Teach Your Children Bluegrass: Mining Wonderland Avenue School's Laurel Canyon Roots for Repertoire

ABSTRACT

Carl Orff recognized that young learners are more engaged in music making when the connections to rhythm and movement are accessible, creating an atmosphere where learning is not only elemental, but also fun. This article explores a Wonderland Avenue School program that was designed to apply the Orff approach to the highly structured genre of bluegrass. In the process, the author and his students also delved into the cultural connection between bluegrass and the Los Angeles neighborhood where Wonderland is located.

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By Richard Lawton

Like many inspired additions to Wonderland Avenue School's music program, this one began at the intersection of existing resources and a free period. Our banjo-playing principal, Donald Wilson, was giving lessons to a couple of students and asked if I could work with him to develop a bluegrass jam band. Wonderland already offered chorus, percussion ensemble, and recorder ensemble as electives for third, fourth, and fifth graders. Why not add a bluegrass option? Given the challenges of playing bluegrass, I was expecting to attract two or three fledgling pickers. Instead, 22 children showed up that first day, and the Coyote String Band was born—although Coyote String Orchestra would be more accurate (see Figure 1, page 35).

In hindsight, the popularity of bluegrass should not have been a surprise. The Los Angeles neighborhood of Laurel Canyon, where Wonderland is located, has a longstanding history of embracing American roots music. Ray Manzarek of The Doors once observed there were only two places for musicians to live in L.A.—the beach and Laurel Canyon—and Laurel Canyon was where one went to get in touch with the earth and the sky (Kubernik, 2009). Located in the hills that separate L.A. from the San Fernando Valley, and ten minutes from

Sunset Strip and its famous rock venues, Laurel Canyon is a slice of bucolic solitude. Streets meander up side canyons and disappear, and deer, hawks, and coyotes abound in the midst of one of the most densely populated regions of the United States.

The Canyon grew from an arts mecca to folk rock's epicenter when pop music took an introspective turn in the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 2). Crosby, Stills, and Nash, Joni Mitchell, The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, The Mamas and the Papas, and later, Jackson Browne, Carole King, and the Eagles were among the artists that contributed to the Laurel Canyon mystique by living and making music here (Walker, 2006).

Many of Laurel Canyon's earliest stars, musicians such as Stephen Stills, John Phillips, and Roger McGuinn and Chris Hillman of The Byrds, had come of age during the folk era and brought with them a deep appreciation for old timey music and musicians (Brewer, 2009). Among folk music forms, bluegrass is connoisseur's stuff—the jazz of country music, sophisticated yet brimming with earthy authenticity. Bluegrass is also highly structured, with fixed repertoire and conventions about soloing and unison playing (Rosenberg, 1985). As Laurel Canyon's growing reputation drew musicians to Southern California, these conventions were used to start many musical conversations. In the process, the timbres of bluegrass became part of the Laurel Canyon "sound."

Also during the 1960s, educators began to argue that public schools needed to be more culturally responsive. They proposed that instruction validating students' heritage had a better chance of stimulating learning (Gay, 2010). This philosophy is now widely accepted, particularly in arts education, but Carl Orff had come to a similar conclusion decades earlier, albeit for a more practical reason. Orff recognized that music study needed to begin with rhythm and movement, and students were more likely to be engaged in making music when the connections to these elements were more accessible, as they are in folk and dance forms (Orff & Murray, 1978).

Is it possible to adapt the Orff approach, which is predicated on accessibility and immediacy, to bluegrass, where successful musicianship can be slow to develop? Over the course of the school year I found that it is. It would take more space than I have here to discuss every aspect of the process,

Figure 1. Wonderland School's Coyote String Band Prepares to Rock the Multipurpose Room.

SOURCE: JORGE DALINGER.

Figure 2. Legendary Canyon Country Store, the Commercial Center of Laurel Canyon for Almost 100 Years.

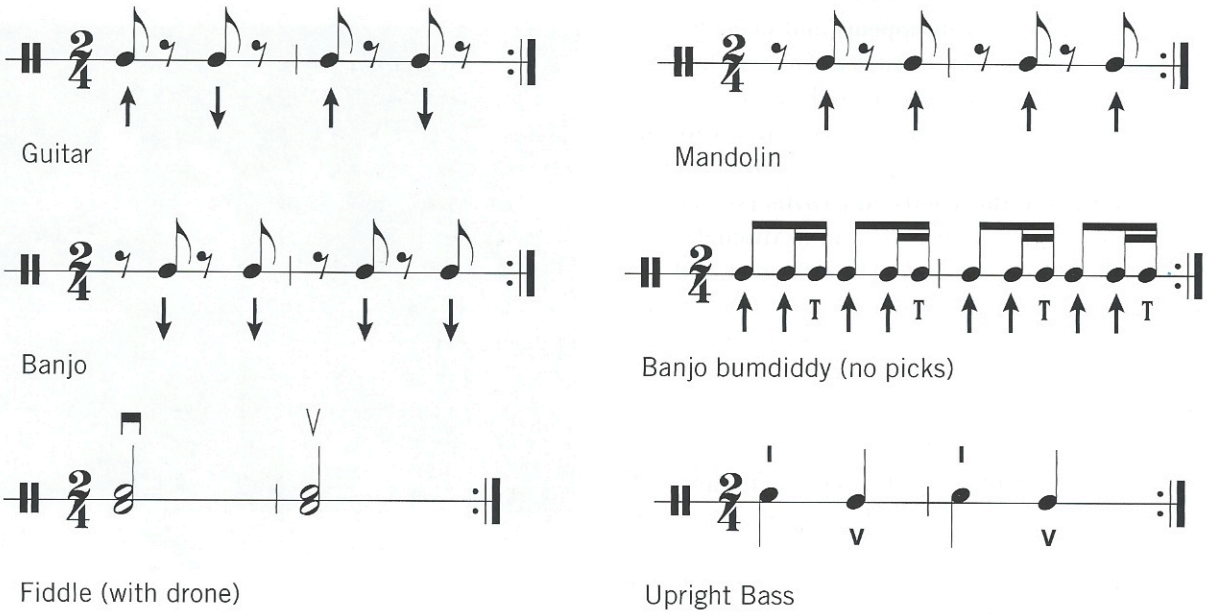
SOURCE: RICHARD LAWTON.

but the broad strokes are worth reviewing, particularly for those who want to infuse their Orff with a bit of twang.

Teaching Rhythm First

Teaching rhythm first might seem a particular challenge in a genre that does not use drums. Like barred instruments, however, the chordophones associated with bluegrass (guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, Dobro, and upright bass) provide both the sense of propulsion and the pitch sequence to the extent that they can also be considered melodic percussion. As in Orff class, before the Coyote String Band did any-

Figure 3. Typical Bluegrass Strumming/Bowing Patterns.



SOURCE: RICHARD LAWTON.

thing else, we patted out our rhythms on our bodies or on the resonators of our instruments.

When it came time for strumming, I found G major was the easiest consensus chord to play. The strumming patterns in bluegrass overlay each other in a precise way (see Figure 3).

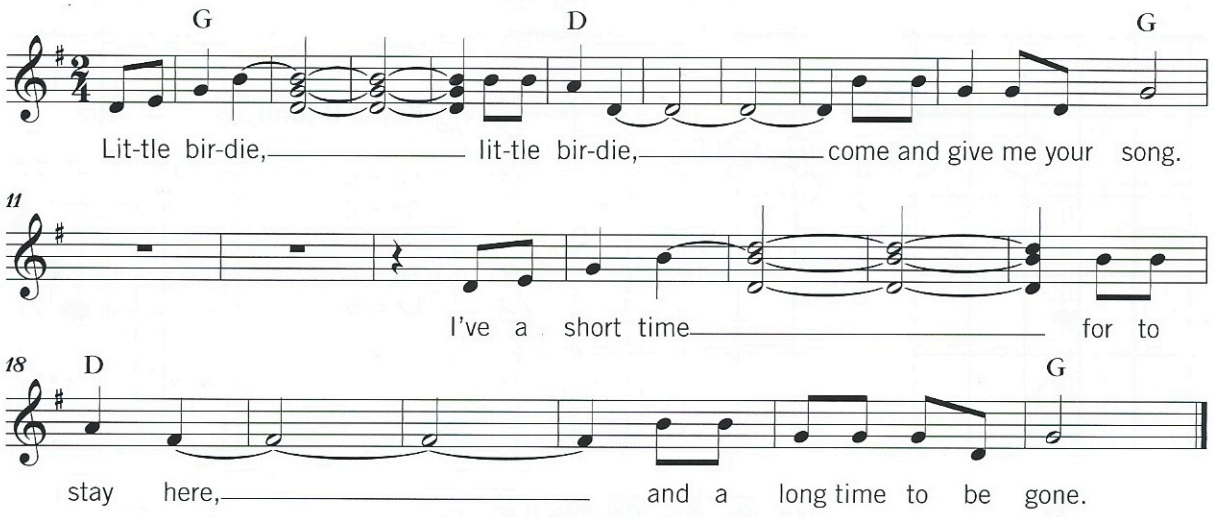
In general, the bass and guitar play on the first and third beat while mandolin and other lead instruments chop on two and four—most bluegrass is in duple (Rosenberg, 1985). Remembering whether to strum up or down, and when, presents challenges for young musicians, but no more than insisting on crossover mallet technique or alternating hands on drums, and the overall propulsive effect is something for which they quickly develop a feel. This "jam on G" formed the basis for our first lesson and became our standard warmup.

Triads and Scales

Orff instruction typically begins with pentatonic scales and moves on to triads. This sequence is reversed in bluegrass; however, introducing triadic harmony first did not confuse the children. Chords are simply how the bluegrass instruments make sense, and focusing on triadic intervals has some advantages when it comes to singing. After the G chord, the children learned D then, in succession, C, A, E, Am, Em, and Dm. These eight chords

Figure 4. *Little Birdie* Using G and D Chords.

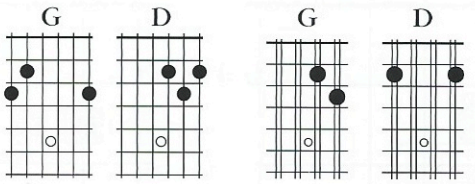
Traditional/ar. Lawton



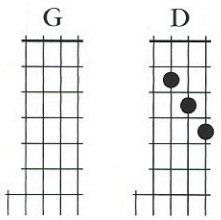
2. Rather be in some dark hollow
Where the sun don't ever shine
Than for you to be another man's darling
And to know that you'd never be mine

3. Little birdie, little birdie
What makes you fly so high
When you know that my true lover
Is a-waiting in the sky

4. I'm a long way from old Dixie
And my old Kentucky home
Got no father or mother
No place to call my home



Guitar **Mandolin**



Banjo

SOURCE: RICHARD LAWTON.

were all we needed to play any traditional bluegrass or bluegrass-flavored folk songs. Two chords were often enough, as in the case of the song, *Little Birdie* (see Figure 4).

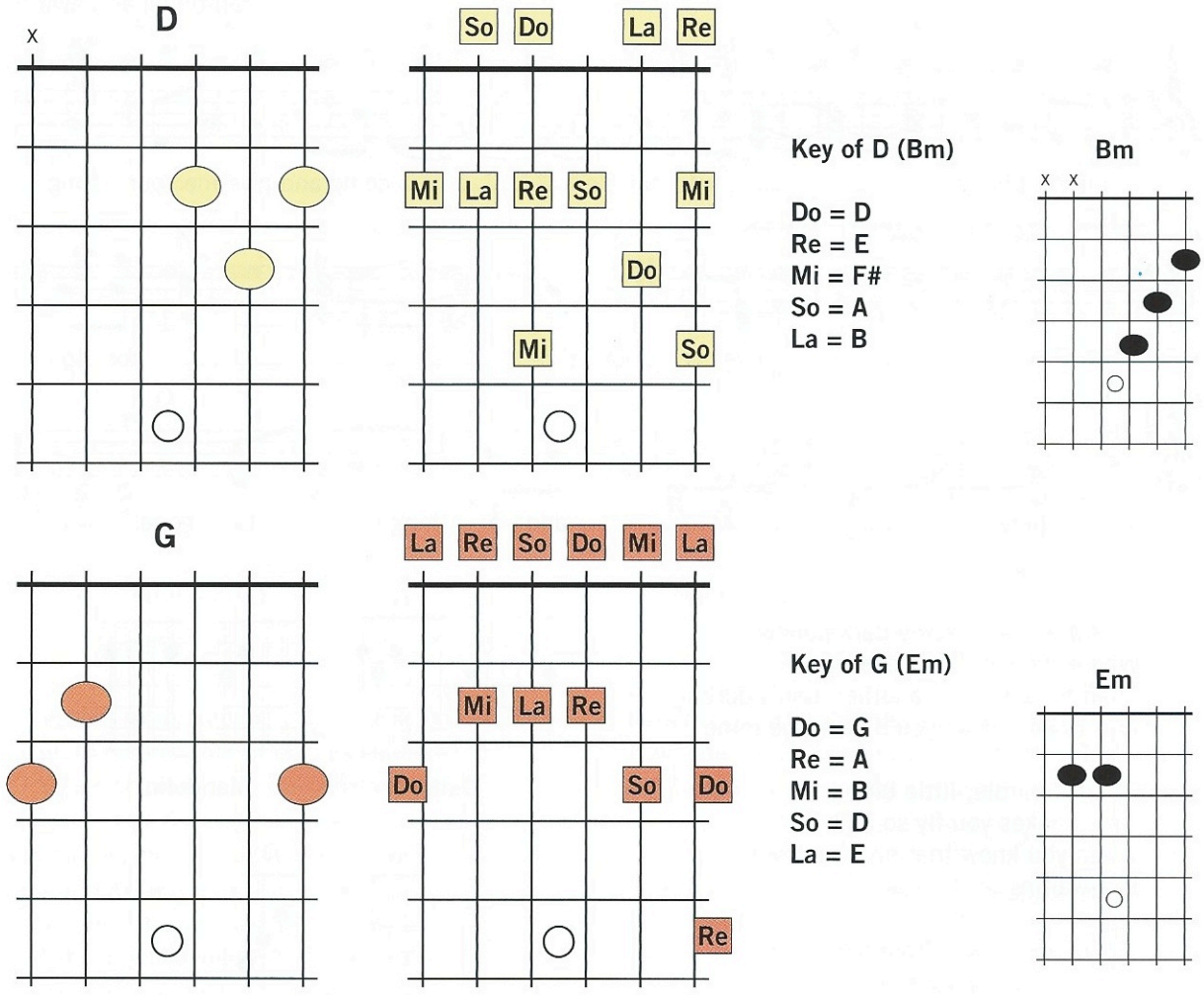
Although the Orff oeuvre contains limited music in keys that work best for bluegrass (G, D, and A), many pentatonic folk tunes children learn in Orff classes, such as *Pretty Saro* and *Old Joe Clarke*, work wonderfully in those keys, as do the songs of Neil Young, Stephen Stills, and other Canyon legends.

Finger-picking individual notes came later. During the first year of the Coyote String Band, I relied heavily on children with existing skills to play solo breaks, but we also made progress teaching everybody to improvise in precisely the same way we do in Orff: We removed dissonance from the equation. Doug Goodkin (2002) observed that the spatial/visual patterns of the barred instruments play a significant role in their accessibility. In a similar way, pentatonic scales on the fretboards are also easy to decipher, once one knows the patterns (see Figure 5, page 38 and Figure 6, page 39).

Ostinati, Drones, and Borduns

The rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic components of Orff can be adapted to all bluegrass instruments, but certain correlations are particularly apt. For example, the roll, a repeating sequence of picking

Figure 5. Pentatonic Scales for Guitar.



SOURCE: RICHARD LAWTON.

with the thumb, index, and middle finger that is a particular feature of banjo and Dobro playing, is essentially a melodic ostinato.

In more advanced banjo technique, a lead line is woven into the rolling patterns, but my group is content (and I am content for them) to roll on chords. One feature of notation here that is familiar to Orff teachers is the use of *ti-ti* to indicate eighth notes and *ta* to indicate quarters. This tablature is often used in bluegrass for guitar and mandolin as well, but all my students have been talking about *ti-ti* and *ta* since first grade, so they pick it up quickly.

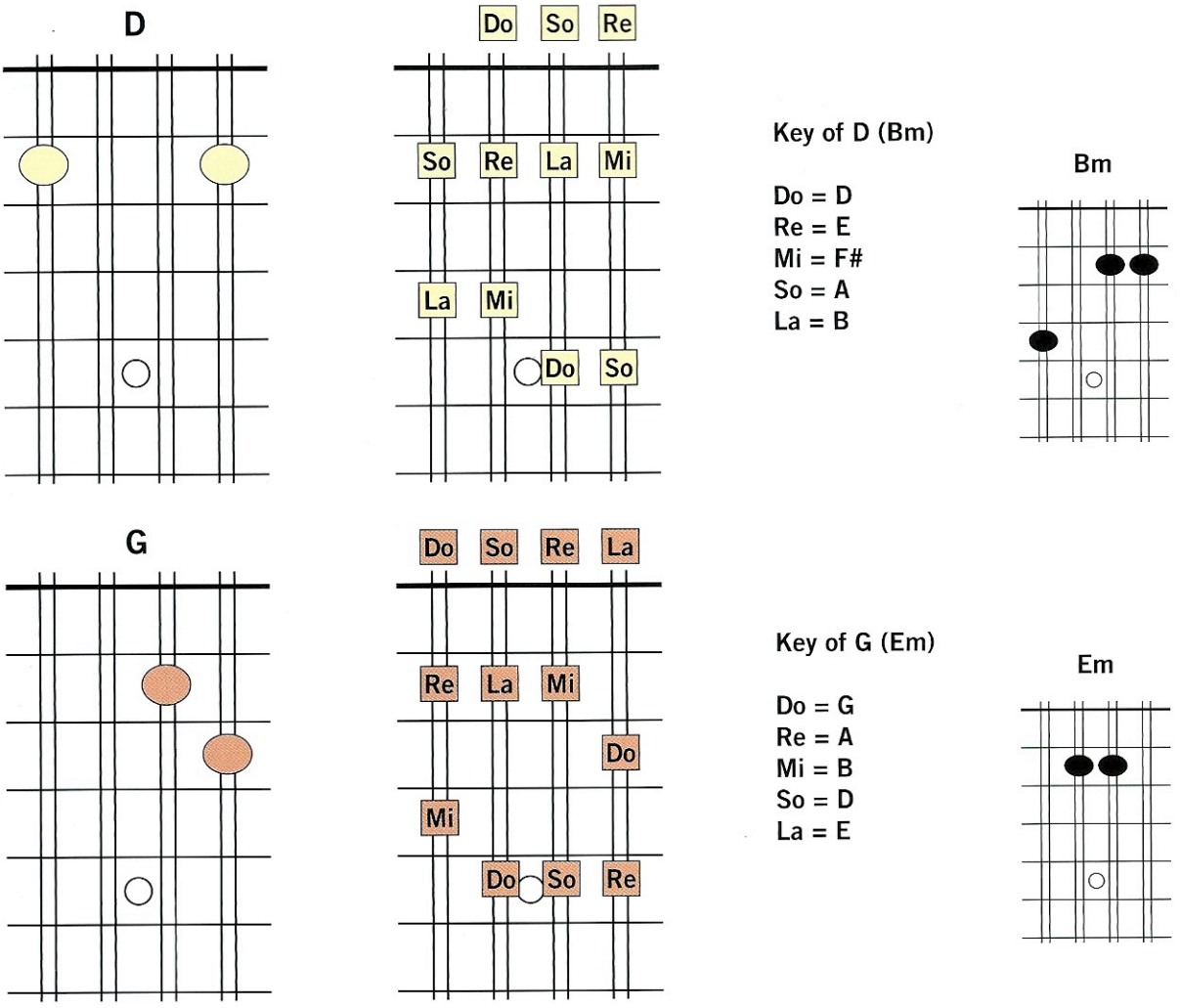
Droning is well suited to fiddle. The fiddle is tuned in fifths, meaning the G, D, and A strings can be accompanied by a fifth above, and the D, A, and E strings can be accompanied by a fourth below. Playing drones on fourths and fifths (or octaves) is a departure for young violin students, who generally focus on playing one string at a time. *Wayfaring Stranger* works well for this. What goes for fiddle also goes for mandolin, because the instruments are tuned the same.

As in Orff, the bass keeps time, almost always in the form of a broken bordun. Upright bass, like

Wayfaring Stranger

The arrangement of *Wayfaring Stranger* mentioned in this article is at Echo Extensions at www.aosa.org under "Publications: The Orff Echo."

Figure 6. Pentatonic Scales for Mandolin.



SOURCE: RICHARD LAWTON.

the bass xylophone, is one of the most popular instruments, probably for the same reason: Children adore large instruments.

Singing

Traditional folk tunes often have pentatonic melodies of less than an octave that are easy to learn and sing. The hallmark of bluegrass vocals, however, is to sing in two-, three-, or even four-part harmony, which is very challenging, especially for children attempting to accompany themselves on guitars, banjos, and mandolins.

Bluegrass vocals call for the melody to be wedged between a high harmony part, referred to as "high lonesome," and a baritone part (Rosenberg, 1985). It would have been difficult for the group to pull this off (for one thing, Wonderland doesn't have any baritones), but they were able to recognize basic intervallic relationships. I applied solfège here, having everybody sing the bass line on *do* and *so*, followed with singing the words on *do* and *so* alongside the melody, which produced the desired two-part harmony.

As for the "high lonesome," our early focus on triads allowed the children to develop an appreciation for the relationship between the tonic and mediant, and between the mediant and dominant. This enabled them, with lots of practice, to sing in parallel thirds. By year's end we were able to produce three-part vocal harmony consisting of a parallel third above the melody and lower "baritone" line on the tonic and dominant. It's not exactly

Crosby, Stills, and Nash or the Stanley Brothers, but it is a sweet sound nevertheless.

Putting It All Together

Bluegrass performances are organized around trade-offs between verses and instrumental solo breaks of equal length. Every Coyote String Band member picks and sings, though certain players quickly showed an aptitude for one or another instrument—including voice. As a result, the children were often the ones to suggest that "so-and-so" take the solo or that a particular blending of voices was best. The discussions about who didn't get a turn became fewer, and a real interest in and commitment to making the band sound right evolved.

Conclusion

Especially wonderful was the chance my young bluegrass pickers had to jam with their elders. Laurel Canyon retains something of a music scene, and our parent community is filled with talented musicians. At the end of the year, as a farewell to Don Wilson, who was leaving Wonderland Avenue School, the Coyote String Band and the Canyon Family Band joined together on stage for a VSOP—very special one-time performance—of *Here Today*, a tune by bay area "newgrass" fiddler Laurie Lewis (Lewis & Huffman, 2005).

We're here today, and then we're gone,
This life will end, just like a song.
We only have this little time,
So come and let our voices twine.

The performance was a magic moment that highlighted a very Orff-like feature of our year making bluegrass—the authenticity of the experience. Musicologists often talk about authenticity in discussing folkloric genres, specifically focusing on the elements of form and technique, and even using the term "fakelore" for that which does not measure up. Our version of bluegrass might not be authentic by that measure, but that is beside the point. The connection of musicians to music and to one another is powerful and rudimentary. How much of this connection is tied to a sense of cultural heritage is hard to measure, but clearly it is community-affirming and community-sustaining. That's reason enough to celebrate. ■

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