to each gathering. She also emails the group with other items of interest. Our club charges no fees and we have no officers. We all share the responsibilities and it seems to work very well.

PS:

For hundred's of dulcimer (TABS) melodies checkout:

- Folk Notes Mountain Dulcimer Tab Page — <http://folknotes.com/MDtab.html>
- Everything Dulcimer — <http://www.everythingdulcimer.com/tab/>
- Mountain Dulcimer Tablature Web Sites — <http://www.qilamountaindulcimers.com/tab.htm>

Not enough just Google *Dulcimer Tab*.

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