

THE HAMMER DULCIMER PLAYED BY CHET PARKER



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2381

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Devil's Dream; Medley #1
Pick Me Up On Your Way Down;
Put Your Arms Around Me;
Spanish Two Step; Flickstein
Medley #2; Medley #3
Medley #4; Soldier's Joy;
#2 of First Place Quadrills
by Cuberdan
Medley #5; Medley #6
The Bald Headed End of the
Broom; Medley #7
Medley #8
Medley #9
Fishers' Hornpipe; Medley #10
Medley #11
Medley #12
Medley #13
First, Second, and Fourth Set
Quadrills from "My Best Girl"

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INTRODUCTION

The art of playing the hammer dulcimer is a fast disappearing one, and is virtually unknown through most of this country. Various instruments similar in construction and methods of playing are known in the East and in Europe. The hammer dulcimer has a long and interesting history. From the research I have done, it seems to be a modification of the Psaltry, an ancient biblical instrument. However, the psaltry is plucked with the fingers and generally has many more strings, giving it a far greater range. Dulcimers range in size from the monstrosity made in 1705 called a Pantaleon with 185 strings to the ones mentioned in the Bible with only ten strings. The Hungarian Cymbalom seems to be most similar to the dulcimer but has more strings and a range of four chromatic octaves. All of the dulcimers that I have seen have a range of no more than two octaves, and sometimes less, depending on how it is tuned. Most of these dulcimers have twelve sets of strings and a varying amount of bass strings, the usual being six sets. The instrument is usually oblong or trapazoidal in shape, being strung with thirty six strings in sets of three, or forty eight strings tuned in sets of four, stretched across a sound chest with a bridge set approximately two thirds of the way across the strings. The bridge is set so that the left side is a seventh half step above the right side. Thus, if the first string were tuned to C on the right, it would sound G on the left of the bridge.

I have heard the hammer dulcimer called a 'Lumberjacks Piano' but Chet Parker claims that when he worked in a lumber camp years ago, he was the only one who played a dulcimer. Where it got this name is a mystery even though logical. Pianos are a problem in transportation in a lumber camp and a dulcimer would answer a need for music and portability.

There seem to be as many ways to tune a dulcimer as there are players. Some players tune them in half steps, although it usually isn't done unless the instrument has eighteen sets of strings. This is due to the limitation of range twelve strings would have if tuned this way. The two most common tunings, Chet Parker calls 'sharps' and 'flats'. The diagram below shows these two types of tunings.

FLATS		SHARPS	
Right side	Left Side	Right side	Left side
B	F#	C#	G#
C	G	D	A
D	A	E	B
E	B	F#	C#
F	C	F	C
G	D	G	D
A	E	A	E
B	F	B	F#
C	G	C	G
D	A	D	A
E	B	E	B
F	C	F	C

As you can see, this gives the instrument a little over two octaves in range.

The instrument is played with a pair of hammers which also vary for each player. Some are rather fancy (as dulcimer hammers go), being made of a thin strip of springy metal with wooden handles on one end and a felt or leather covered wooden knob on the other end. Most hammers are made with thin strips of flexible plastic or wood with a piece of wood covered with felt or leather glued or tacked on one end. Most players prefer hickory or elm for their hammers. Some like the hammers with long flexible handles or a short handle about 5" or 6" long that is quite stiff. Chet plays with short ones slightly warped with the knob of wood covered with buckskin.

Believe it or not, there is such a thing as a right or left handed dulcimer, the right handed of course, being the most common. The left handed ones would be tunned on the left side of the bridge after it is moved to the right side of the center line. Thus making the right side a seventh higher than the left. The reason for this is that a righthanded person plays most of the melody with the right hand and conversely for a left handed person, and most of the melody is played on the lower pitched strings. I have seen one left handed dulcimer. It had eighteen strings tuned in half steps and was made by an eighty three year old man who could play a mean fiddle as well as the dulcimer.

There seem to be two styles of playing the dulcimer. Most players chord, fitting some, if any, of the melody in around the rhythm. Chet plays lead melody. When Chet was first learning to play, he said there were plenty of dulcimer players but he knew of only one other fellow who played lead.

The types of music played have a wide range of possibilities. Most of the music is the old time dance tunes represented in this album, but I have heard classical and semi-classical music played. It would be interesting to see if someone can come up with some dulcimer playing in the jazz medium. The instrument fits well with nearly any other instrument as either lead or back up.

A club of dulcimer players had been formed in Michigan, aptly named the 'Old Dulcimer Players Club'. It was formed by a man named Elgie Hickok who appeared with Chet Parker at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. The club members come from all over Michigan and meet at a central town in the state twice a year. They have been meeting at Barryton, Michigan for the last three years but are going to have to find a bigger hall due to the large crowds that showed up at the last meeting. People walking down the street hear the music and drop in and find themselves staying until things break up. There is usually at least twenty dulcimers that show up with nearly as many players. So it appears there is some interest locally of this old style of music and perhaps it will spread. At the last meeting someone even brought in an instrument that only 3 or 4 people had ever seen the likes of before; an Appalachian Dulcimer.

Chester Parker has lived his whole life in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area. He is the son of a blacksmith, born in August 1891. Chet got at least part of his music from his father's fiddle playing. He first learned to play the snare drum and later a fife. (Both of which he still has). He played the fife in a fife and drum band for several years. His grandfather gave him a fiddle and taught him how to play: In 1901 his father made



CHET PARKER

him a fiddle. In 1900 a friend introduced him to the dulcimer and let him borrow one. It was "as big as a door and was so loud you couldn't even hear the piano playing chords. Had to open the doors and windows in a house to keep from being driven out by the noise". In 1904 Chet made his own dulcimer which he still plays. He taught himself to play the dulcimer from old violin books. This is where he learned to play melody. Perhaps some of you reading this will recall E. T. Root's "Gems of the Ballroom", Elias Howell's "An Instruction For Fiddle" and Cuberdans book of quadrills "Pride of the Ballroom". Nearly all of the tunes Chet knows come from these books. Sometime about 1910 (Chet couldn't remember exactly when) he formed his own dance band which he had for about fifty years. Chet still plays on Saturdays during the summer with a guitar player for dancing or whenever friends drop by. He recently had a cataract operation on his eye and has some trouble seeing things close, but after sixty some years of playing, you can lay a newspaper over the instrument and he never misses a string.

The last four pieces on this record are quadrills. In the # two quadrill of 'My Best Girl', Chet plays the clarinet part in the middle. The #4 from the same set is a "Real crooked one" according to Chet. When we made the recording, Chet commented that he didn't feel up to playing the tunes "that were really crooked".

Patrick R. Murphy

COUNTRY MUSIC ON FOLKWAYS RECORDS

OLD TIME & BLUEGRASS

by John Cohen

This is to serve as an introduction to one segment of the Folkways catalog which represents something of the seeds and sources for a dynamic aspect of American folk music which has found a voice in the cities and colleges in recent years. For the most part, this is mountain music derived from the rural south.

There is now an excitement about this music throughout the colleges and cities, amongst young people who are finding a voice in this music, and who are making it their own voice.

There are a great range of approaches to this music, and a great many styles involved; yet inherent in this movement is a desire to remain close to the traditional ways of playing the music.

The movement, diverse as it is, has taken on a structure which has its heroes, artistic leaders, legendary characters, a sort of language of its own, and several senseless confusions and stereotypes applied to it.

Much of the clamor about this music has come from banjo pickers & guitar singers who have brought the music to everyone's attention by their very enthusiasm. It is their excitement about the music which has communicated first. But there is much more to be heard and understood.

These spirited musicians are often 'put down' for being merely 'ethnic imitators' by the very same people who recognize that traditional folk music is the only aesthetically complete folk music to be heard.

Although it is relatively new in its present situation, this music is part of one of the oldest American traditions. It has its roots in the music of the early settlers, and has received fresh vigor over the years from developments within American culture which have introduced new sounds and new instruments to this tradition, as well as new rhythms and harmonies to accompany the changing social functions the music has performed.

It is part of an active and progressive tradition, yet it has always maintained a terrific sense of respect and preservation for its own past. In this way elements from years ago are still considered as significant to the present day music by those who perform and live with this music.

Within old time string band music, bluegrass and just home performances, are found trances of the old ballad styles of singing, of bagpipe and fiddle sounds from the British Isles, as well as sounds of the sentimental songs from the 19th century, minstrel stage songs, early Negro blues, rhythms from jazz as well as those now found in rock-and-roll.

One significant and important aspect of the current city trend towards this music is that it has presented a way to enjoy and understand the popular music, without sentimentality and without losing the perspective of culture as a whole. It is only in the nature of this perspective that the urban interest differs from the country tradition. This can neither be praised nor lamented, nor can it be overlooked. It must be recognized, for it is the basis upon which an intelligent approach can develop to the many ideas which are being encountered in the current investigation of folk music.

The importance of academic scholarship can not be denied: neither can an excited emotional involvement. It is only when folk music becomes just a form of entertainment, in the more commercial sense of that word, that it is being abused.

That the investigation has become more like an involvement of love or art, is to the credit of the investigators. If city people have found that country music is meaningful to them, then this is a genuine enrichment of their lives.

The more one gets involved in this music, the more one realizes the character of an old tradition at work, and the astonishing directness and simplicity in the approach of the traditional artist. An understanding of the music opens up the possibilities for us all to get the most pleasure and reward from these old songs, and from the people who sing them.

In various college campuses and cities now, folk music societies and festivals are emerging which incorporate active research with song collecting, concert producing, and music playing. At one school, on the event of a New Lost City Rambler concert, the folk music society increased its membership by 100, a panel discussion was held with university faculty and visiting musicians participating, a student string-band was formed, and a local Bluegrass band of country kids was 'discovered' and incorporated into the general university folk song scene. In addition to this, a regular publication was started. At another place, serious discographical research is being done and a record of rare re-issues of early hill music was released. Concerts are being produced employing traditional artists; this is no longer a unique situation. The University of Chicago Folk Festival, the Berkeley Festival, the Friends of Old Time Music, and the Ash Grove in Los Angeles, are all pointing the way towards an intelligent enjoyment of traditional folk music.

Within the Folkways catalog is a group of recording which present the scope and nature of the various facets of this music. Folkways has been consistent in its presentation of this music as it is traditionally and authentically performed.

FA2951 (Vol. 1) - Ballads: 27 traditional ballads performed by The Carter Family, Clarence Ashley, Buell Kazee, Carolina Tar Heels, Furry Lewis, Charlie Poole with the North Carolina Ramblers, G. B. Grayson, The Masked Marvel, "Chubby" Parker, many others.

2 12-inch 33-1/3 rpm longplay records

FA2952 (Vol. 2) Social Music: 29 selections performed by Bascom Lunsford, Blind Willie Johnson, Carter Family, Sacred Harp Singers, Bunt Stephens, A Hunt's Ramblers, The Pep-Steppers, Cincinnati Jug Band, others.

2 12-inch 33-1/3 rpm longplay records

FA2953 (Vol. 3) Songs: 28 selections incl. East Virginia, One Morning In May, Sugar Baby, Mountaineer's Courtship, 99 Year Blues, K.C. Moan, Fishing Blues, etc., performed by Uncle Dave Macon, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Clarence Ashley, Cannons Jug Stompers, Carter Family, John Hurt, "Dock" Boggs, Stoneman Family, many more.

2 12-inch 33-1/3 rpm longplay records

The Anthology of American Folk Music FA 2951, FA 2952, FA 2953 This collection is a most comprehensive one, and gives an incisive look into the folk music current from 1927 to 1932 as recorded by the commercial recording companies of that time. Good representation of rural music, with many important artists represented, ed. and annotated by Harry Smith.

Vol. 1 Ballads:

Some Child Ballads, and many other old songs in the ballad tradition, sung as current and popular songs in 1927, etc.

Vol. 2 Social Music:

Dance music and religious music. Both white and Negro traditions. Many instrumental pieces.

Vol. 3 Songs:

Excellent collection of country songs and many blues.

Important artists in this collection.

Clarence Ashley,
Buell Kazee
Dick Justice
Uncle Eck Dunford
Burnette & Rutherford
Covener & Young
Carolina Tar Heels

Miss. John Hurt
Furry Lewis
Jilson Setters
Eck Robertson
Uncle David Macon
Blind Lemon Jefferson
Dock Boggs

Grayson & Whitter
The Carter Family
Kelly Harrell
Frank Hutchison
Charlie Poole
Bascom Lunsford
Jim Jackson
Ernest Phipps
E.V. Stoneman
Blind Willie Johnson

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Boys keep away from the girls I say
And give them lots of room
For when you're wed they'll bang ya
till your dead
With the bald headed end of the broom.
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Side 2

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Come and be my rainbow my pretty
rainbow
My heart's beguiled give me a smile
Once in a while in rain or sunshine
My rainbow keeps your lovelife a-glow
I love you so my sweet rainbow.
"Silver Bells"
Chorus:
Your voice is ringing my silver bell
Under it's spell I've come to tell you
Of the love I am bringing o're hill &
dale
Happy we'll dwell my silver bell.

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Now the moon shines tonight on pretty
Red Wing
The breeze is sighing and the night
bird crying
Far beneath the star her brave is
sleeping
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