At only 12-years-old Bradley Ellis became the youngest person to win the National Mountain Dulcimer Championship. The 2011 competition was held this past September at the Walnut Valley Festival in Windfield, Kansas. Fifteen contestants of all ages participated in this year’s event.

In the first round Ellis played *Your Cheating Heart* by Hank Williams Jr. and *Midnight Jig* by his instructor, the 2007 National Champion, Joe Collins. He was one of five, in the second round, to make the callbacks. In the finals he selected to play *If I Only Had a Brain* from the *Wizard of Oz* and *West Phalia Waltz* an old French tune.

Bradley said that, “Awesome” was his reaction when they announced him as the winner. He was named second place winner the previous year. His advice to young musicians like himself is that they need to always do their best and have confidence in their abilities.

Jo Anthony, Ellis’ grandmother, enjoys telling the story of how at the age of seven Bradley took one of his Paw Ray’s dulcimers and sat down in the floor and started playing. He flew past his Paw Ray in no time and placed third, at only 9-years-old, in his first adult competition. Jo Anthony would like to commend Western Carolina University for the scholarships they make available for the younger students so they can attend the Mountain Dulcimer Week during the summer. She said without the scholarships there would be a lot of young talent unable to attend the best educational experience available for the mountain dulcimer. Ellis has been a scholarship winner in the past, along with the third place winner in the Mountain Dulcimer Championship, Nathaniel Samsel. (See Sidebar)

What does the future hold for this young talent? Bradley is currently working on his first CD that will be available this summer at Dulcimer U (formerly WCU Mountain Dulcimer Week). He will also be attending the Winter Weekend at Lake Junaluska in January. While there, maybe he can be coerced into signing autographs. — Allison Boone
Learning Corner

What is the best way to play this chord?

I often hear the question about what fingers to use in playing a particular chord on the dulcimer. The answer is not as easy as it would seem. How to play a particular chord depends on several things: the context (what other finger positions surround it in a particular song), physical limitations (what will your own hands allow you to do), and your system (the way you have trained yourself to move from one chord to another).

Each of the factors could be discussed at length, but let’s simply define the last one in this short article. A system, first of all, is developed and learned. Most people who have been playing a while have developed and learned a system whether they know it or not. For example, the system determines HOW they move from a chord shaped like 1-1-3 to one shaped like 2-3-4. However, most players don’t think about whether their system is effective, efficient, and consistent.

Effective means that your system gets you to the chord you need to hit as quickly as your music needs you to get there. Efficient means that your system gets you from one chord shape to another with as little wasted movement and energy as possible. Consistent means that your system gives you a way to move from one chord shape to the next no matter where those chord shapes need to be played on the neck. For example, moving from 1-1-3 (Em) to 2-3-4 (D) can be done with the same motion and same fingers as moving from 2-2-4 (F#m) to 3-4-5 (Em). Good consistency can lead to greater effectiveness and efficiency. In fact, all three are interrelated.

Really good players from across the country use different systems depending on the types of music they focus on, the chords they are particularly fond of using, and their own physical ability. As a dulcimer student, I have studied several different systems under great players. I have found a system that works for me, but I am not so attached to it that I am unwilling to change it in order to play more effectively and efficiently.

Learning a new system involves the very difficult task of “unlearning” one’s present system. My recommendation for finding the “best way to play this chord” is to go to dulcimer workshops, watch great players with a critical eye, and evaluate some different systems that will contribute to your own system. However, you ultimately have to decide whether a more effective, efficient, and consistent system is worth the struggle. — Joe Collins

When the Dulcimers are Gone

By James Still

When the dulcimers are mingled with dust
Of flowering chestnut, and their lean fretted necks
Are slain maple stalks, their strings dull threads of rust,
Where shall the mellow voice be heard upon the hills,
Upon what pennroyal meadow, beside what rills?

Where shall the gentle words in mild abandon sing
With sweet design in loitering melody
As flights of swallows aimless on the wing,
Yet skilled as scythes that curve through yellow grain
And fragrant as jasmine after freshening rain?

Or may the heart’s breath on the slender reed
Sing bright virelais to match the oriole? –
The tulip tree the lyre that one must heed
When the dulcimers are gone, when afternoons attend
The silver underleaf of poplars in the wind?
Wither you consider yourself a novice or a beginner, a dulcimer club is a good way to learn new techniques, build your skills and meet new dulcimer friends. There are over 400 dulcimer clubs in the United States to choose from. If you are wondering how to find one near you then Everything Dulcimer and Gila Mountain Dulcimers have the clubs listed by state with contact information. If there is not a club in your area then the clubs listed should be able to supply information on how to start one.

In Western Carolina University’s backdoor there are two well established clubs, the Pic n’ Play Dulcimer Group of Sylva and the Western North Carolina Dulcimer Collective in Asheville, NC. Don Selzer and Steve Smith shared some information with the Dulcimer U Journal about their dulcimer clubs.

**Sylva Dulcimer Club**

Pic n’ Play Dulcimer Group of Sylva is made up of both lap and hammered dulcimer players that come together to make music. Ida Arnold started the group by placing an ad encouraging other dulcimer players to join her local club. The forming of the Sylva group is what encouraged other groups in western North Carolina to form, this included groups in Franklin, Bryson City, Cashiers, and Highlands. Pic ‘n Play also gives themselves credit for a group forming in Chapel Hill.

The Pic ‘n Play members meet at 1 p.m. in the basement of St. John's Episcopal Church on Jackson Street in Sylva every first, third, and fifth Saturdays of the month. Players join the group as either inexperienced beginners or experienced professionals. Many of them have learned how to play the instrument by attending group jams. Anyone who wants to attend is welcome at all jams and gigs, no matter how basic their playing skills. Sometimes a stray upright base, harmonica, or guitar find their way into the jams and are welcomed.

Their music selections include old fiddle tunes, jigs and waltzes, as well as more modern tunes. The club no longer relies solely on written music, and has expanded its depth of sound with harmonies, chords, and improvisations. This allows the group to play many songs that do not have dulcimer tablature.

**Western North Carolina Dulcimer Collective**

Katie Cunningham Waldren and some of her friends officially formed this club in April of 1983. Meetings were originally held monthly in various homes and churches until they found a condominium clubhouse in Asheville, where they met for several years. When the clubhouse was no longer available, the club was offered the library in the Folk Art Center on the Parkway from the Southern Highlands Craft Guild in Asheville. The WNC Dulcimer Collective has been meeting at the Folk Art Center now for at least 15 years. The library has since been renovated into gallery space, so they are now out in the main upstairs gallery. If you visit the Folk Art Center on the second Sunday of the month dulcimer music fills the entire building.

The club meetings have always consisted of learning and sharing music on mountain and...
hammered dulcimers. Participants learn new tunes together and review tunes they have previously worked on. During the time there is a "play around" where each person plays something they've learned or, if they don't want to do a solo, they may ask everyone to join them in playing a tune they select. At the end they have an informal jam, playing as many songs as they can before they pack up and head home.

The club’s newsletter started out as a postcard announcing the meeting locations. Joy Metcalf then initiated a more formal newsletter, and in 1990 Steve Smith started sending out a quarterly newsletter with tabbed music. He still produces the newsletter, but besides being mailed to paid members, it is also emailed out to about 700 other people and later posted on the WNC Dulcimer Collective website for anyone to download. It consists mainly of the monthly tabbed tunes, a list of the review pieces for each month and an extra tab for Christmas or Hanukkah.

Steve Smith searches books, sheet music and non-dulcimer websites to find public domain songs for the newsletter to add something new to the available dulcimer repertoire and also to make sure he is not subconsciously copying something from another dulcimer player. The music ranges from old mountain tunes to children's songs and other traditional music from around the world. Some of the clubs favorite times at the Folk Art Center have been when they were playing a song from a country and a native of that country walks up and starts singing it in their native language. It has happened with tunes from Germany, France and Taiwan, but Steve’s favorite was the first time they played the Polish national anthem and a man walked up with tears in his eyes. The man had moved from Poland to Greenville, SC three weeks before and was visiting the Folk Art Center.

The club has a series of "Newsletter Tune Learning CD's" available with all of the songs from 1990-2010, as well as a "Tab CD" with the tablature and music in a website format at the WNC Dulcimer Collective website. For more information about the WNC Dulcimer Collective contact Steve Smith at kc5f@yahoo.com — Allison Boone
A Winter Tradition

Each January, after the dust settles from all of the holiday activities, dulcimer enthusiasts from all around the area converge on beautiful Lake Junaluska, North Carolina for the annual Dulcimer Winter Weekend. This year’s event is scheduled for January 5-8, 2012, and will be held inside the Terrace Hotel and Conference Center.

It began in 2006 as a small gathering inside the Lambuth Inn at Lake Junaluska and was moved to the Terrace Hotel two years ago in order to accommodate the growing number of participants and to take advantage of the more modern facilities found at The Terrace.

Participants enjoy the all-inclusive setting. Once they arrive on Thursday evening, they do not have to leave the building until checkout on Sunday. All accommodations, meals, workshops, concerts and jam sessions take place inside the hotel.

Last year, hammered dulcimer classes were added to the curriculum. This year, we continue to offer hammered dulcimer in addition to mountain dulcimer and will be adding some guitar accompaniment classes as well.

The 2012 staff will include:

Joe Collins – Mountain Dulcimer
Larry Conger – Mountain Dulcimer
Elaine Conger – Mountain Dulcimer
Marsha Harris – Bowed Dulcimer/Mountain Dulcimer/Native American Flute
Anne Lough – Hammered Dulcimer/Mountain Dulcimer
Steve Smith – Guitar
Ruth Smith – Hammered Dulcimer
David Street – Mountain Dulcimer
Jim Miller – Master of the Jam
Dr. Will Peebles – WCU Music Department Chairman shares his love for unique folk instruments and Shaped Note Singing

Please make your plans to join us for a fun filled weekend of sharing music together in a cozy and intimate setting at Lake Junaluska! — Larry Conger

Register for Winter Weekend 2012