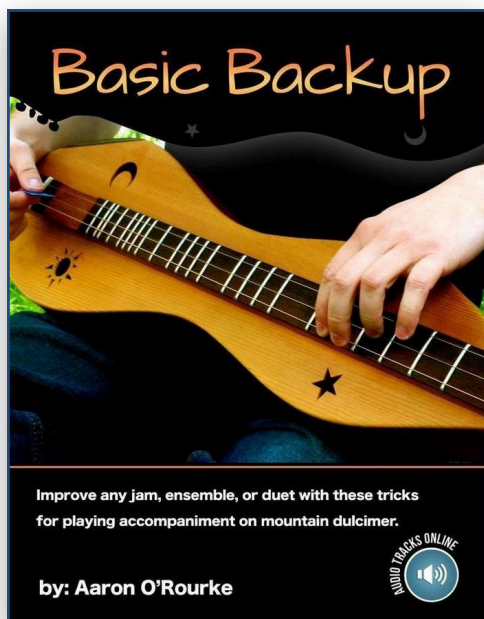


FINGERS OF STEEL® PUBLICATIONS

Basic Backup

by Aaron O'Rourke



Most dulcimer players learn to play melodies first. But when two or more players get together, whether it's a duo on stage or a circle at a jam, the music sounds fuller when one person carries the tune and the others support it. Good players trade those roles back and forth all the time. Knowing how to play a solid backup part is what lets you join in, and it's a skill you'll use every time you play with other people.

47 pages

Free demo audio

INSIDE THE BOOK

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Introduction

Why play back up when you can have the spotlight?

I'm inclined to begin this introduction with a self-centered statement: I love playing accompaniment. Even with all the time invested in learning how to perform solo and play lead, nothing makes me more excited about music than playing back up.

Why is this? After all, the spotlight is almost never on the person playing accompaniment. What's so great about that?

When I first started playing dulcimer, I had a conversation with my good friend Madeline MacNeil about musicians we really look up to and respect. She said something that was quite simple and made a lot of sense, "The musicians who can make others sound good are in high demand and they're the ones I want to play with."

Being a musician who makes other players sound better is a different mindset than trying to blow people away with technical prowess. It involves keeping in mind a bigger musical picture which is about more than just yourself. It's about trying to make the music greater than the sum of its parts and being sensitive to what you can do to make any duo, trio, ensemble, or jam sound the best it can.

How this book is organized

In this book, you'll find a number of approaches and tricks you can rely on when playing accompaniment. We'll start by imitating the rhythmic approaches found on other instruments like the mandolin and bass before looking at a style of accompaniment uniquely suited for the mountain dulcimer. From there, we'll put all of these ideas into practice using common jam tunes.

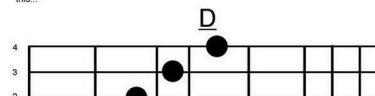
And speaking of jam tunes, we're going to continually reference what is possibly the most common of simple jam tunes, "Bole'm Cabbage Down". Chances are, if you're a mountain dulcimer player, you already know this tune. You might even be absolutely tired of it. However, if you don't already know it like the back of your hand, I recommend taking a few moments to familiarize yourself with the tune before we dive into playing accompaniment.

Chapter 1: Chop Chords

If you listen to bluegrass, you've probably noticed that when the mandolin isn't playing a solo, it's making a percussive sound that happens on the offbeat. This approach to playing accompaniment is often referred to as playing chop chords (aka chopping).

The Technique

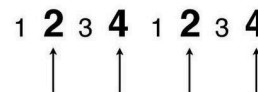
We're going to start by playing a chord that leaves no open strings. Let's take a look at a D chord. While there are many ways to make a D chord on the mountain dulcimer, let's use a 4-3-2 D chord (4 on the bass, 3 on the middle, 2 on the melody). It'll look something like this...



Get this chord under your fingers. Give it a strum and right after your pick crosses all of the strings, relax your fretting hand immediately. When you relax your fretting hand, your fingers should still be on the strings but NOT HOLDING THEM DOWN TO THE FRETTS.

Doing this will abruptly stop the strings from ringing and you will have played a chop chord. One of the most common mistakes people make when trying this technique for the first time is getting a little too enthusiastic about lifting fingers. Remember, you don't have to lift your hand entirely off the strings. Just relax it so that you're not holding the strings down. If you hear any strings ringing, chances are that at least one finger is still holding down one of the strings.

Keep in mind this approach to playing accompaniment is on the offbeat. So if we're counting a tune in four (like a typical liddle tune) we're going to play only on the second and fourth beats.



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