



Method For Bass Mountain Dulcimer

by

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Futch

Folkcraft
INSTRUMENTS

About This Book

The mountain dulcimer is a wonderfully diverse instrument that lends itself well to all different styles of music. In its fairly young history, the mountain dulcimer has evolved to the demands of its many enthusiasts, resulting in a number of different configurations including soprano or “ginger” dulcimers, baritones, banjo/dulcimer hybrids, resonators, bowed dulcimers and even models outfitted with digital interfaces that trigger electronic effects and synthesizers.

All of these variations provide a broad sonic palette with which to paint arrangements and orchestrations of our music, but none of these can anchor an arrangement like a good, solid bass.

Bass mountain dulcimer is enjoying an upsurge in popularity as more people take up the position of bassist for their jam groups. Instead of desperately seeking out folks who play stand-up bass or U-bass (the very popular ukulele hybrid) folks are making it happen using the bass mountain dulcimer and this book will reveal everything you need to know about playing it!

Though this book can be used by anyone at any skill level, I am assuming that you can play standard mountain dulcimer and are familiar with strumming, fretting, changing chords and doing a little soloing. If you’re not quite there yet, please check out my first “Fingers Of Steel” book, “Method For Beginning Mountain Dulcimer”, also available from Folkcraft Instruments.

Playing the bass requires a slightly different approach than playing regular dulcimer. Often, you will be the only one playing your part. The focus is on one note at a time, rather than chords, though you can certainly play chords on the bass as well as solos. With the bass also comes the matter of amplification. They sound great unplugged, but are just as hard to hear as your basic dulcimer. If you’re planning on providing backup for more than three instruments, an amp is going to be necessary. I highly recommend using an amp for practice with this book though it won’t be essential. Plugging in to an amp will change the style of your approach and I’ll be covering those sonic basics as well.

From my high school orchestra days through today as a producer, I have always had a thing for the bass instruments. I graduated from high school in 1984 and joined the band *Teacher’s Aide* as their bass player (I had an Aria Pro II RSB Series axe with a sunburst design. *Loved* that bass) and I’ve had real world experience with rock, pop, blues, funk, jazz, country and world-beat bass, so get ready for a method I’ve developed to get you “in the pocket” and handling the basement like a pro!

Go to [Folkcraft.com](https://folkcraft.com)/download to listen to (or save) the audio.

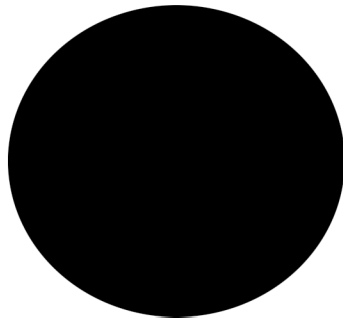
Table of Contents

How To Use This Book.....	7
Chapter 1: Getting Started.....	8
Bass Chord Theory.....	10
Bass Styles: Holding The Root.....	12
Exercises.....	14
Bass Styles: Playing Time.....	22
Exercises.....	24
Bass Styles: Walking Bass.....	32
Exercises.....	34
Technique: Finger Placement.....	42
The Tone Zone: Major Chords	43
The Tone Zone: Minor Chords.	44
Exercises.....	46
Chapter 2: Getting Deeper (Ha-Ha).....	54
Scale Degrees & Chord Progressions.....	55
Intervals.....	56
Chord Building.....	57
Extended Chords/Deep Theory.....	58
Chord Leading.....	62
Bass Styles: Mix and Match.....	66
Exercises.....	68
Chapter 3: Modern Bass Styles.....	90
Chapter 4: Gear.....	106
Good Practices.....	110

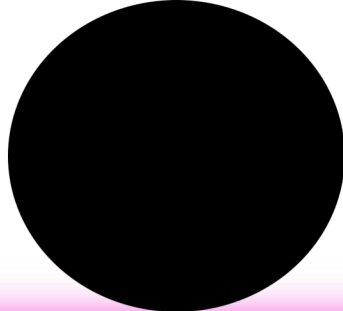
BASS STYLES: HOLDING THE ROOT



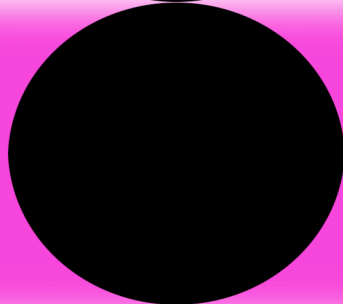
5TH



3RD



ROOT



The *interval* between the root note and the 3rd sounds like “DO a DEER” with “DO” being the root and “DEER” being the 3rd.

The interval between the root note and the 5th sounds like The Alphabet Song “a B C” with “B” being the root and “C” being the 5th.

Chords are usually built from the ROOT and then go up in pitch to the 3rd and 5th. When holding the root, simply play the root note using long tones to support each chord. Whole notes that take the entire measure have a gentler energy to them while the quarter note rhythms bring the energy up. Quarter notes are fine for fiddle tunes if you don't want to get fancy. All you have to do is change the root note with the chord. This is also known as “making the changes.”

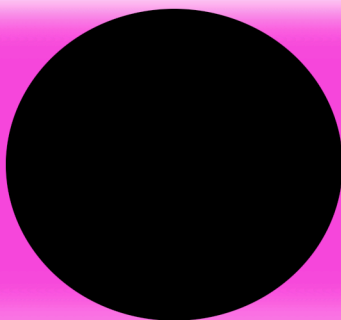
For the purpose of these exercises, we'll be using four tunes as a testing ground for different bass techniques.

BASS STYLES: PLAYING TIME

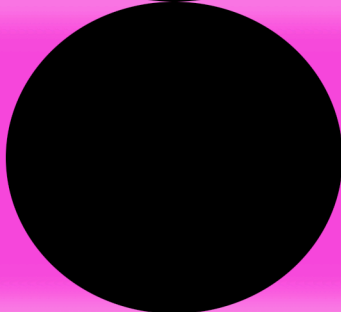


The interval between the root and the 4th is “HERE COMES the bride” where “HERE” is the root and “COMES” is the 4th.

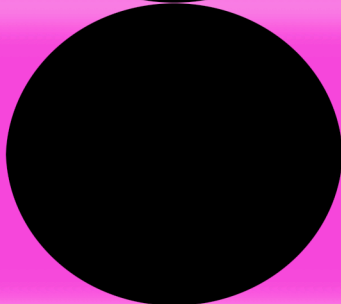
5TH



4TH



ROOT



“Playing time” brings a lot more energy to the mix with the bass accenting more beats of each measure. The most popular, and traditional, way of playing time is by alternating between roots, 4ths and 5th. On the downbeat, play the root for two beats and then play the 5th for two beats. Also called a “pendulum” bassline, it accents the root and 5th of a chord while the 4th allows you to play lower than the root.

Experiment with bouncing back and forth between these three notes on every chord. Keep your eyes open for repeating visual patterns on the fretboard. They’ll help you put together bass lines on the fly.

Exercise 8A/8B

How about some more cabbage?

PRACTICE ZONE

This exercise can be found on
Track #8A and 8B

D G D G A

TAB: 0 4 3 0 0 4 4 1

D G D A D

TAB: 0 4 3 0 0 4 0 0

D D D A

TAB: 0 4 0 4 0 4 4 1

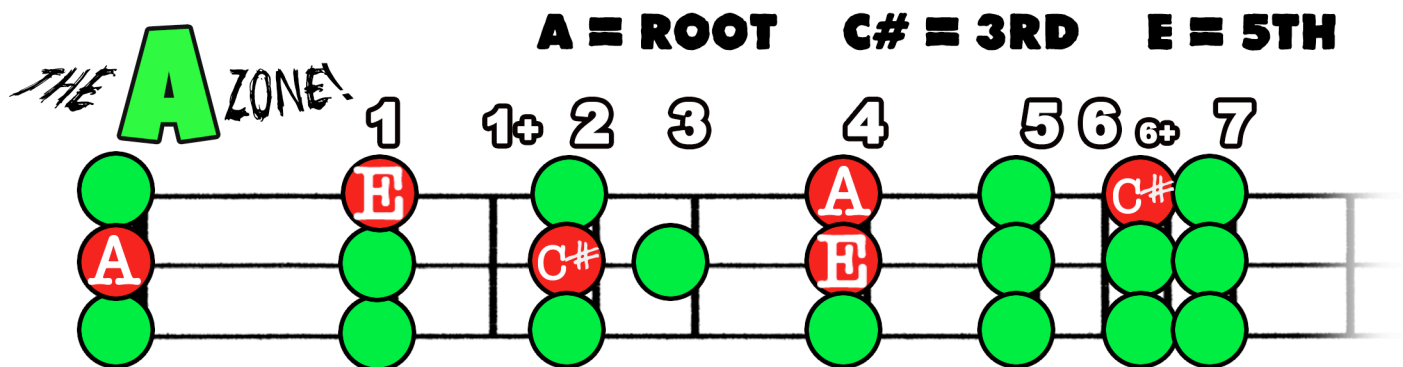
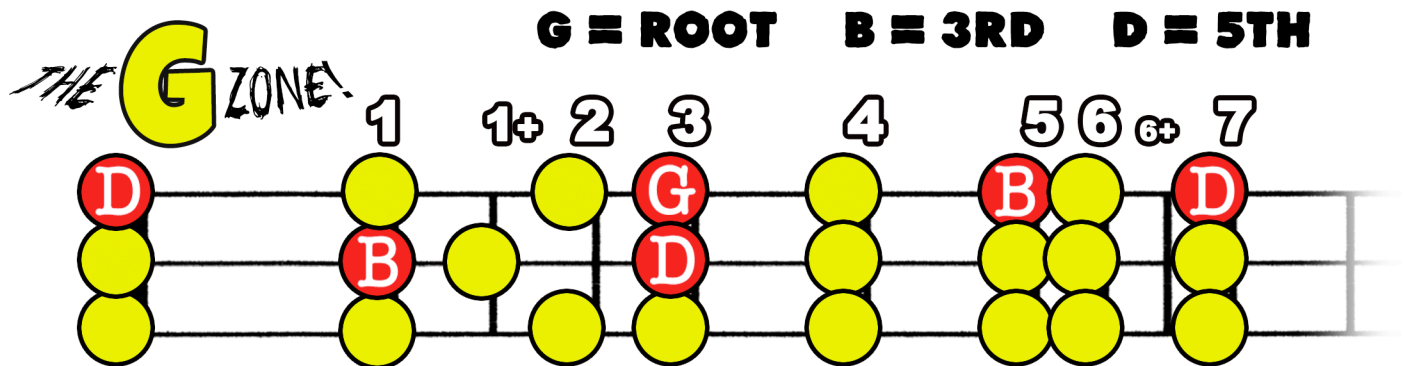
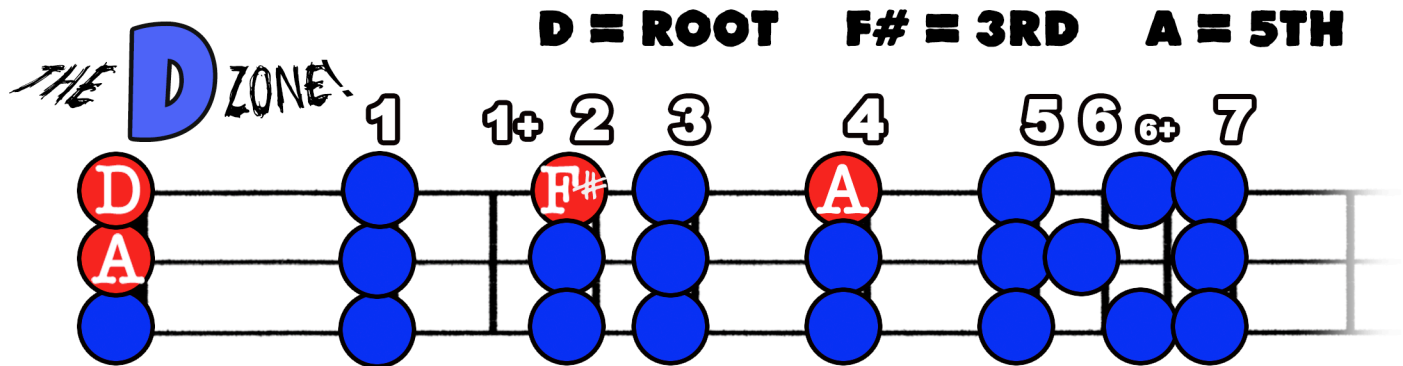
D G D A D

TAB: 0 4 3 0 0 4 0 4

THEORY: TONES AND ZONES

Thus far, we've been focusing on playing root notes, 4ths and 5ths with a little sprinkling of 2nds and 3rds to connect the dots. Every time the chord changes, we're working with a different scale as the source for our notes. "Chord tones" are notes that make up the chord you're supporting. You can't go wrong with these since they're a part of the chord.

When a D chord is playing, you're in **The D Zone**. Play root and fifth (D and A) with the occasional third (F#). When the chord moves to G, play root and fifth (G and D) with the occasional third (B). Memorize these three sets of chord tones and you can back up anyone!



AMPLIFIERS AND PRE-AMPS

In order to provide bass support for an ensemble or jam, the bass mountain dulcimer will need to be amplified. This can sometimes create a little friction at traditional music events where fancy electronic things aren't always welcome, but everyone loves a good bass-player, so as long as you watch your volume, you should be okay. It doesn't take a lot of power to get a bass tone floating out into a room. For one thing, you're playing on a different frequency than just about everyone else, so you won't have any trouble being heard playing "in the basement."

Also, bass is not only heard but felt. You are pushing air around the room with your lower tones and that vibration is being picked up by anyone in the vicinity. With your bass playing comes great power and responsibility! In order to get the best sound out of your bass mountain dulcimer, you'll want to get a dedicated bass amp. Guitar amps will work in a pinch, but most have been designed specifically to replicate the sound frequencies for guitar. Bass amps are designed with larger *woofers* in the speaker, perfect for capturing all of that big bottom end. Big bass sound can distort through amps not created for that purpose.



Something rated between 5 watts and 25 watts should be more than enough power to get your bass message out there. Solid cabinet construction is key to avoiding buzzes, rattles and weak, distorted tone. Bringing tone like that to the jam isn't going to win you any musical friends!

Do a search online for "battery powered bass amps" and you'll come up with a number of solutions including the **Roland Microcube Bass RX**. Whatever you end up getting, be sure to either try it in the music store with your bass dulcimer or listen to recordings of musicians playing through the amp. Make sure that it's got the sound quality that you're looking for.

The **L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic D.I.** truly belongs in every folk musician's gig bag. This pedal-sized pre-amp packs a lot of features into one simple-to-use interface. Features both 1/4" input for guitar cables as well as XLR input for microphone cable.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bing Futch has been playing the mountain dulcimer for over 30 years and is one of the most high-profile performers of this uniquely American instrument today. As a nationally-touring artist, he's presented shows across the United States to the tune of over 40,000 miles a year.

In 2016, Bing won "Best Solo Guitar" at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis, Tennessee as the only mountain dulcimer player in the competition. His innovative style and love for teaching music has made him a favorite performer and instructor at events such as the **Florida Folk Festival, Common Ground On The Hill, Old Songs Festival, The Big Muddy, Kentucky Music Week, Indiana Fiddlers Gathering, ODPC Funfest and The Walnut Valley Festival.**

Bing has been playing **Folkcraft Instruments** since 1994 and became an endorsing artist in 2008. He has authored two other instruction books for Folkcraft; *Method For Beginning Mountain Dulcimer* and *Method For Chromatic Mountain Dulcimer*. Residing in Orlando, Florida with his wife, Jae, and a menagerie of critters, he's all about that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble.