



An Interview with Alan Freeman, Mountain Dulcimer Player

by [Lois Hornbostel](#)

Alan Freeman (right) and Robert Shafer, Vandalia Gathering, Charleston, WV
photo credit David Fattaleh

I think it was about 1979. I had just made the trek up the steep trail leading to the amphitheater at the Cosby, TN Dulcimer Convention. My weariness was quickly overcome by some spectacular, energetic music coming from the stage. I knew it was somebody playing a mountain dulcimer, but I couldn't figure out how he was getting so many chromatic notes from this diatonic instrument - and playing them at such speed!

It was Alan Freeman. His high powered, sly, nuanced playing has made him a favorite both among audiences and among some of the country's finest guitarists and fiddlers. Alan has won 1st place in the dulcimer competition at the Galax, VA Fiddle Convention 5 times, and he has been the perennial West Virginia dulcimer champion since 1985. Alan has toured with Jimmy Driftwood and has been the opening act for Roy Clark, Kitty Wells, Waylon Jennings, Roger Miller, The Seldom Scene, Tim O'Brien, and Charlie Pride.

Here are a couple of sound files of Alan Freeman's playing:

"Blackberry Blossom"

From "The Mountain Dulcimer," Roane Records, fiddletunes.com
(Drew, please put here the Real Time file cd0105.rm.)

"Black & White Rag"

From "The Mountain Dulcimer," Roane Records, fiddletunes.com
(Drew, please put here the Real Time file cd0112.rm.)

Last summer I visited with Alan Freeman at the Clifftop (WV) Appalachian Stringband Festival. We played some tunes, talked about music, his wayward ways, old times, and I was reminded of his unique talent and contributions to mountain dulcimer music. I asked him if we could do an interview for [DulcimerSessions.com](#). Here goes!

Alan: Ask me anything, my little woodnymph.

DS: Woodnymph? Tell us about your early years before you came to the mountain dulcimer ...Were there musicians in your family? I heard you were a folk singer and an actor in New York City...

Alan: I grew up in Brooklyn, NY, and started playing trumpet when I was in 5th grade. I chose trumpet because it had only 3 buttons to push and I thought I could handle that ... see the beginning of a pattern? The only musician in my family was my paternal uncle who was a society fiddle player and a rake and a ramblin' boy ... more pattern?

DS: Yup.

Alan: I could read well enough to always sit 1st chair but mostly because I was clever enough to always sit next to someone who could play better than I so I could copy him ... the pattern continues. Much as I wanted to, I couldn't improvise on the trumpet to save my cookies. Ever.
I got the first guitar in 1960, my freshman year in college, after I heard a transfer student from Chapel Hill fingerpicking ... blew my mind ... still does.
By 1961 I was singing off pitch and playing out of tune all over the West Village ... and you say no joking about Yankees. The joke is, of course, that I worked quite a bit and made some decent basket money.
Back then dulcimer was only heard in the context of deprecating humor and I never saw a playable one 'til I got to West Virginia in 1974 and got my first (only?) one from Jim Good, who lived in Weston, WV, at the time.
And I've always been an actor first ... its really what I do best ... last time was 6 weeks in Wytheville, VA, in 2004, doing "Smoke on the Mountain"...

DS: I'm no James Lipton, and I don't know nothin' about birthin' actor interviews. So can I ask you what inspires your music?

Alan: For me, performance music is like any other performance art: I wanna *feel* something: amusement, sadness, joy, horror, just needing to tap a foot and snap a finger. When a performer feels that stuff and can communicate it, it sets up an almost tangible link with an audience that can be maintained for the length of the performance ...



DS: What was it about the dulcimer that made you choose it to express your music?

Alan: There were several reasons that made the dulcimer attractive to me ... the first 10 or 15 of them were Richard Farina ... and the last was that it only had 3 strings ... or so I thought ... oh, and that I could *finally* get to play some leads with a little authority.

DS: And you still play that first Jim Good dulcimer after all these years?

Alan: And it still has the best action of any I have ever held in my hands. As far as actual sound goes, and mine isn't all that loud, I think that's the reason God invented electronic amplification in the first place.

DS: Your dulcimer has a short fret pattern, right?

Alan: 24-1/2" between the bridge and nut ... and that helps me make the long stretches for chordal effects ... plus, I was attracted to the happy G tunes right away more than the spooky D tunes - and that length is about perfect for Ionian G tuning.

DS: Alan, your dulcimer has a traditional diatonic fret pattern, with no 6-1/2 or other "extra" frets. Yet as fiddlers play accidental notes and romp from one key to the next you're right there with them. You're not retuning between tunes. Please explain how the tuning you use and your right-hand picking style enable you to do these things.

Alan: The tuning isn't mine. It's Jim Good's. It's how that first dulcimer was set up when it came to me. I think it's a little piece of inventive genius really. Listen: regular dulcimer Ionian tuning could be DD-D-G (*treble course-middle string- bass string*), right? Jim stuck another unwound string next to the wound G bass string and tuned it to B, so the tuning is:

DD-D-GB (*treble course-middle string-bass string & higher B course*)

and you can cover that GB course with one finger. That, my darling woodnymph, sets up a full triad G chord ... just like ... saints preserve us ... a banjo! So in scale degrees the tuning notes are 55-5-1 3, and the addition of the 3 makes you as chromatic as you wanna be ...

DS: Woodnymph?

Alan: And if you're gonna pick banjo, you're gonna fingerpick. I get good leads in the keys of A, C, D, E, G, Am, Em, and Gm in that tuning, and can play rhythm in F, B-flat, Bm. To be really well equipped, one needs 3 instruments actually: one each in F, G, and A. I flat hate the idea of dulcimer capos. The way I see it, the instrument is limited in number of strings and frets to start with. Why limit myself even further?

DS: Any suggestions to other dulcimer players for developing playing technique?

Alan: If you're gonna practice, do it in the morning before you do anything else. 20 minutes half asleep in the morning before your brain has to deal with anything else is worth 5 times that much after work. In the evening you can play for fun if you want, but the morning thing is surefire for getting it all to move along. And (this is important) invest in recordings of the kind of music you want to "grow up to play." I mean the music you really want to play. Try recordings of other instruments besides the dulcimer. Play it all the time. In the car. While cooking or cleaning or reading. Get the music into your head. You can't learn a tune and an instrument at the same time. It doesn't work. Ever.

DS: You and David Schnauffer did some nice musical collaborations in the 1980s. Please cite some of the work you did and how you blended your two dulcimers.

Alan: David played jew's-harp on the "Out of the Cold" recording, and then we made "Hogfiddlers' Fancy" together in 1983. There is such a clean-sounding lyricism to everything he does that I really felt that what I should be adding was rhythm and fills more than anything else. To be sure, I got my share and more of leads, but I really enjoyed backing him a lot. There are 6 tunes from each of those albums on my 2005 CD "Frank and Me." I think they stand up pretty well.

DS: Where are your favorite places and resources for learning music?

Alan: I guess the correct answer to that is "yes." Everywhere. All the time. Anywhere. I guess I became me in the parking lots of western Virginia fiddlers' conventions where I had the opportunity to hear all of it (you name it; they played it). And of course about a million recordings of every kind of music I could find that I like ... there's a lot of that ...

DS: I've often heard you express admiration and respect for older traditional Appalachian musicians you know. Tell us what qualities you like about them and their music.

Alan: They all, to a man (and woman to be sure), were conscious of the musicianship involved in what they were doing. Many of them were only recorded late in life when their hands had begun failing them, so those not familiar with the context they came from thought that scritch-scratch out-of-tune playing was the real deal ... nothing could be further from the truth.

DS: Can you name some of your musical "heroes" over the years?

Alan: So many ... no matter what I say here I'm gonna leave out a lot of important names ... WV fiddlers Glen Smith, Woody Simmons, French Mitchell, John Morris, Dave Bing, Jenny Allinder, and of course, Frank Beall ... virtually all the big bands of the 30s and '40s ... Django, Doc Watson (who first really made me aware that you didn't actually have to be a fiddler to be a 'fiddler') ... Jerry Douglas, Norman Blake (a big one for me), Robin Kessinger, Robert Shafer, Ken Bloom ... enough ... there are a lot more.



**Alan Freeman performing with (L-R) Darrell Moore, Frank Beall and Dave Bing
at 2003 West Virginia State Folk Festival, Glenville, WV
photo credit Betty Vornbrock**

DS: What pieces of music do you especially enjoy playing?

Alan: I've always been partial to the swing stuff ... and dixieland ... and melodic fiddle tunes. Jenny Allinder made me aware of how much fun playing really well at dead-stop slow speed could be.

DS: What have been some of the most enjoyable performances (and jams) you have played?

Alan: I am a Ham ... any time an audience feels the need to stand at the end of what I do, I go weak in the knees ...

DS: Yes, my little woodnymph.

Alan: I've been lucky enough to be around some incredible musicians playing for the hell of it over the years and there's no way I can say any one of them was any more or better than any of the others.

DS: How many recordings have you made?

Alan: Nine, maybe ten. Just priming the pump for future archaeologists.

DS: Apart from music, what other interests do you have?

Alan: I write fiction and for a while wrote opinion for the Mountain Messenger in Lewisburg, WV. Fiddler Magazine published a story of mine, and the Appalachian Journal out of Lewisburg has published some others. I quit the opinion thang about 6 months ago when I found myself losing my sense of humor and starting to sound strident. I hate when that happens. I'll be 63 in June ... Whooda thunk?

We're looking forward to hearing more of Alan Freeman's outstanding mountain dulcimer playing in his 63rd and many years to come. If you attend a fiddle convention in or around West Virginia and hear some great dulcimer playin' coming from a jam session, that might very well be Alan. Folks coming to Western Carolina University Mountain Dulcimer Week, Cullowhee, NC, June 18-23, 2006, will have the opportunity to see Alan in concert with Ken Bloom, in a workshop on ragtime music, and energizing many jam sessions.

Alan Freeman can be reached at alanfreeman@earthlink.net or twannng@yahoo.com. His recordings include:

1978, "Black Mountain Dulcimer" (with Frank Beall)
1980, "Out of the Cold"
1981, "Together at Last" (with Sam Rizzetta)
1983, "Hogfiddlers' Fancy" (with David Schnauffer and Frank Beall)
1986, "Oldtime, Newtime, Ragtime, My Time"
1991, "Back in the Saddle" (with Robert Shafer)
1994, "The Mountain Dulcimer" (with Robin Kessinger)
2005, "Frank and Me" (collection)