

Simple • Quiet • Beautiful

*The Sound of the Mountain Dulcimer*

# INTRODUCTION TO THE DULCIMER WORLD

*A workshop for players with minimal musical background  
who wish to explore the music of the mountain dulcimer.*



Presented by Ron Beardslee

*rondulcimer@gmail.com*

# Some Thoughts on the Dulcimer

Ron Beardslee

You are not going to get rich or famous playing the dulcimer so just relax and have fun. As the distinguished philosophers Simon & Garfunkel once said “slow down, you move to fast. Got to make the morning last”.

I can teach you very little. Playing a musical instrument at an early level certainly requires some level of intellectual understanding but, at the heart of the matter, it is a physical activity. In other words, practice.

In this course, we will cover how to strum with the right hand, how to play simple melodies and chords with the left hand and how to read tablature (AKA Tab) which is the musical notation system used by dulcimer players.

If you feel that I am not being clear or being a bit too pompous during the workshop, please let me know of my deficiencies.

# **Welcome to the Dulcimer World. Class Notes**

Ron Beardslee

## **Instrument position**

- Right end of instrument close to body with strum hollow above the right thigh.
- The left end of the instrument should be near the left knee.

## **Right hand strumming**

- Grasp the pick with the thumb and index finger with the tip facing down. Hold the pick near the center, not at the top.
- Hold the pick in a vertical position and strum across the strings.
- Use your arm to move the pick rather than the wrist (sort of).
- Strum out with the beat. Strum in with the beat. Your choice.
- Strum out on the strong beats (1, 2, 3, 4). Strum in on the off beats between the strong beats. Repeat for a couple of years.

## Left hand Technique

- Left arm relaxed with elbow near your side.
- Wrist straight, fingers curved down, press on string with the tip of the finger.
- To play a note put your finger just to the left of the fret not on the fret.
- Frets are numbered sequentially with a few exceptions that will be explained.
- Play basic Boil them Cabbage Down melody.
- Chords are three or more notes played in unison that have a desired sound (e.g., strong, sad, unsettling, dissonant).
- The main chords used on the dulcimer are D, G, and A.
- The D chord can be described as 0 0 2, reading from the bass string farthest from you to the melody string nearest you.
- The G chord can be described as 0 1 3.
- The A chord can be described as 1 0 1.
- There are numerous other versions of each chord. More later.
- Practice strumming D, G and A chords.
- Play Boil Them Cabbage Down with chords.

## Reading Tablature

- Tablature is a simple graphical way to let you know where to place your fingers on the strings and the length of time your fingers are held down.
- The three lines represent the three strings of the dulcimer. The top line is your bass string farthest from you, the middle line is the middle string and the bottom line is the melody string.
- When the number “0” appears, it means that none of the frets are played on the indicated string.
- A single line under a note indicates that the note is held for one beat.
- Notes that are connected by a square “U” shape receive one-half beat. The first note of the pair is strummed out the second is strummed in.

## Make some music

- Play *Boil Them Cabbage Down*, melody only. Remember to alternate pick direction on paired eighth notes
- Play *Boil Them Cabbage Down* with chords. Use (mostly) index finger for notes on bass string, middle finger or ring finger on middle string, ring finger or

thumb on melody string. You can also use the little finger if you are brave.

- Play *Bullfrog*. Note that the rhythm has changed.
- Play *It Ain't Gonna Rain No More*. This piece moves up to the sixth fret.
- Play *Go Tell Aunt Rhody*. Playing across all strings is a traditional method. It is now more common to play both chords and single notes.

### **Miscellaneous stuff**

- Double melody strings. Single is easier and, in most ways, better.
- You should get a tuner.
- Some history: The mountain dulcimer originated in the area that became West Virginia (probably around 1800) and was probably based on the more primitive German scheitholt. There was major decline in popularity of the dulcimer following the introduction of Spanish guitar around 1900. The instrument never completely disappeared (thanks Jean Ritchie) and went through a major rebirth (thanks Neal Hellman and others) in the area around

Felton in the 1980's with new playing styles and instrument building techniques.

- Other resources: [RiverCityDulcimers.com](http://RiverCityDulcimers.com), Pacific Mountain Dulcimer email list (contact me at [rondulcimer@gmail.com](mailto:rondulcimer@gmail.com))
- Do not buy a dulcimer without talking to an experienced player. There are a lot of unplayable junk instruments on the market.
- Feel free to contact me, Ron Beardslee, if you have any questions at [rondulcimer@gmail.com](mailto:rondulcimer@gmail.com)
- Hold each note for its full assigned time. Do not play the note and then immediately move your left hand to the next position.
- Try to keep your arms and hands relaxed. Stress will reduce your ability to play and can result in trauma. Do not press down with your left hand more than is necessary to produce a clear note.
- Listen to the sound you are producing. Record yourself using one of the many free apps available.
- When learning a piece, play it no faster than the tempo that allows you to properly play the most difficult parts. Speed up the tempo when you get all the parts working properly.

- Listen to other musicians, both experienced and beginners.
- Use a metronome