

# Dulcimer Sessions

## Featured Luthiers

**Blue Lion Dulcimers & Guitars**  
**Robert and Janita Baker**



Nestled in a grove of ancient California live oaks, Blue Lion Dulcimers and Guitars has, since 1977, been dedicated to building the highest quality mountain dulcimers and acoustic steel string guitars. Robert and Janita Baker moved to the mountains east of San Luis Obispo and opened up their shop in a converted garage, intending to build steel string guitars and a few dulcimers. It was when the dulcimers began to get noticed and the response from the dulcimer community was so positive, that the Bakers reconsidered their goals and shifted the focus of their shop production from guitars to the dulcimers. In the years since, Blue Lion production has moved out of the old garage and into a 2100 sq. ft. shop building where the Bakers work, usually seven days a week, building state of the art dulcimers and guitars. Players of Blue Lions include such acoustic artists as Jean Ritchie, Leo Kottke, Steve Martin, Neal Hellman, Robert Force, Mark Nelson, Sally Rogers, Mike Casey, Kevin Roth, Tracy Chapman, and Bruce Hornsby.



Both Robert and Janita entered into the luthiery profession with a passion for high quality musical instruments: Robert is an acclaimed guitarist and multi-instrumentalist, and Janita plays not only the mountain dulcimer but five string banjo, autoharp and guitar. When they began Blue Lion it was from the perspective of musicians; they wanted instruments to not only meet aesthetic standards but the highest musical standards as well.

Robert gave Janita an inexpensive mountain dulcimer for an anniversary gift in 1974, and Janita took to the instrument immediately. She had never heard or seen a mountain dulcimer and, as such, began playing the instrument from a banjo picker's point of view. Unaware that, traditionally, the dulcimer was only fretted on the first string, and more often than not strummed, she immediately began chording and fingerpicking, using it as both a lead and back up instrument in their bluegrass and old time music band.



As soon as she began playing dulcimer in public, the limitations of her first instrument became readily apparent, so the Bakers began searching for a high quality dulcimer which would match the presence and capability of their other performing instruments—an old Gibson Mastertone banjo and a Martin D-35. When none was found, Janita and Robert bought six dulcimer kits and assembled them, making subtle (and not-so-subtle) changes in each one in order to better understand both construction and acoustic dynamics of the design. In a learn-by-doing fashion, the Bakers analyzed what worked and what did not, and then designed their first built-from-scratch dulcimer.

Using old walnut from Janita's grampa's orchard and with a few power tools, lots of reading and research into the physics of acoustics, and skills and knowledge gleaned while doing instrument repair for a local music shop, the Baker's built their first "from-scratch" instrument in 1976. From that design, and with another year or so of testing, alteration and re-design, the first Blue Lion dulcimer was crafted. Currently, Blue Lion produces anywhere from 150 to 200 dulcimers and four to six guitars a year. The design of the Blue Lion dulcimer is based on the principles of acoustic guitar engineering; it never made sense to the Bakers to build a dulcimer any differently than one would build a high quality, handcrafted guitar. Currently, Blue Lion has standard dulcimer models ranging in price from \$320.00 to \$775.00; the least expensive is built with the same attention to detail and ease of playing as the most expensive.



**Style I Blue Lion**



**Style II Blue Lion**

In the beginning it was difficult for the dulcimer community to take a California builder of Appalachian dulcimers seriously. The Blue Lions were one of the first dulcimers to utilize non-native woods in the construction; the top of the line, and by far the most popular model is built with East Indian rosewood back and sides, and a Western red cedar top. This combination of woods produces a very balanced, clear sounding instrument, ideally suited to both contemporary styles of playing as well as traditional techniques.

Blue Lion has introduced several unique instruments over the years. Along with their standard hourglass and teardrop instruments, Robert designed a bass dulcimer which began production in 1986. Sally Rogers was the first dulcimer player to record using the bass, and since then the instrument is steadily gaining in popularity. Many players opt for a bass as their second instrument for the tuning range. An octave lower than a standard dulcimer, the bass plays in the same keys and with the same fingerings as a regular mountain dulcimer, so a player doesn't have to re-learn the instrument in order to become proficient on it. Other innovative models include a Blue Lion version of the baritone dulcimer, a six-string bass, and five-string "standard" dulcimer designed in conjunction with Mike Casey.

In the early 1980's, the Bakers got to know Robert Force and Albert d'Ossché, noted players from the West Coast and the Pacific Rim Dulcimer Project. The four of them came up with a synthesis



**Blue Lion Bass Dulcimer**

of Robert's and Albert's six string teardrop designs to become the Force-d'Ossché six string. This instrument is ideally suited to a chordal style of playing, and works well in situations where projection and presence is important.



**Force-d'Ossché 6-string Blue Lion**



**Jean Ritchie model Blue Lion**

In the mid-'80's, Jean Ritchie contacted the Bakers and met with them to discuss building a signature Jean Ritchie model. This instrument combines the best of the Jean Ritchie-styled instruments, well-suited for modal tunings and vocal accompaniment. Each one has a label signed by Jean Ritchie, and the walnut version features a "hearts-a-flower" inlay motif designed by Jean. When Jean was visiting with the Baker's, she commented that their location reminded her of the Blue Ridge mountains "back home," and that Blue Lion was set in the "Appalachian mountains" of the west coast.

Today, Blue Lion is still a two person operation. Constantly striving to improve production methods, the instruments are built in production runs of anywhere from 24 to 40 at a time. It takes approximately twelve to fourteen weeks, from point of order, to have a standard dulcimer ready to ship. Adding certain custom features, such as the high gloss lacquer finish or extensive custom inlay, can extend the wait time for a few weeks, but for the most part the Bakers are able to get the instruments out to their customers in relatively short order. They would prefer to always have instruments in stock so customers don't have to wait, but so far, even when they include "extras" in a production run, those instruments are usually sold by the time they are ready to string up.

One of the things for which Blue Lions are noted is exquisite custom inlay, available by order. Janita does all the inlaying, and for the most part, the designs are limited only by the imagination of the customer. Over the years, she has inlaid everything from flower vines, birds, and bucolic meadow scenes to carousels, dancing bears, laughing pigs, and splashing ducks.



**Blue Lion with “Tree of Life” inlay**

The development of the mountain dulcimer has been greatly enhanced by Blue Lion’s Robert and Janita Baker, who blend the highest standards of luthiery and artistry.



**Detail of Dragon inlay**

To learn more about Blue Lion instruments, visit the Blue Lion website <http://www.bluelioninstruments.com> or contact Robert and Janita Baker via email at [dulcimers@bluelioninstruments.com](mailto:dulcimers@bluelioninstruments.com) or:

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**Mel Bay books by Janita Baker:**

**Fingerpicking Dulcimer** (newly revised and expanded) \$19.95.

A collection of 22 songs arranged in a fingerpicking style for the mountain dulcimer, this book offers a wide variety of musical genres and playing levels. Divided equally between arrangements for three and four equidistant strings, the songs progress in difficulty within each section from beginner to advanced level.

