

Get Noterized!

An Introduction to Noter & Drone Dulcimer

by

Ken Hulme

Kwajalein Atoll, RMI

2006

Definitions

Chord — three or more notes sounded simultaneously which create an harmonious sound. Anytime you fret the melody string and strum across all three strings, you are creating a chord.

Drone Chord — a chord formed by fretting the melody string and leaving the drone strings open.

Barre Chord — a chord created by simultaneously fretting all of the strings at the same fret, whether by hand or noter.

Fingerdancing — Playing technique using two or more fingers to play the melody on the melody string(s) only, allowing the other two strings to drone. Sometimes called **Melody-Drone** style.

Noter & Drone — Playing style using a short length of wood, metal, plastic or glass to fret notes on the melody string(s) while the other two strings drone in accompaniment.

Chord-Melody — Playing style using three fingers of the left hand to form chords for each note of the melody. Developed by players who found the traditional diatonic fretboard and dronal style "limiting" but who were unable or unwilling to play guitar/mandolin/banjo, and instead applied chordal technique to the dulcimer.

Introduction

"The more I play and learn about the mountain dulcimer, the more I appreciate noter style playing. I started almost 30 years ago with noter style playing, and picking out all those melodies on one string for months made me a good by-ear player. That's a skill many who immediately go to chord-melody style miss out on." -- Lois Hornbostel

Noter & Drone is a very old and traditional technique of playing Appalachian dulcimer as well as its European predecessors (hummel, langleik, epinette des Vosges, scheitholt, etc.) that dates at least as far back at the late 1500s.

Noter & Drone is NOT just for playing "simple tunes with no chords". Listen to a competent hummel or dulcimer player perform O'Carolan or any of the European classical composers' material using Noter & Drone style!

Nor is Noter & Drone style only for DAA tuning. It is a very effective and beautiful way to play all of the Modal Tunings (Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian, Phrygian, Locrian, or Lydian) in any key.

N&D is a much more challenging technique than just playing chords, and so it is not suited to everyone. It demands precise control of the noter – which requires practice to perfect. You also need to learn a bit about Modes and Modal Tunings, and be comfortable tuning and re-tuning your instrument.

You simply cannot get the "haunting whine" of traditional dulcimer using fingers, no matter how hard your calluses get. Nor can you get really "zingy" slides with just fingers. And for playing fiddle and dance tunes nothing beats a noter slip-sliding from one end of the fretboard to the other. Also N&D isn't as painful for beginners or for long playing sessions as using your fingers.

"Playing with a noter is often touted as an "easy" way to play and thus, strictly for beginners. Au contraire! Whether you do it with fingers or a noter, playing the melody on a single string I think is quite a challenge. I think anyone checking out a langeleik tutor would be amazed at how complex and challenging one string playing can get. "The next time someone gives you guff for being a noter player, look at them with a sad pitying look, gently shaking your head and know that they are people of limited vision. There is great beauty in simple things."

"In the end, it's the music that's important, not a technique, style, or personality. When all of the last three fade, the music will still be here." — Ken Bloom

The Naked Noter

There are round noters and flat noters, even ergonomic noters for folks with hand problems like extreme arthritis, missing fingers, or digital paralysis. Noters run from 2" to 6" long and varying thicknesses and diameters. Since the noter is sort of a substitute finger, many N&D stylists prefer a noter about the length and diameter of their index finger.

Noters can be made from hard woods, hard plastics, metal, glass or other materials. Different materials will give you different sounds.

Traditionally noters were made from two materials – “river cane” and feathers. River Cane (*Arundinaria gigantea*), the native American bamboo, can still be found along the banks of the Kentucky and Illinois rivers and other streams in the South and Midwest and even into Texas and Oklahoma. Exotic bamboos make excellent noters, and they have been planted almost everywhere from Connecticut to Florida and Washington to Baja. Some exotic bamboos are much tougher than River Cane. Bamboo contains a lot of silica (like glass), and may be the ideal noter material as it is also light and easy to work. Most homeowners with a patch of bamboo in their yard will be more than glad to let you cut a culm (stem) or two to make noters - use only the mature older culms, not young soft ones or the old dead brown ones.

A large turkey or goose feather gives you both a noter and a plectrum or pick. Choose a primary feather (the long one at the tip of the wing) or a center tail feather. The large, hollow butt end of the feather becomes the noter. Cut it off just where it starts to change from hollow to solid white.

The thin, solid end of the feather, stripped of its barbels (feathery bits), is the plectrum.

Rather than being held like a pen and “scraped” across the strings, the thinnest end is swept across the strings almost parallel to them.

Wooden noters should be made from the hardest wood you can find. The birch dowels sold in various diameters at lumberyards and hobby shops are barely hard enough. Oak, cherry, walnut, hickory, ash are barely hard enough to last for more than a couple months of serious playing. Teak, ebony, olive, mesquite, madrone, *Lignumvitae*, hophornbeam, and blue beech are much more suitable (but less common) woods. A useful trick for “toughing up” a noter is to soak it overnight in a light penetrating oil such a 3-in-1 (don't use vegetable oil).

Don't run out and buy exotic hardwoods to make one or two noters unless you just have to!

Ask your woodworking friends, local cabinet shops, etc. if you can scrounge their scrap bins for suitable pieces of noter wood. A good source for small pieces of exotic woods for noters is to explore the Ebay auctions for “pen blanks” - pieces of wood used to turn fancy wooden ink pens. Pen blanks are about 3/4" square and 4-5" long. Use a pocket knife, rasp or belt sander to round off the corners, or slice lengthwise into 3 pieces for a flat noter, before sanding smooth.

Glass tubes or solid rods give notes an eerie sound, as do Apache Tears and other forms of volcanic glass. Certain kinds of polished stones make beautiful noters, such as malachite and onyx. Metal rods, tubes and bars are almost indestructible noters, although brass and copper will be notched by steel strings. Large spikes or bolts are good sources for solid metal noters. Many Big Box Stores have a place where the stock a variety of metal rod, bar and tube stock.

Flat noters are often made from Popsicle sticks or tongue depressors, although they are readily custom made to your specifications with a saw and sandpaper.

Up to a point, a heavier noter is better than a light one. I have one that is actually the mortar from a Mexican molcajete made of polished malachite, which is fabulous for playing long sessions. At nearly an inch at its largest diameter and 4" long, it's so heavy I can almost just let the weight of it depress the string(s)!

Hmmmm, I wonder about a bamboo noter cast full of melted lead... Got a couple of wheel weights I can borrow?

Adaptive ergonomic noters are individually shaped to the hand or finger configuration of the user. Ergonomic noters may incorporate holes for anchoring fingers, bulges to fill palms, or extensions to compensate for lost digits. Simplified versions of the ergonomic noters are those round styles which incorporate a notch at the string end intended to prevent the noter from slipping into the middle drone(s). Another ergonomic noter, if you will, is a plastic or metal thimble used on the index finger.

Get A Grip On It!

There are two basic ways to hold the noter – underhand and overhand. Neither one is "better than the other", but they are different. The Underhand way is sometimes called the Jean Ritchie method because it was popularized in Jean's landmark *The Dulcimer Book* © 1963. This "thumb on top" style is very useful if you have a very tall (3/4" or more) fretboard, with depth enough for your fingers to clear the top of the instrument. The knuckle of the index finger acts as a guide to keep the noter from going too deeply into strings. However, many modern fretboards are only 1/2" – 5/8" tall, and most people have fingers thicker than that! Some players also feel that this technique does not give a particularly sensitive feel or control as the noter is pressed and moved.

The second way to use the noter is the Overhand or Galax hold:

"Hold the noter with the index finger on top, with the side of the end of the middle finger as a brace along the side of the fretboard for stability. Just enough of the noter protrudes to cover the strings..." – Mary M. Mason, *Noter & Quill*, Mountain Dulcimer Southwest Virginia Style, © 1995

The overhand style works on both shallow and tall fretboards, and with the dulcimer in your lap or on a stand. This style is more ergonomic because the index finger pushes down using gravity to help hold the noter, rather than a sideways or palm up grip where the forces tend to pull the noter out of one's grasp. The overhand method also provides good control of noter placement - almost as if noter is a hard finger tip. As Mason emphasizes, the middle finger also acts as a guide to keep the noter from extending into the middle strings.

I suspect that some of the reason for the tall fretboard height in early dulcimers came because a significant part of the player population was using noter in the underhand grip, and playing the instrument in their lap. European noter players, with the frets imbedded directly into the instrument top, played standing up with their instruments on a tabletop, using the overhand grip, which needs very little clearance.

It's Not What You Do, But How You Do It

The noter should be at right angles to the strings, and close to the fret, to avoid strange overtones if the string, between the fret and the noter, has room to vibrate. This means the wrist must be relaxed and flexible.

To prevent "clicking and clacking and bumping sounds" the plane (surface) of the noter must be parallel to the plane of the fretboard =====. If the nose end \ or the tail end / of the noter comes down first, the result is a "bump" every time you cross a fret. If you have doubled melody strings this is even more important. If the noter is not parallel as it presses down, either the inner or outer string may not be fully depressed, which can create some real discord!

Another reason you may be getting "speed bumps" is because you're pressing down too hard. White knuckles are NOT a requirement for good N&D playing!! Relax....release....let all the tension flow away.....

As Lois Hornbostel says *"Noter style playing should be a restful, melodic experience."*

Reason #3 for experiencing the bumpy side of life may be that you're not easing up your pressure slightly as you slide from fret to fret. Back off the pressure just a bit as you start sliding to the next fret.

Using a noter is not just "one press and hold it", and it's not just "shove the thing down as hard as you can". It's as subtle as fingerdancing or chord-melody style playing, and takes just as much or more practice to become expert.

The "speed bump" syndrome decreases as you get more comfortable with your noter and your dulcimer. You'll eventually relax your death-grip and start moving more fluidly. At the same time you'll stop feeling a clunk every time the noter crosses a fret.

Start slow and work your speed up. Rome was not built in a day; neither are good Noter & Drone players (or dulcimer players of any style). We blithely talk about how easy it is to learn to play the dulcimer. And, comparatively speaking that's true. But we must never forget that it does take playing experience. Forget "practice" – just "play". The best way to tell how your technique is coming along is to tape record yourself periodically and then listen to and compare the tapes.

Sliding Down the Fretboard of Life

The most asked question about Noter & Drone style is "Do you have to pick the stick up and put it back down for each note, or can you just slide the stick along?" The answer, of course, is a resounding "Yes." Picking the noter up between notes versus sliding between notes depends on the effect you want to create or the song employs. Compare, for example, the "bounce" of the first few notes of *I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing* to the 5 note slide of the opening phrase of *Jock O Hazeldean*.

If you're trying to keep up with a fiddler playing *Mairi's Wedding* or jigs at full speed, keeping the noter to the strings is the fastest way to play. Remember to keep your wrist sideways flexible as you slide up and down the fretboard so that the noter stays relatively at right angles to the strings as you press them down.

If you want the song to sound more stately, especially if you're fingerpicking or flatpicking with the right hand, then by all means pick the noter up between notes. Work at just barely lifting the noter, so as not to waste time and energy moving too broadly.

You can get some interesting Hammer effects by plucking an open string and then "chopping" the noter down to cut off the open note with the fretted note (Hammer On); or plucking the fretted note and then quickly lifting the noter to change from the fretted tone to the unfretted tone (Hammer Off). Hammer Ons and Hammer Offs take place quickly, in the time of a single note, as a way to decorate special notes in a phrase.

Another interesting effect is the Ghost Note, which is especially effective if your dulcimer has good sustain. Let's say the Tab calls for you to play frets 3, 5 and 7, with a strum at each fret. You could Ghost Note this phrase by strumming the 3, sliding to the 5 in tempo, then sliding to the 7 and strumming again. If you do the sliding to the 5 quickly, you get that note with nearly the volume of a strummed note. You can Ghost note both up and down the scale, and sometimes Ghost more than a single note, depending on the sustain of your instrument.

Similar to Ghost Noting are the techniques of Sliding On or Sliding Off a note. Say, for example, the tab calls for you to play that same 3 5 and 7, with a strum at each note. What you might play instead is 3 5 67, with the strum coming as the noter is at the 6th fret before sliding into the 7th. Going down scale you might play 7 5 43, with the strum coming as the noter is at 4 sliding down to 3. Some people think this technique developed because people had trouble remembering where a particular note was! He/she kept playing the wrong note and then sliding into the right one just in time. Whatever the origin, Slide On and Slide Off can be useful techniques for your noter repertoire.

After you've been playing Noter & Drone style for awhile, you'll begin to notice that not all Drone Chords are melodious. As you play the scale, especially in Ionian Mode above the 8th fret, the Drone Chords sound less and less pleasing to the ear. One solution is to change to another tuning such as the DGD, so-called Reverse Ionian. However, that changes the "flavor" of all the Drone Chords because a plain steel string sounds completely different than a wound string tuned to the same G note.

An easier solution is to change the angle of attack; not of the noter, but of the pick on the strings. As you go up the scale, strum less and less of mid and bass drones; so that by the time you pass the first octave, you're playing just the melody string(s). As you come down the

scale, play more and more mid- and bass drone until by the 7th fret you're playing all strings more or less equally.

No matter how much you love playing Noter & Drone style on the melody strings alone, there will always come *that* song. You know - the one that requires a note or three from either the mid- or bass drone string. The only solution is to reach over and play those notes with a fingertip. This can be cumbersome if the tune is particularly fast! Something to experiment with is a noter with a beveled nose that can be tipped over so that the bevel contacts the non-melody string.

Come on over to The Dark Side. Pick up a stick and give Noter & Drone style a try for a few months. Betcha can't play just one tune that way!