



Bing Futch: The Dulcimer Pimp

By Bing Futch

*Bing Futch on Beale St. in Memphis, TN, where he won "Best Solo Guitar" at the 2016 IBC
Photo by Jae Futch*

When I take one of my mountain dulcimers out of its case, the first question people usually ask is, "What the heck is that?" Folks who haven't spent time journeying the highways and backroads of the Appalachian region probably wouldn't be familiar with the traditional lap instrument that can be found hanging just about everywhere you look. The Appalachian mountain dulcimer, also known as mountain dulcimer, dulcimore or hog fiddle, is a fretted string instrument related to the German zither and scheitholt. It also shares possible origins with the Norwegian langeleik, the Swedish hummel and the French epinette des vosges. It usually has three or four string courses that stretch along a fretboard running the length of a traditionally hourglass or teardrop-shaped body. The unusual fret pattern, featuring wide and narrow spaces, comes from its diatonic configuration. Based on a basic seven-

note major scale, the traditional mountain dulcimer is missing five notes that are normally found on guitars, mandolins, banjos and other chromatic fretted instruments. Due to a scarcity of written records on the instrument, historians have had to try and fill in the gaps regarding its development.

The mountain dulcimer first appeared in the early 19th century where Scottish and Irish immigrants had settled in the Appalachian Mountains. Lacking the tools and skills to build the more popular violin, researchers theorize that the mountain dulcimer was a blend of old world memories and designed in the easiest way possible. Often called "a bagpipe with strings," players would sit the dulcimer on their lap and strum using a feathered quill. The other hand held a small piece of wood called a noter, sliding it up and down the string closest to the player.



The mountain dulcimer first appeared in the early 19th century in the Appalachian Mountains Photo by Bing Futch

The other two strings were left to drone open like a bagpipe, and its distinct hypnotic sound worked perfectly for playing fiddle tunes and hymns.

The mountain dulcimer languished in relative obscurity until the late '50s when folk songstress Jean Ritchie brought it out of the Kentucky hills and onto stages in New York City. Richard Farina, who was a friend and contemporary of Bob Dylan, is often cited by many dulcimer players as the man who brought the instrument to their attention. In the '70s, Joni Mitchell popularized alternate tunings on the mountain dulcimer, using the instrument to compose and perform songs such as "California" and "A Case of

You." Many years later, Texas-born David Schnauffer brought the humble instrument to Nashville, TN, where he was featured on albums by Johnny Cash, The Judds, Chet Atkins, Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt. Perhaps the most high-profile artist to take up playing the mountain dulcimer is pop diva Cyndi Lauper, who was a student of Schnauffer and used it to compose her hits "Time After Time" and "True Colors."

I first encountered the mountain dulcimer in 1986 as a 17-year-old budding musician working at Knott's Berry Farm theme park in California. I was fascinated with the dulcimer's sound and ease of play, and it's been my main songwriting and performance tool for 30 years. Modern dulcimers are equipped with extra frets, specialized body designs and electronics. There are a number of models that include banjo-style, cello-style and even resonators. As a full-time touring musician who specializes in Americana music, I've taken the mountain dulcimer from one side of the country to the other, performing in concert, presenting at school and library programs and teaching workshops on how to play it.

In 2015, I competed in the International Blues Challenge (IBC) in Memphis, TN, and, using only my double-fretboard and resonator dulcimers, advanced to the semifinals. Before then, the only mountain dulcimer I'd heard at the IBC was played by David Kimbrough III, son of blues legend Junior Kimbrough. When I asked David how the instrument was received when he competed in 2002, he replied, "Well, the judges didn't really understand, but what are you gonna do?"

When I returned to the IBC in 2016, it became clear that the judges were feeling very favorable about roots-based blues, whether by style, content or instrumentation. It felt fantastic to make the semifinals once again and was extremely satisfying to advance to the finals. But anyone at The Orpheum Theatre on Saturday night knows I was completely mind-blown when I was

named the winner of the solo-duo "Best Guitar" award. Holy cow! I'm still pinching myself over that one.

One of the reasons I entered the IBC was to expose a new audience to the Appalachian mountain dulcimer. I like to think of myself as a dulcimer pimp; someone who enjoys turning people onto its charms. My goal is to see a mountain dulcimer in every household, because I think strumming this little three-stringed wonder is one of life's most sublime joys. To demonstrate that the blues can be played on it has also become a passion. I've taught Mississippi Delta Blues workshops from California to New York, publishing *Blues Method For Mountain Dulcimer 101* along the way and recording the album *Unresolved Blues*, using it as the primary instrument. It truly is a remarkable thing and a warmly expressive tool for the guitarist's toolbox. My IBC win has already resulted in a flurry of new bookings at blues festivals across the country, and I'm looking forward to taking the mountain dulcimer into new settings to be heard by new audiences. If you see me at a festival, be sure to stop me and ask to see one. Once I get it into your hands, you're going to fall in love just like so many others have.

You'll want one and I'll hook you up. That's just what a dulcimer pimp does. 🎵

Bing Futch is a full-time musician who has also worked as a print journalist. His work has appeared in The Orlando Weekly, Connections, Ink-19, InSite, Axis and Jam. He lives in Orlando, Florida with his wife, Jae. www.bingfutch.com.



Author Bing Futch describes playing the dulcimer as "one of life's most sublime joys." Photo by Bob Trester