



In Search of the Wild Dulcimer

by Molly Scott

In Search of the Wild Dulcimer, by Robert Force and Albert d'Ossche, Illus. by Carol Palmer (Vintage Books, 1974), 109 pages. \$3.95.

"A love ballad needs a dulcimer like a blossom needs rain," said old-timey dulcimer player, Uncle John Ritchie. The Appalachian Mountain dulcimer is a folk instrument of deceptive simplicity. It was used traditionally as an accompanying instrument for mountain ballads, held on the lap and strummed with a goose quill or an assortment of homemade picks. But the potential of the dulcimer goes far beyond its use in tradition. *In Search of the Wild Dulcimer*, subtitled "Complete instructions on how to play this traditional Appalachian instrument and how to adapt it to contemporary music," explores this potential. It is addressed to a new style of musician; to people who, like the authors and myself and maybe you, wander in and out of different cultures and musical styles, yet still cherish the ways of tradition.

Besides being a lucidly written and detailed "how-to" book for the playing of the dulcimer, *In Search* is a low-key and charming exposition of a life-style, full of references and assumptions that establish its audience as a different breed from the folk scholar or the earnest student of traditional music. Everything from its title — a take-off on Euell Gibbon's eat-the-weeds books — to the delicately skillful line drawings by Carol Palmer, seems to be aimed at the long-haired, bearded and blue-jeaned beings who people its pages. (One position for holding the dulcimer is given as being best suited to playing in the front seat of a Volkswagon. One drawing shows a bookshelf filled with titles ranging from *The House at Pooh Corner* to *Autobiography of a Yogi* and the *I Ching*.) It's a far cry

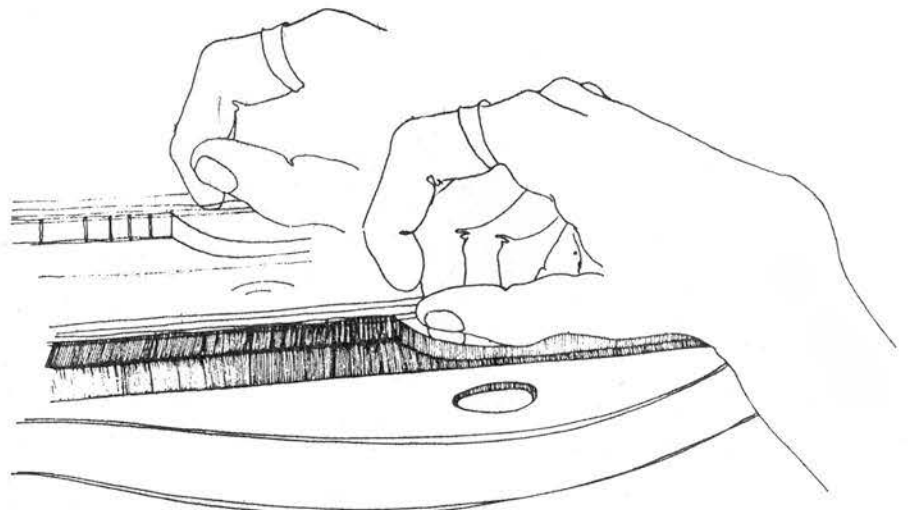
from the calicoed country populace that illustrates the pages of instrument manuals before it, but, in its thoroughness, detail and respect for the history and tradition of the instrument, the book should well serve anyone who wants to learn to play the dulcimer regardless of their life-style. (I mention all this because I do share the lifestyle and really get into all the drawings and philosophy. It appeals to my clanishness!)

Authors Robert Force and Albert d'Ossche (whose name conjures up images of medieval troubadours) style themselves as contemporary minstrels, wandering around the world with dulcimer on back and knapsack bulging with notes. "And so it has been that the handful of people out of a thousand, and the hundred thousand out of a nation step away from the things they know, clinging only to a whispered promise in some half-remembered dream of themselves — something to be found in another valley or over another mountain. These are the minstrels . . . The twentieth century has brought us the perils and illusions of newer, faster communications, but now we have created new isolations, new xanadus, with different valleys, other moun-

tains, and a new people with old eyes . . ."

Looking at this new book with my old eyes, I see much to commend it for. The packaging is slick, funky/elegant and sensible. The type is bold and clear, which is a great service to the learner who has propped the book up while experimenting with the techniques. The approach is fresh, light and often humorous. "And then there is the 'wall dulcimer' . . . People who buy these dulcimers usually hang them on the rec-room walls in suburban bungalows." The authors have been quite careful to start at the beginning of the beginning teaching techniques which are sound, wide-ranging, and often inventive; for instance, the use of tremolo on the strings as on a violin, and the use of guitar tricks such as a broken bottle-neck to achieve a bluesy sound. With a warm and encouraging tone, they encourage self-teaching and experimentation at every point along the way. "Never forget, no matter what anyone says, that folk music is what you do."

In some respects this book comes across like the next best thing to sitting on the porch of a mountain cabin at the knee of an old-timey dulcimer



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player, getting it first hand. Yet for many of its readers in this multi-musicked society, it goes a step further, opening up new ways to play and creating possibilities for endless experimentation and discovery. Because the dulcimer is fretted for modal tunings, it has limitations in contemporary music. Force and d'Ossche have remedies for this situation. If a note is missing on the dulcimer, skip it. Chances are that the listener's ear will supply it anyway! The explanation of modes is especially good and buttressed with historical background. There is a section on how to play along with a guitar — always a problem for dulcimer players because of the modal tuning — and a section devoted to a variety of charts, some of them everyday-useful, some quite esoteric: string tolerance chart, range and tuning chart, enharmonic transposition chart. There are lists of books and records, and a chapter titled "More Odds and Ends" which is just that, including "An Apology" (for putting a large emphasis on self-teaching) and "A Poem."

The gut of the book is in the chapters devoted to picking techniques and chording — a method rarely used in traditional playing. Some of these techniques would bring frowns from traditional players of the instrument, but that is simply the familiar tension between the old struggling for purity and the new struggling for growth. Jean Ritchie, perhaps the best known traditional dulcimer player around, says in *The Dulcimer Book*, her excellent work on a traditional approach to the instrument, "I always maintain that the greatest charm of this musical instrument is its simplicity and its distinctive sound . . . Some players, however, have experimented with more difficult picking techniques such as are used on a banjo or guitar (and which, incidentally, may be done better on those instruments). This destroys, for me, the drone sound which is the heart and soul of a mountain dulcimer, but it is pleasant enough, and if you are interested or can afford only one musical instrument, then I can understand the urge to make it as flexible as possible."

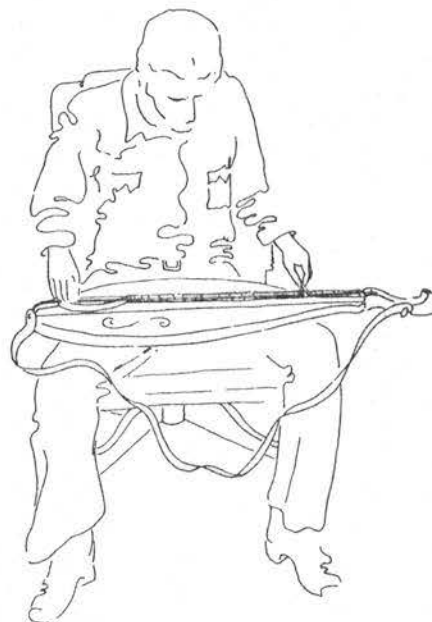
I found the authors' intermix of down-to-earth instruction, history, personal footnotes, and sweeping extemporization quite charming, and I moved through the book with more pleasure and interest than I thought I was going to. I'm surrounded by things that are waiting to be learned about and fixed, like cars, plumbing,

and carpentry, and I have, or think that I need to have, a raft of universally dull books on how-to-do just about everything. I really wasn't sure that I wanted to search for the wild dulcimer, since I already play a rather tame one. But I'm glad I did, and maybe my playing will be a little wilder from now on!

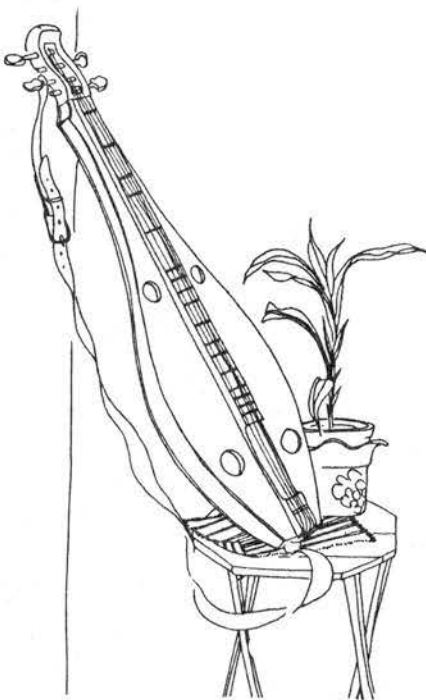
There are two things that I missed in the book. First was songs, but as the authors explain, songs were quite consciously omitted in the faith and hope that the readers will choose their own, not needing to be spoonfed from a book. The second was the mention of the dulcimer's use in kirtan or chanting. I would guess that it simply has not been in the authors' experience to use the instrument in this kind of setting. Perhaps that's their next step.

I would point out that because it is a drone instrument, the dulcimer shares with the tambura, ectarra, bagpipes, and many other instruments, the compelling, centering quality of the repeated "SA" or key-note. As with Indian musical instruments, the dulcimer has no fixed tonality. It can be pitched to the feeling of the moment, and being modal, it lends itself quite beautifully to Eastern (as well as Western) devotional music and chanting. Brothers Force and d'Ossche touch on this possibility in a very tentative, roundabout fashion. "If you want simple music, uncomplicated music, here it is. If you want more complicated music, it

began within these modes. If you want still more complicated music, you'd best go East." Well, yes, do — and use the dulcimer with all its beauty and simplicity in this music too — as an accompaniment for chanting and bajan. East and West are getting so closely intertwined that one soon may find the old timer in the



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mountain cabin playing his tambura! The truth of the matter is this: "There is a certain magic about the dulcimer. It's hard to define, but if it's touched you, you know what it is. Keep this magic alive, and your music will take on form and substance, will grow and develop from within."

It is only fitting that as new people with old eyes, we should use this old instrument for our new as well as old music, and remember, as the authors of this lovely book remind us, "There is always a place to sleep, some food to eat, and sometimes even a little money for people whose lives bring peace." AMEN

Some recommended books:

The Dulcimer Book, by Jean Ritchie. Oak Publications CT4001, 1964.

Four & Twenty, by Lynn McSpadden. The Dulcimer Shoppe, 1970.

Records:

Anything by Jean Ritchie. Howard Mitchell, Paul Clayton or (especially) Mimi and Richard Farina.