

THE DULCIMER AND THE LADY

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 Balis 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.

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," "Sourwood Mountain," "Lord Randal."

There were newer ones, 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.

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. This short but interesting excerpt is from her publication, *The Dulcimer Book*.

As long as I can remember, and as long as my father could remember, and as long as *his* father could remember, there have been dulcimers, or "dulcimores", made and played in our Kentucky mountains.

In Viper, where we lived, the dulcimer maker was Uncle Will Singleton, whose old-fashioned white frame house set just over the river from the post office, at the other end of the swinging bridge. Uncle Will had a large kindly face framed by a shock of silky white hair, and a tremendous mustache. He always dressed neatly even at home, with suspenders, the mark of a gentleman.

At the annual Hall reunion (he was kin to the Halls) he was a familiar figure, dressed in black for the occasion, sitting on the speaker's platform with his dulcimer on his

lap, playing and patting the floor with his foot in his dignified way for the entertainment of the company. There would be two or three hundred people assembled, each family with its good-smelling dinner basket, on the wood plank benches around the hillside. Oaks rustled and bees buzzed, babies cried gently, old ladies fanned, the dulcimer droned and remembered.

HOW TO TUNE UP BALIS RITCHIE'S METHOD

According to Dad, "You tune her like this: Bim-bim-BOM." He'd sing the "bim-bims" up fairly high and come down hard on the "BOM," five tones lower. If you ask the singing-school master, he will tell you that this is so-so-do. Translated to the

musical staff, it reads, G-G-C, G above middle C for the first and second strings, and middle C for the third, or bass string. Now, it may *not* be G-G-C, for the instrument is usually tuned to suit the singing range of the player, but anyway that is the relationship of the strings.

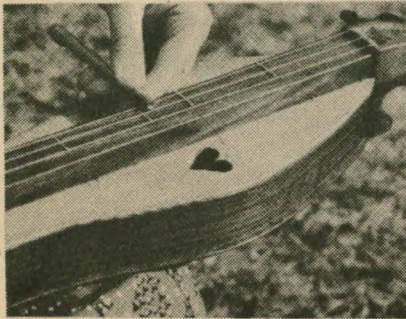
We always tune up by ear, to the key we want, but you may want to be guided by the piano, at least until you get used to the sound of it.

SINGING WITH THE DULCIMER

In all the years I listened to Dad Ritchie play, I very rarely heard him sing to his own music. I knew he would be singing somewhere *inside*, for he would not stop on "Merry Golden Tree," or "Sweet By and By," until he had played all the

verses. Uncle Will Singleton and his grandchildren, on the other hand, did often sing to dulcimer accompaniment. They sang and played in unison always, their voices rising and falling with the pitch of the instrument.

HOW TO HOLD THE NOTER



Have your dulcimer in the major key tuning-G-G-C or the equivalent notes. In your left hand is the noter, usually a finger-length of bamboo (cut from the little end of a fishing pole, or from a garden "staker"). Cradle the noter along the fingers and hold it so that the thumb may press from above, and the side of the finger may glide along the side of the fingerboard to keep the end of the noter from touching the middle string. That's because melody changes are all made on one string; the other two are always drones. Press the noter down upon the melody string, the one nearest your body. You get the clearest tone when

you press the note immediately to the left of the fret.

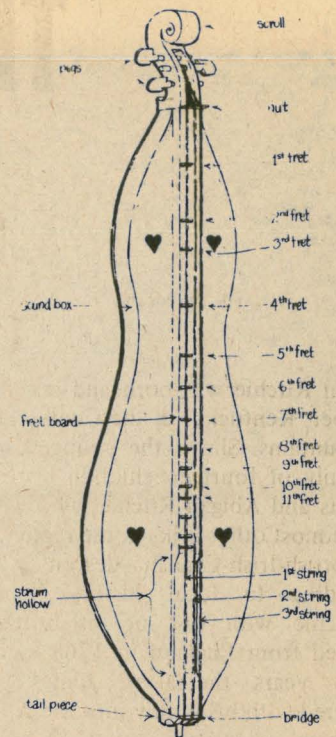
Now, strum with the thumb of your right hand, away from the body. Perhaps at first, just to get the sound and the feel of the scale, begin at the third fret and play up the scale, moving from left to right and plucking each note with the right-hand thumb on the first string only. Then play back down the scale again, moving the noter to the left. Try to keep both hands relaxed. Firm but not rigid pressure is best for the left hand. The middle finger of the right hand may be used now and then for steadying the instrument, while the thumb is being used for strumming.

PLAYING THE SCALE

Next, try going up and down the scale again, only this time let the thumb sweep across all three of the strings. This provides the melody string with a constant harmonizing chord which gives the delightful and characteristic drone, or "bagpipes" sound.

PICKING OUT A TUNE

I believe that the very first tune I ever picked out was, "Go Tell Aunt Rhodie," and I suspect that this has been the learning piece for almost everybody. There must be a good reason for it, and so I will start you off on, "Aunt Rhodie." Strum all three strings at the same time, in the rhythm of the song:



Note: All Music in the major key is set down in the key of C. However, your dulcimer should be tuned to the key which most suits your voice, and this may *not* be the key of C. For this reason, I give also the fret numbers of the melody string changes. Since the dulcimer may be played on only in the key to which it is tuned at the time, you will be all right, so long as you begin at the right fret! ♥

GO TELL AUNT RHODIE (I)

type dulcimer

FRET NUMBERS

5 5 4 3 3 4 4 6 5 4 3

Go tell Aunt Rho - die, Go tell Aunt Rho - die,

7 7 6 5 3 3 4 3 4 5 3

Go tell Aunt Rho - die, Her old gray goose is dead.