

## How to Play Chords on your Mountain Dulcimer tuned DAd

*(or Surviving in a Multi-Instrument Jam)*

by Missy Strothers

If you are like me, sooner or later you'll get into a festival situation where you'll not know the song, or the song will not be in DAd. Don't panic, you CAN play along, as long as you've done a little preparation. I'm also not going to tell you to retune – first because the jam participants probably don't want to wait for you to do so, and second because I've yet to find a chord I can't at least fake with.

I'm not going to go into the theory of what makes up a chord (prime, thirds, fifths, etc.). If you would like to get in depth on this, I would recommend a copy of Jerry Rockwell's "*Music Theory and Chord Reference for the Mountain Dulcimer*" which you can get at the following:

[http://www.jcirmusic.com/cat.book\\_theory.html](http://www.jcirmusic.com/cat.book_theory.html)

What chords do you play in what tuning? For most major tunings, that will be the I, IV and V chords. Hold your left hand up, palm facing you, thumb on the left. Assign the key (D) to the thumb, and count off along the fingers (pointer – E, middle – F, ring – G, pinky – A). For the key of D, you want the thumb – I, ring – IV and pinky – V, which will be D, G and A – those are the three chords for songs in the key of D (sometimes there will be an Bm (vi), you'll just have to figure this out by default). Try it for G... you'll have G, C and D. Key of C.... you'll have C, F (no sharp this time), and G.

So, if you learn the three chords for the major song keys, you'll at least be able to play backup for most songs. Sometimes you won't have all three notes of the triad of your chord, and you may only have one note (as in a Bb chord). But you'll still "fit", at least as backup.

I'm lazy, so I try to find chords that are near each other for a particular key. If you are playing a D chord, you can get this at 0,0,2 (bass string, middle string, melody string(s)). You can also use 2,3,4 or 4,5,7. Which one I use will depend on what other chords I am playing in the song, along with what sound I want to have. I'll also use a capo at the third fret to get into the key of G, or the fourth fret to be in the key of A. And if I'm playing in C, I'll also capo at 3 since most of my chords will be around the 6<sup>th</sup> fret.

The following is some of the frets placement I use for chords. Of course, since you are tuned DAd, all of these can be reversed. I'm also assuming you have a 6 ½ fret, but not a 1 ½ or 8 ½ (I don't, so that's how I've come up with my chords). I am also not getting all three notes of the triad in all cases.

<b>Chord</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>
Bass	0	2	4	1	1	4	4	0	0
Middle	0	3	5	0	0	4	4	1	1
Melody	2	4	7	1	4	4	6 1/2	3	3
<b>Chord</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>Bm</b>	<b>Bm</b>	<b>Bm</b>	<b>Em</b>	<b>Em</b>	<b>Em</b>
Bass	3	3	5	0	2	5	1	1	3
Middle	3	3	6	1	1	5	1	1	4
Melody	3	5	7	2	2	5	1	3	5
<b>Chord</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F#(m)</b>	<b>F#(m)</b>	<b>C#(m)</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Gm</b>	<b>Am</b>
Bass	3	6	5	2	6 1/2	6 1/2	6	3	4
Middle	4	6	4	2	5	6 1/2	7	3	4
Melody	6	6	5	2	6 1/2	6 1/2	6	3	6

Chord	Bb	Ab	Eb	Db	Dm	Cm
Bass	0	6	3	6 /12	4	6
Middle	3	6 1/2	6	6 1/2	3	6
Melody	0	6	3	6 1/2	4	6

If you are looking at printed music, you'll often see chords marked as D7, D9, Dsus, or D/A. The first two refer to adding a fourth note to the triad. While you can get a "different" sound that way, we only have three strings, so I just play the root chord. I honestly do not know what the sustain is – again I just play the root chord. The D/A for the guitar player means they substitute the last note of their chord with the note "A". Again, unless I'm looking for a fancier sound, I just play the root chord.

You may also see printed music which states: "guitar capo 3" and two sets of chords, one on top of the other (sometimes the top is in *italics* and the bottom is in bold). For the dulcimer, play the chord on the bottom, or in bold. This is a way for the guitar player to use more familiar fingerings for the less often used chords.

The following is what I most frequently use for fingerings in some common keys:

Key of D					Capo on 3 <sup>rd</sup> fret		
Chord	D	A	G		D	A	G
Bass	0	1	0		4	4	3
Middle	0	0	1	or	3	4	3
Melody	2	1	3		4	4	5

Key of A (capo on 4 <sup>th</sup> fret)			
Chord	A	E	D
Bass	4	5	4
Middle	4	4	5
Melody	6	5	7

Key of G (capo on 3 <sup>rd</sup> fret)									
Chord	G		G	C		C	D		D
Bass	3		3	3		6	4		4
Middle	3	or	3	4	or	6	5	or	3
Melody	5		3	6		6	7		4

Key of F					
Chord	F	Bb	C		C
Bass	6	0	6		3
Middle	7	3	6	or	4
Melody	6	0	6		6

(the Bb chord doesn't sound good, because you are only getting one note of the triad. I often wind up just picking the middle string, or playing "air dulcimer" for this chord!)

Key of C (capo on 3 <sup>rd</sup> fret)									
Chord	C		C	F	G		G		G
Bass	3		6	6	3		3		5
Middle	4	or	6	7	3	or	3	or	6
Melody	6		6	6	5		3		7

If I don't have the chord you are looking for on here, or if you'd like to see some alternate fret patterns for chords, please take a look at the chord wizard Tom has put up on our web site:

<http://www.strothers.com/chords.htm>

The purpose of the Chord Wizard is three-fold: 1) to find possible fingerings for a particular chord, to see all the fingerings for the I, IV, V chord sequence and to find possible chords using one, two or three notes. This is pretty self explanatory, but if you have any questions don't hesitate to email Tom or me.

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Another comment on playing back up – work on your strum patterns. Listen to different types of music and pay attention to what the guitar players are doing. Bluegrass has a distinctive “thump, strum” kind of rhythm. Waltz patterns are different again. Work on strums in 3/4 and 4/4 timing – work on having one strum per count, or multiple strums per count. Also work on flat picking or finger picking. If the guitar player is not strumming, you probably don't want to either. Again, you can pick once on each count, or you may want to add arpeggios.

If you are playing backup to a vocalist or lead instrument you may want to select an inverse chord or chord not using the particular melody note that the lead is using. For example, if they are using an A (4<sup>th</sup> fret) in a D chord, you may want to play the 4-3-2 or 2-0-0. In this manner you enhance the lead part without taking the lead yourself.

I have been playing with our “contemporary music group” at church for the past 7 years. This group consists of 2 twelve string guitars, 1 six string guitar, 1 electric bass guitar, 1 electric piano, 1 drummer, and four other singers (the other instrumentalists sing, I don't). There are songs we do in the keys of D, G, A, or Em that I can play melody for. There are many that are in keys that I can only do backup on. There are some that I'm only getting one note of the chord triad. But I've yet to see a reason for tuning out of DAd, or taking multiple dulcimers with me tuned to different keys.

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