

## Where did the 4-Equidistant String set-up come from?

by Steve Eulberg

It is generally thought that mountain dulcimers have traditionally had a 3-string set-up, even when strung with 4-strings. Usually this was with 2 strings (aka “double melody strings”) close together and tuned to the same pitch, closest to the player’s body. This left a middle string and a bass string to act as drones against the melody strings. When there were no frets, but only fence staples under the melody string(s), only the pitch of those strings could be changed with a noter (stick) or fingers while the remaining strings droned on the pitch to which they were tuned.

However, the old-time **Galax style** of playing dulcimer has been one of 4 equidistant strings, all of the same gauge and all tuned to the same pitch (often d-d-d-d or the high strings of a DAd-tuned mountain dulcimer). The noter (stick) covers two of the four strings and the others drone on the pitch to which they are tuned.

In 1997 I heard **Jean Ritchie** (1922-2015), also from Kentucky, talk about playing in a 4-equidistant string style, but the strings were tuned 1-5-8-x, with the final string matching whichever modal tuning she needed for the song she was singing: 1-5-8-5 (DAdA), 1-5-8-4 (D-A-d-G), 1-5-8-8 (D-A-d-d) and 1-5-8-b7 (D-A-d-C).

**Homer Ledford**, the Kentucky instrument builder, is one who experimented with many features of the instruments he built (like designing the first Resonator dulcimer that we know of.) One of his favorite set ups for 4 strings was to have a single bass string, doubled *middle* strings and a single melody string.

At this date, the origins of modern 4-equidistant string playing can be traced to a few players.

**Janita Baker**, of Blue Lion Instruments in Santa Margarita, California, received her first dulcimer as hand-built anniversary gift from her husband, Bob, in 1974. Originally a banjo player, Janita immediately approached the dulcimer from a finger-picking perspective and because she really wanted to play the music of Scott Joplin, so she moved the doubled melody string toward the middle in order to have the notes she need to play *The Entertainer*. (She recorded and published books and CDs with this and other arrangements. You can find her *Four String Fingerpicking: 16 Arrangements for Mountain Dulcimer* here: <https://www.amazon.com/Four-String-Fingerpicking-Arrangements-Mountain/dp/1730884784>)

In 1975, **Leo Kretzner**, also from southern California, was learning 3-string style from Margaret MacArthur (1928-2006) in D-A-d and D-G-d tunings. He was also learning from and corresponding with **Lorraine Lee (Hammon)** of Boston, who was playing 3-string dulcimer with all treble strings a-d-d (all treble) tuning. “Within a year we both had four-string equi-s tuned D-A-d-d.” Leo recalls.

**Aubrey Atwater**, from Rhode Island, talks about learning from Lorraine, but using the 4 equidistant tuning as a way of accompanying singing, since she leaned towards Jean Ritchie’s 3-string style of playing, but she simply left the extra string ringing as a high drone, more like Jean.

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Alvey, R. Gerald. *Dulcimer Maker: The Craft of Homer Ledford*. With a new Foreword and Afterword by Ron Pen. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984, 2003. pp. 86-91

Janita Baker was interviewed by Joellen Lapidus for *FolkWorks*: <https://folkworks.org/janita-baker-mountain-dulcimer-innovator/>

Leo Kretzner wrote an article for *Dulcimer Players News*, August 2022, Vol. 48, No. 3. “Four equidistant strings add flexibility.” <https://issuu.com/dulcimerplayersnewsinc/docs/120823175529-6bbf18ae49c142919e8b8dcb29578ed1> pp.13-14