

Mel Bay's

MB94385G

*Learn
to Play*

MOUNTAIN DULCIMER

By Mark Biggs

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MARK BIGGS

Born in 1954 in Kansas City, Mark Biggs first began to play the mountain dulcimer in 1979 when he and a friend played music for free room and board in a small Greek restaurant on the south side of Crete. He's come a long way from those early "ad lib" days, winning many listeners' ears and a national reputation along the way. The author of three books, including *THE MOUNTAIN DULCIMER* (Mel Bay Publications) and *THE COMPLETE DULCIMER HANDBOOK* (Mel Bay Publications), he has also recorded two record albums, *NOT LICKED YET* (Centennial Records-1981) and *SEASON OF THE DREAM* (Kicking Mule Records-221).

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Besides writing and recording for the dulcimer, he has taught hundreds of students around the Midwest at workshops, at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, and through the Continuing Education Departments at Southwest Missouri State University and Drury College in Springfield, Missouri. He is also the winner of many dulcimer championships, including:

- 1st Place (1984): National Mountain Dulcimer Champion
- 1st Place (1983 & 1981): Southern Regionals in Arkansas
- 3rd Place (1983): National Championship in Winfield, Kansas
- 1st Place (1981): Ozark Mountain Championship in Missouri
- 1st Place (1980): Midwest Dulcimer Championship in Iowa

To order any of Mark's books, records, or tapes, please write to him c/o R.R. #2, Box 541, Galena, MO 65656.

TUNING INTO THE MIXOLYDIAN MODE: Key of D

The Mixolydian Mode: The Greeks associated this major mode with the sun, and so with lightness. It has the distinctive characteristic of having a flattened seventh tone.

All of the songs on this tape are in the Mixolydian tuning for a number of good reasons. First, I find the Mixolydian to be the most flexible of all the different modes. It is a major mode, which sounds less drone-like than the Ionian. It is well suited to a wide variety of songs both old and new. **Most importantly**, chords can be easily inverted in the Mixolydian Mode simply by switching your finger positions on the melody and the bass strings. Also, the Mixolydian Mode offers us the option of walking a melody line across all three strings instead of always running it up and down the melody string as is traditionally done. These last two very important considerations will eventually help us accomplish **one of the main goals of this tape, namely to learn how to take a melody line and put the appropriate chord structure behind it.**

Tuning:

Step #1: The Melody String

The first step in tuning into any mode is to select the **keytone**, the note corresponding to the key you wish to tune into. If you want to tune into the key of C, C is the note you'll tune to. If you want to tune to the key of F, select the tone F to tune to, and so on down the line. **NOTE:** You get this keytone note from any number of tuning aids — a pitch pipe, a tuning fork, an electronic tuner, or another instrument such as the piano or the guitar. (If you want to play with another instrument, it is best to tune to that instrument.) You may simply tune to your voice or to a tone which pleases your ears, as well.

Once you decide on the keytone, tune the dulcimer's melody or bass string to that note. The string you choose to tune first will depend in part on habit and in part on which keytone you originally selected. **For the purposes of this tape**, however, accept that you will always tune your melody-line string first.

We are going to tune into the key of D in the Mixolydian Mode. If you don't have another instrument to tune to (D above middle C on the piano, or the D note on the 3rd fret of the second string — the B string — of a guitar), you can buy an inexpensive pitch pipe at a local music store. The D note on a tenor banjo tuning pipe works nicely. Now tune the melody string of your dulcimer to D (above middle

C). Listen carefully to your source for this keytone, and bring your string up or down according to this tone. Work with this tape.

There are two essential ingredients to tuning: 1) take your time — don't rush, and 2) listen carefully to what you are doing at all times. **Be sure to pluck the string you are tuning constantly so that you can hear where you are and where you are going.** You may find it easier in the beginning to lower your string well past the intended note and then tune up to it gradually. There will often be a **dead zone** in a tuning peg — a slack area where the peg is turning but nothing is happening. Pass through this dead zone quickly and don't get hung up in it thinking you are tuning. As long as you are striking the string every second or so, you'll be able to hear the tone of your string going up or down when you are actually tuning.

Listen carefully — you will be able to hear the sound of your string converging on the keytone. Visualize in your mind's ear two tone points coming together (like bringing your two forefingers together). When your string is at the same pitch as your keytone source, there will be a full-bodied harmony or resonant sound where a brief moment before there was a slightly strident or discordant sound. Be patient and practice listening. The only way to learn to tune is to do it over and over again until you can hear the very slight differences in pitch. No, you are not tone deaf or you wouldn't have the least interest in music or in learning to play your dulcimer.

If you have a double melody string, tune the second string to the same tone as the first melody string.

Step #2: The Middle String

Now come up to the third (3rd) fret on your middle string. Remember 0 is the open string, 1 = the first fret, 2 = the second fret, and so on. (**Note:** If you were formerly tuned in the Ionian Mode chances are you will have to lower the tone on your middle string at this point, so don't twist up and break a string. Lower the tension and work back up to the tone you're after.) When you are at the third fret on the middle string, hold it down and **tune the middle string to the same tone as that of your first string played open.** Again be patient and persevering.

If you are uncertain whether you need to raise or lower the pitch of your middle string, try this simple test. If moving up the fretboard from the third fret to the 4th, 5th, 6th, or on to a higher fret brings you closer to a tone roughly equivalent to that of the melody string played open, then you need to **raise** the tension on your middle string (i.e.: tune up the middle string). If you find that you must move down the fretboard to the 2nd, 1st, or to the open middle string in order to approach the tone of your open melody string, then you need to **lower** the tension of your middle string (tune down the middle string).

Step #3: The Bass String

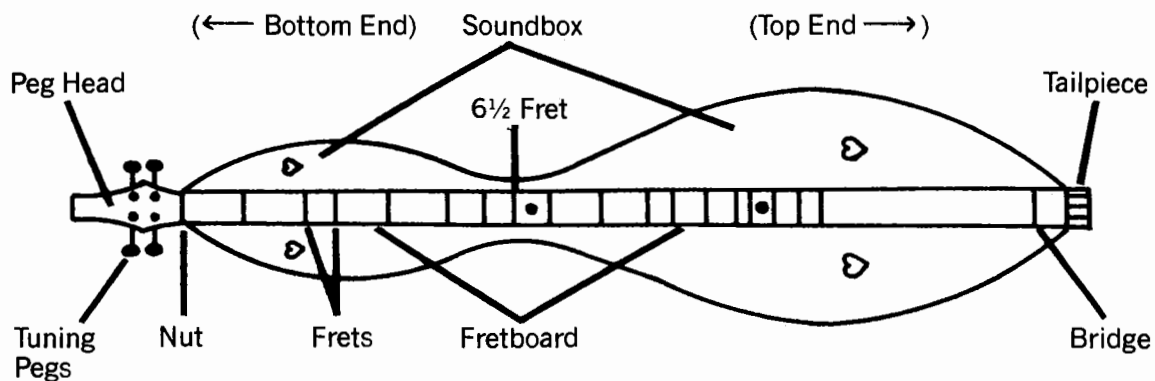
Once the middle string is tuned to the melody string, we have a choice as to how to tune the bass string. So let's use both possibilities and give ourselves a fail-safe device. Come up to the fourth (4th) fret on the bass string (the string farthest away from you), and **tune the bass fretted at the fourth to the tone of the open middle string**. When you are satisfied that the bass and middle string share the same tone, **come up to the seventh (7th) or octave fret on the bass string and make certain that its tone is exactly the same as that of the melody string played open**. If there is a difference in tone between the bass string fretted at the seventh and the melody string played open, start over with the middle string and make sure you have the proper tone on it. Of course you can always go straight to the 7th fret on the bass and tune the bass first to the open melody string, then double check it at the fourth against the middle string. (If you can't get all three strings in tune using these instructions get a musically inclined friend to try, and if they still can't tune your dulcimer, you may have a faulty instrument.)

For review: First we select the "keytone", then we tune the melody string to this same pitch. Next we fret the middle string at the third fret and tune it to the open melody string. Finally we fret the bass at the fourth fret and tune it to the open middle string, double checking it by fretting it at the seventh fret and making sure it now has the same tone as the melody string played open. You are now in the Mixolydian Mode.

Don't be timid when tuning. You are the only one who can make music with your instrument—it will never play itself. You must take charge. You are bound to break a few strings; that's part of playing a stringed instrument. In time the cold sweat which some of you may experience when tuning or restringing your dulcimer will disappear. The secret lies in practice, patience and listening.

Graphically the Mixolydian Mode looks like this (remember we can tune any Mode into any "key" we wish):

Mixolydian Mode:	Melody	Middle	Bass	(Key)
	DD	A	D	(D)
	CC	G	C	(C)
	EE	B	E	(E)
	(1)	(5)	(8)	



FINGER EXERCISE #1: Finger Warm-ups & Scale Practice

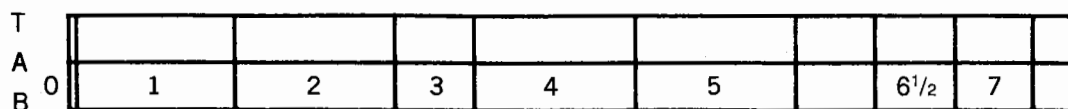
Now that we've tuned up together, let's move directly onto our first finger or melody exercise. This exercise is intended to do two basic things: 1) to limber up your fingers and give them greater flexibility,

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strength, and suppleness; and 2) to familiarize you with the whole fretboard — to show you where all the notes are on all the strings so that you can begin to see where convenient "cross-over" points exist between the strings.

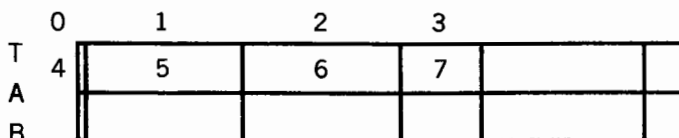
Let's begin with the basic exercise and walk up the fretboard to discover the major scale of the key we are tuned in. Be sure to use all of your fingers. Remember, we are in the Mixolydian Mode, key of D, so we will be walking a D-major scale. **We start on the melody string from the open position and proceed:** 0 (the open melody string) to the 1st fret, to the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ fret, and end on the 7th or octave fret. If your dulcimer does not have the 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ fret, you can find this same note at the 9th fret on the middle string. I strongly urge you to have the 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ fret put on your dulcimer by a competent instrument repairer and to be certain to look for it when buying a new dulcimer. Without this fret it is impossible to play a major scale from the open position, and it is very difficult to play many songs. I will make constant use of the 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ fret throughout this tape, as do most contemporary dulcimer methods.

In diagram, this finger exercise looks like this (follow the numbers up and down):



In the Mixolydian Mode this pattern gives you the major scale of whatever key you are tuned in, the key being determined by the open note found on your melody string. To walk the scale back down from the octave or 7th fret we simply retrace our steps back down the fret board.

When you are comfortable with this finger warm-up, let's walk across the three strings of our dulcimers utilizing this same scale once again. This time we will begin on the bass string from its open position, and walk up the string: 0, to the 1st fret, 2nd, 3rd; then switch to the middle string: 0, to the 1st fret, 2nd, 3rd. This time the diagram looks like this:



Again, to reverse the scale, we simply start at the 3rd fret on the middle string and walk the pattern backwards. **This pattern gives you exactly the same scale one octave lower than the scale which we played on the open melody string a moment ago.**

When we move from the 3rd fret on the bass string to the open middle string, we are making use of a **cross-over point**. We "cross over" between strings whenever we move from one string to another without repeating the same note we just played. In other words, as we walk our scales across the three strings, we search for points which enable us to move smoothly and logically from one string to another without skipping or repeating a note and without having to make long or awkward jumps along the fretboard.

Now then, let's put both of these scale patterns together and walk across and up the fretboard through two complete octaves. We'll use numbers going up and the names of the notes which these numbers correspond to when we walk the pattern back down. Follow the diagram, and begin on the open bass string using the fingers marked: L = little finger, R = ring finger, M = middle finger, I = index finger.

	0	1L	2R	3M					
T	4	5L	6R	7M					
A		8L	9R	10M	11I	12R		13M	14I
B									

(in reverse)

	D	E	F#	G					
T	A	B	C#	D					
A		E	F#	G	A	B		C#	D
B									

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Finally let's run this scale up and down one more time, looking at a different set of cross-over points. We climb up the fretboard exactly as above, but fall back down following a new set of numbers (using the fingering indicated):

	D	E	F#	G	A	B			
	14	13L	12L	11R	10M	9I			
T			C#	D	E	F#			
A			8L	7R	6M	5I			
B				G	A	B		C#	D
				4L	3L	2R		1M	0I

Practice these finger warmups whenever you sit down to play your dulcimer. They will help get you limbered up and, more importantly, they will teach you to hear a major scale (which happens to be one of music's basic building blocks). **The dulcimer is an easy instrument on which to get started playing and to pick out simple melodies precisely because its fretboard lays out the major scale for you.**

"Oh Susanna"

Mix. D
(1st phrase)

D D D

Oh I come from Al - a - ba - ma with a ban - jo on my

0 1 2 4 4 5 4 2 0 1 2 2 1 0

(2nd phrase)

A7 D D D D A7

knee, I'm goin' to Lou - si - a - na my true love for to

1 0 1 2 4 4 5 4 2 0 1 2 2 1 1

(3rd phrase)

D G G D

see. Oh, Su - san - na, Oh don't you cry for

0 3 3 5 5 5 4 4 2 0

(4th phrase)

A7 D D D D A7 D

me. For I come from Al - a - ba - ma with a "dulci-mer" on my knee.

1 0 1 2 4 4 5 4 2 0 1 2 2 1 1 0

"Oh Susanna" - Split Octave Chord

Mix. D D D D

0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 0

0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 0

A7 D D D D A7

1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1

1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1

D G G D

0 | 3 3 | 5 5 5 | 4 4 2 0

0 | 3 3 | 5 5 5 | 4 4 2 0

A7 D D D D A7 D

1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 0 1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 0

1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 0 1 0 1 | 2 4 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 2 2 1 1 | 0

"Oh Susanna" - Set Chord

Mix. D

Chord progression: D D D

Chord progression: A7 D D D D A7

Chord progression: D G G D

Chord progression: A7 D D D D A7 D

"The Wildwood Flower" (Split Octave Form)

D G D Em D

2 3 | 4 5 7 | 2 3 2 | 1 2 1 | 0

2 3 | 4 5 7 | 2 3 2 | 1 2 1 | 0

D D G D Em7 D

2 3 | 4 5 7 | 2 3 2 | 1 2 1 | 0

2 3 | 4 5 7 | 2 3 2 | 1 2 1 | 0

D s D D Em D

4 7 | 9 9 9 9 8 | 7 4 | 5 6 5 | 4

4 7 | 9 9 9 9 8 | 7 4 | 5 6 5 | 4

D D D A7 D

0 1 | 2 2 1 2 4 | 2 1 2 1 | 0

1 1 | 2 2 1 2 4 | 2 1 2 1 | 0

"Silent Night"

Trad. Christmas Hymn

Mix. D

D D D D A

Si - lent Night, ho - ly night, all is

A D D G G D

calm, all is bright. 'Round you vir - gin, Moth - er and

D G G D D A

child, Ho - ly in - fant so ten - der and mild. Sleep in

A D D A D

heav - en - ly peace, ——— sleep - in heav - en - ly peace.