A companion instruction book is located in the Music Resources Centre at call number:

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The Appalachian Dulcimer
by Jean Ritchie
an instrumental record

SIDE I

The sound you have just heard was made by what we in Kentucky call a mountain dulcimer. As long as my father or his father could remember, there have been dulcimers or dulcimors made and played in our Kentucky and Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina mountains. There were three well known dulcimer makers living all within a few miles of each other in my part of Kentucky and, almost every family had one of the instruments lying on the mantle piece or hanging on the wall, and some member or members of the family who liked to play it. My father was the player in our family and I learned from him. I guess, the reason so many folks like to play it is that it's so easy. It's just as easy as it sounds and, the accompaniments that sort of come natural on the dulcimer are simple and uncomplicated. But, at the same time, they are beautiful and, well somehow, they're just right for most of our lovely mountain traditional songs.

Now, I honestly think that the best way to learn to play the dulcimer is just to do what we all used to do. Pick it up and fool around with it, try out things as they come to you. And if you have any kind of an ear to hear right and wrong harmonies, you'll be playing as well as I can in a short time. But, assuming that you have a dulcimer and that you don't know what in the world to do with it, let me see if I can tell you how to get started.

Sit down on a fairly low chair or stool without arm rests. Place the dulcimer flat on your lap so that the tuning pegs are to the left and the first or melody string is nearest to you. Now, adjust your legs so that you feel comfortable and so that the instrument doesn't slide. I find, that I usually angle the dulcimer slightly so that the left end extends somewhat beyond the left knee, while the right end is drawn inward towards the body. You'll soon find the position that's best for you after you've handled the instrument a bit.
Now you're ready to pick out your first tune. I suggest that you begin with a simple, easy one. I think the first tune I ever picked out was "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" and, I suspect that this has been the learning piece for almost everybody. There must be a good reason for it. So I'll start you off on Aunt Rhody.

Sound the first note of the scale, your "do", third fret from the left in the major key. . . Now hum the first line of Aunt Rhody. . . Now try to pick out the tune. Slide the note up on to the fifth fret, that's where you begin. . . and keep going with me. I'll sing along so you'll see where the words fit in.

Go tell Aunt Rhody,
Go tell Aunt Rhody,
Go tell Aunt Rhody,
That her old gray goose is dead.

The one that she's been savin',
The one that she's been savin',
The one that she's been savin',
To make her feather bed.

Now as long as we're in the major key, it's a good time to show you how to use the pick. I prefer the feather pick; a large turkey or goose wing feather, whittled down to a fine long flexible point on the quill end. When using the feather pick, hold it, of course, in the right hand. And I find that the most natural thing to do is to strum the strings beginning with an inward sweep. . . Towards yourself. This makes it easier to get the necessary pressure for the important beats. If you can't find a feather right away, take a stay out of a man's shirt collar and whistle that down and, you can start learning with that. Now at first give each note one strum, striking all three strings always pulling the stick inward. Strike the note firmly, with authority . . . So. After you've done this for a while, you may want to put in extra strokes with a feather to achieve a fuller sound and to make an accompaniment for the main notes of a tune. Like . . . Either on the down beat or on the return outward. Always light and, of course, keeping the rhythm of the song. Try a tune. But, if you can't fill it out by yourself, let me indicate how it might go. Let's take a very simple tune, one that everybody surely knows. Let's try "Skip to My Lou". I'll begin the tune just with the inward strokes and then I'll put in extra ones as we go along.

Now here's what we've been doing. I'm going to say "in", when I pull the feather in and, "out" when I push the feather out. . . in, in, out, in, in - in in in out in in, in out in in, in in in out in in, in out in in, in in in in, in in in, in in in, in in in.

Well, let's see. Let's start on another one . . . 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, on the seventh fret and let's play a very simple counter melody to "Barbara Allen". You can just sing along, strum along until you get the hang of it.

All in the merry month of May,
When the green buds they were swellin',
Young William Green on his deathbed lay,
For the love of Barbara Allen.
He sent his servant to the town,
To the place where she was dwellin'.
Sayin', "Master said, can he send for you,
If your name be Barbara Allen.

Well, Barbara Allen is a long song and it'll get pretty monotonous if you go all the way through it with the same simple sweet strum. So you'll want to put in some rhythmical variations. Two of the ones that I like to use are, well one of them I call the "ompa" which is just striking the first melody string and bringing the drones in as an accompaniment like this. Just like you do on a guitar.

Then slowly, slowly she got up,
And slowly she came nigh him,
And all she said when she got there,
Young man, I believe you're dyin'.

And another one is just a simple roll across the strings. One-two-three-

Oh yes I'm low, I'm very low,
And death is on me dwellin',
No better, no better I never will be,
If I can't get Barbara Allen.

And sometimes on a verse you'll want to mix them all up.

Oh don't you remember in yonders town,
In yonders town a drinkin',
You drunk the health of the ladies all around,
And you slighted Barbara Allen.

Here's a little picking variation that you may find pleasing. It's not one of the old traditional ones but, it's one that some modern players have worked out. Let's go back to Aunt Rhody cause, that's one that everybody knows. We won't have to learn the tune. Now I have the note on the fifth fret. Brace the thumb of the right hand against the side of the finger board near the right hand end. Play with a slightly lifting or plucking motion the melody string. One, and the second string with the forefinger. You're going to go back and forth. One, just with one finger but, in between the middle finger is going to play the third string. So, one. Now let's try the melody "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" with this picking method.

To tune from a major key into the minor, simply turn the first string higher by a tone and a half. Or to say it another way: if you tuned in the key of C major, G,G,C, for the strings, you turn the first string up to B flat leaving the second and third strings as they were before. Now if your dulcimer is tuned to the pitch of your voice and you have no other instruments or tuning fork by which to determine what key you're tuned to, you may tune the dulcimer to itself as we did before, to get from the major key into the minor. We'll leave the second and third strings as they were in the major tuning which is like this. One. We're going to change the first string to make it the minor key. Now press down on the third string, the bass string, just to the left of a sixth fret and sound that note. Now you're going to tune the first string to this note. Let's do that. There we are. In the minor tuning the scale begins at the first fret.

Now since you're tuned to the minor key, let's try a song there. Here's "The Dear Companion", that's one of our family songs and a very lovely one.

I once did have a dear companion,
Indeed I thought his love my own,
Until some black eyed girl betrayed me,
And now he cares no more for me.

Go and leave me if you wish to,
That will never trouble me,
For in your heart you love another,
And in my grave I'd rather be.

Last night you were so sweetly sleeping,
Dreaming in some soft repose,
While I a poor girl broken hearted,
Was listening to the wind that blows.

Just go and leave me if you wish to,
Far from this lonely world I flee,
For in your heart you love another,
And in my grave I'd rather be.

You've already been given the two popular tunings, the major and the minor and, these will be the two you'll probably want to use most of the time. The dulcimer can be tuned to all the modes, however, and I'll give here these modal tunings for those who'll want to experiment with them.

To tune to the Myxalidian mode from the regular major minor tunings simply turn the first string so that it sounds an octave higher than the third or bass string. Like so, one. This is the bass. One and you'll want to turn the first string so it sounds like this. One. And so the three strings will be the first string, second string and third string. The first note of the scale is then played by sounding the open or unfretted melody string, the second note by pressing the first fret and so on.

Here's a favorite Ritchie play party game to play in the Myxalidian tuning. I like to use a pick for this one; playing a verse or two through first and then, if I want to sing the words I pick a simple harmony during the singing, keeping the "bom biddy bom" rhythm and striking the notes somewhat more softly. This makes it easier for the voice to be heard above the music. Here's "Going to Boston".

Goodbye girls I'm going to Boston,
Goodbye girls I'm going to Boston,
Goodbye girls I'm going to Boston,
Early in the morning.

CHORUS:
Won't we look pretty in the ballroom, (3)
Early in the morning.

Rights and lefts make it better,
Early in the morning.
(CHORUS)

Hand your hands a little bit faster, (3)
Early in the morning.

(CHORUS)

The Dorian scale is almost the minor or Aolian except that when one comes to the "La", the sixth note of the scale, it sounds unexpectedly major.

To tune to the Dorian mode from the regular major or minor tuning, press the third or bass string just to the left of the third fret. . . . There. Sound the note and tune the melody string to this note. Da-ra-dam . . . Here we are. . . . The first note of the Dorian scale begins at the fourth fret. The song I like to play and sing in this mode is "Bachelors Hall" from home.

On hard is my fortune and hard is my fate,
Controlled by my mother so early and late,
But when I get married to end all the strife,
Controlled by a man for the rest of my life.

Oh Bachelors hall it is bound to be best,
Get drunk or stay sober, lay down, take a rest,
No woman to scold you, no children to boss,
So happy is the man that keeps Bachelors Hall.

The Frigian mode. . . . Now you'll not be likely to find many South Appalachian mountain tunes in this mode, for it's a rare one. But many of our tunes sound well when harmonized here.

To begin with you'll have to turn the first string down quite a bit and it might sound watery. So I've taken the whole dulcimer tuning up a bit. Up to here. . . . Now to get your dulcimer into the Frigian mode tuning, from the regular major, press the first string down just to the left of the second fret. . . . And now turn the first string down until it has the same pitch as the open second string. . . . And you have this tuning. . . . Isn't that lovely? This is the Frigian mode. Let's try something in the Frigian mode just to show you how pretty it is. I think a good one would be "Pretty Polly".

Oh Polly, pretty Polly come go alone with me,
Oh Polly, pretty Polly come go along with me,
Before we get married some pleasure to see.

Oh Willie, oh Willie I'm afraid of your ways,
Oh Willie, oh Willie I'm afraid of your ways,
I'm afraid you will lead my poor body astray.

Oh Polly, pretty Polly you're guessin' about right,
Oh Polly, pretty Polly you're guessin' about right,
I dug on your grave the best part of last night.

The Lydian mode. The Lydian mode is like the major Ionian mode except that the fourth note up the scale, the "Fa", sounds sharp. To tune to the Lydian mode from the major, press down just to the left of the third fret on the first string. Sound the note and tune the first string to the same pitch as that of the open second string. The first note of the scale or the "Do" will be sounded at the sixth fret. Listen to the scale . . .

I'd like to sing here a song that Uncle Jason Ritchie calls "The Lonesome Days of Winter".

The lonesome days of winter they bring forth frost and snow,
Dark clouds around me gather and stormy winds do blow,
I went to see my love last night she seemed most soberly,
I asked her for to marry, she would not consent to me.

This night will soon be over, it's almost break of day,
And ask me plain and tell me oh now what do you say,
Hence e'er if I must tell you I'll choose a single life,
For I never thought it suited for me to be your wife.

Oh since it does not suit you I'll cross the deep blue sea,
I'll cross the briney ocean and never married be,
The lonesome days of winter they bring forth frost and snow,
Dark clouds around me gather and stormy winds doth blow.

SIDE II

Band 1: PLEASANT OHIO

Come all ye fine young fellows who have got a mind to range,
To some far off country your fortune for to change
We'll settle in the land of the pleasant Ohio,
Through the wild woods we will wander,
And hunt the buffalo.

Sweet and shady groves,
Through the wild woods we will wander,
And hunt the buffalo.

Come all ye fine young women who have got a mind to go,
That you may make us clothing you may knit and you may sew,
We'll build you fine log cabins in the pleasant Ohio,
Through the wild woods we will wander,
And chase the buffalo.

Sweet and shady groves,
Through the wild woods we will wander,
And chase the buffalo.
There are fishes in the river just suited to our use,
Beside there’s lofty sugar trees that yield to us
some juice.
There is all kinds of game, my boys, beside the
buck and doe,
When we all settle down in the pleasant Ohio.

Sweet and shady groves,
When we all settle down in the pleasant Ohio.

Tis you can sow and reap, my love, and I can spin
and sew,
And we’ll settle in the land of the pleasant Ohio,
For the sun shines bright from morn till night,
As down the stream we’ll go,
And good and great will be our state,
The mighty Ohio.

Sweet and shady groves,
And good and great will be our state,
The mighty Ohio.

Band 2:  OLD CROMLEY

Old Cromley he begin to swear as the leaf grows on
the tree, tree,
That he could do as much work in a day as his
wife could do in three, three,
That he could do as much work in a day as his
wife could do in three.

Missus Cromley she picked up the whip and went
to drive the plow, plow,
Cromley he picked up the pail and went to
milk the cow, cow,
Cromley he picked up the pail and went to
milk the cow.

Brendo, Brendo saw him a’comin she begin to bill
and blow, blow,
She kicked old Cromley on the shin till the
blood run off his toe, toe,
She kicked old Cromley on the shin till the
blood run off his toe.

He looked to the East, he looked to the West, he
looked toward the sun, sun,
Thought it been a very long day, I wish my wife
would come, come,
Thought it been a very long day, I wish my wife
would come.

Band 3:  COMMON BILL

Oh, I'm in love with a feller,
A feller you have seen,
Neither white nor yellow,
But he's altogether green.

Yes, his name is not so charming,
It's only common Bill,
He urges me to weddin to him,
But I hardly think I will.

CHORUS:
Poor Bill, poor silly Bill,
He urges me to weddin to him,
But I hardly think I will.

He whispers out devotion,
Devotion pure and deep,
But it sounds amighty silly,
That I almost fell asleep.

Now he thinks it would be frilsome,
For to journey down the hill,
Go hand in hand together,
But I hardly think I will.

(Chorus)

I'm sure I would not choose him,
If it were in my power,
But he said if I refuse him,
He could not live an hour.

Now you know the bible teaches,
That's it's very wrong to kill,
So I thought the matter over,
And I think I'll marry Bill.

Band 4:  WARRENTON

Come my fount of every blessing,
Fill my heart to sing thy praise,
Streams of mercy never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise

CHORUS: (2x)
I am bound for the kingdom
Won't you go to glory with me
Halleluja, praise the Lord.

Ode to grace how great our debtor,
Gaily I'm constrained to be,
Let that grace Lord like a fetter,
Bind my wand'tring heart to thee.

(Chorus - 2x)

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love,
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it,
Seal it from thy forts above.

(Chorus - 2x)

Come my fount of every blessing,
Fill my heart to sing thy praise,
Streams of mercy never ceasing,
Call for songs for loudest praise.

Band 5:  CIVIL WAR MARCH

Instrumental
CHORUS:
Three jolly rogues of Lynn,
Three jolly rogues of Lynn,
There was a miller and a weaver and a little tailor,
Three jolly rogues of Lynn.

Well the miller he stole corn,
And the weaver he stole yarn,
And the little tailor he stole broadcloth
For to keep the three rogues warm.

CHORUS:
For to keep the three rogues warm,
For to keep the three rogues warm,
And the little tailor he stole broadcloth
For to keep the three rogues warm.

Now the miller he drowned in his dam,
And the weaver he hung in his yarn,
And the devil laid his paw on the little tailor,
With the broadcloth under his arm.

CHORUS:
With the broadcloth under his arm,
With the broadcloth under his arm,
And the devil laid his paw on the little tailor,
With the broadcloth under his arm.

Now the miller still swims in his dam,
And the weaver still hangs in his yarn,
And the little tailor goes skipping through hell,
With the broadcloth under his arm.

CHORUS:
With the broadcloth under his arm,
With the broadcloth under his arm,
And the little tailor goes skipping through hell,
With the broadcloth under his arm.

Band 8: SHADY GROVE

CHORUS:
Shady Grove my little love,
Shady Grove I know
Shady Grove my little love
Bound for the Shady Grove

Cheeks as red as the bloomin' rose,
Eyes of the deepest brown,
You are the darlin' of my heart,
Stay till the sun goes down.

(Chorus)

Went to see my Shady Grove,
She's standin' in the door,
Shoes and stockin's in her hand,
Little bare feet on the floor.

(Chorus)

Wished I had a big fat horse,
Corn to feed him on,
Pretty little girl stay at home,
Feed him when I'm gone.

(Chorus)
ABOUT JEAN RITCHIE

Jean Ritchie was born and raised in Viper, Kentucky, in the Cumberland Mountains. She is the youngest in a family of fourteen children born to Ballis and Abigail Ritchie, who were, like most other folks in the region, of Scottish-Irish-English descent. According to local history, James Ritchie with five of his brothers sailed from England in 1768, and a few years thereafter, James pioneered with his family into the Appalachian wilderness, and died somewhere near what is now the Carrs Fork of Troublesome Creek in Kentucky. His family stopped there, becoming one of the first few families to settle in that section.

Five generations passed and saw little change in their way of life. Other parts of the country had forged ahead, the Industrial Revolution had brought radical growth to cities and “level country” farms, but the Ritchies and their neighbors, walled in by the rugged ridges of the Cumberland, continued to farm their hillsides, using the primitive old-world methods; continued to entertain themselves with the play-party dances, the beautiful ballads and the lonesome love plaints handed down through the generations from their British Isles ancestors. Sometimes they sang unaccompanied, as they went about their work; often, Jean’s father would take the dulcimer down from the fireplace, and make the mountains ring with the sweet music of the ballads.

In Jean’s generation, the change began. Her older sisters recollect the exciting time when the first railroad train pushed its thunderous way up their narrow valley, the first load of coal taken from the new mines, the first of the “Quare-women” who came up from the level lands to open settlement schools. Jean herself remembers the first radio, the first movie house, and now of course, television has come to Viper, all bringing popular modern music to mountain hollows.

There are still many people who say the old songs are the best, and when Jean was growing up and singing with the family on the front porch of an evening, it wasn’t the new, so-called “hillbilly” songs or the catchy tin-pan alley tunes that were the favorites. It was songs like “Barbry Ellen,” “A Pretty Fair Miss A-Workin in the Garden,” “Sourwood Mountain,” “Lord Randall.” There were newer ones, too, news accounts of local events — hangings, elections, ground-hog hunts, murders, feuds — all meaningful, each one a living part of the growth of a people, and the dulcimer learned and played these stories, too.

Many folk-song collectors have come to the Ritchies, have noted down tunes and words and set them in books, have come to refer to this family as, “The Singing Ritchies,” because of their knowledge and love of the old songs.

Jean was graduated from the Viper High School, then from Cumberland Junior College, Williamsburg, Kentucky, finishing, with highest honors and a Phi Beta Kappa Key, at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. She took her bachelors degree in social work, and so went to New York to gain practical experience at the Henry Street Settlement. With her mountain dulcimer, which she had learned to play from her father, she taught her family songs and games to the children of New York’s Lower East Side, and learned theirs in return. Her friends began to ask her to sing at their parties, then school-teachers begged her to come to their classes. Through a friend at the Settlement, she was introduced to Alan Lomax who recorded her songs for his collection and for the Library of Congress Folksong Archives. Soon she was asked by Oxford University Press to write the history of her family’s growing-up in the mountains, and her book, SINGING FAMILY OF THE CUMBERLANDS, called an American classic by leading reviewers throughout the country, was published in 1955. It was recently published in a paperback edition by Oak Publications.

The response to her singing, too, has grown far beyond anything she ever imagined. Calls for her to sing have come from many parts of the United States and Europe. She has sung at such places as Town Hall in New York and Orchestra Hall in Chicago; been featured at folklore seminars and festivals at Harvard University, Columbia University and the University of California; and has given countless recitals at colleges and universities throughout the country.
In 1952, Jean won a Fulbright scholarship which enabled her to travel about
the British Isles in order to trace the sources of her family songs, learning and
comparing the variants now being sung by the countryfolk of Britain with the Ritchie
variants. While in England, she appeared in concert at the Royal Albert Hall and
at Cecil Sharp House.

In 1953, she attended the International Conference of Folk Music in
Biarritz-Pamplona as the sole representative of the United States.

She has appeared many times on all the major TV and radio networks
(NBC's "Wide, Wide World" once visited her family at Christmastime) in this
country and for the BBC in London, Radio Erin in Dublin and Radio Paris in
France. She has made record albums for Folkways, Westminster, Elektra,
Riverside, Tradition, and Classic Editions companies, and for HMV and Argo
companies in London.

Jean sings in a light, clear, untrained voice, and her songs are presented
with simplicity and directness. Her Kentucky dulcimer accompaniments are free-
flowing and tasteful, pointing up the ethereal beauty of the mountain tune.

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