

Keeping the Old-Time Music Alive

By Carl Tyrie

The North Carolina High Country is home to a tradition of old-time music that flourishes through the efforts of many area residents. At almost any Jones House jam on Thursday nights in downtown Boone, some musicians play instruments that were around a century ago.

Jones House Cultural Resource Coordinator Mark Freed says defining “old-time” music can be tricky. “I guess it’s the rural country music of our country,” he offers, “but that style will change depending on what region you’re in. When you’re in southern Appalachia, it’s a lot of string-band music and some people would include some old-world unaccompanied ballads.”

Freed adds that musicians aren’t the only old-timers in the High Country. “There’s also a rich tradition of instrument building in the area,” he explains, citing craftsmen such as Charlie Glenn, Paul Graybeal, Earl Moretz, and Rick Ward. They all build high-quality acoustic instruments including guitars, banjos, fiddles, and dulcimers. Freed points to a relative newcomer to that group, John Peterson, who is producing a classic example of one old-time musical instrument—the ‘fretless’ banjo. Peterson is turning out perhaps more fretless banjos than any place in the world from his workshop home on Three Top Road in Todd. Frets are the ridges placed uniformly along the neck, or fingerboard, of stringed instruments that guide the player’s fingers to produce varieties of notes. The fretless banjo pre-dates the American Civil War. The ‘fret’ would appear on banjos and guitars later in the 19th century.

The absence of frets allows the player’s hands to easily slide up and down the neck. “Instead of being restricted to the notes allowed by each fret, the banjo projects all the tones going through the scale,” Peterson explains, adding that the ‘skin’ used on old-time banjo heads produces a mellower tone than that found

on modern fretted instruments built with plastic heads.

Born in Ohio, John spent most of his youth in Boone where his father served on the business school faculty of Appalachian State University. The younger Peterson pursued a degree in Anthropology at ASU, but it was his minor in Appalachian Studies that sent him on the path to banjo building and preserving the music of the region.

Peterson credits Boone musician Mary Greene with leading him down the musical path to where he is now. He met Greene not long after his first attempt at instrument building. In 1990, he completed a mountain dulcimer kit his dad had started but not finished several years earlier. “So then I had a dulcimer and didn’t know how to play it,” Peterson remembers. “I saw a newspaper ad for a dulcimer class Mary was going to teach at the old Appalachian Cultural Museum, so I signed up.”

The class not only helped him learn to play the dulcimer but also sparked his interest in the historical story of its music. He ended up working at the cultural museum in Boone for nine years before moving to Fargo, North Dakota. “I started volunteering at a museum up there,” he recalls. “Then they hired me and I worked there for about ten years before returning to Boone.”

By the time Peterson returned to the High Country, he had already decided to build instruments full time. In Fargo, he posted a photo of the first banjo he built on his own website, inspired by a fretless model built by a man from Watauga County.

“I was doing an old-time music workshop and playing my Stanley Hicks banjo,” Peterson says of his efforts to promote old time music in Fargo. “After the program, this fellow came up to me and asked, ‘Can you build me one of those?’ I told him I had never made one before, but I’d try.”

The result was a fretless banjo made mostly of plywood and, in the builder’s

words, “looking really rough.” The banjo’s photo on the website, however, was interesting enough for a player from Seattle to request John Peterson’s fretless banjo #2. That banjo began a tradition that Peterson continues. He photographs his banjos and records a video in which he plays each instrument before it is sent to its owner. These videos are posted on his YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/user/frailingbanjo>, where viewers can check out his instruments and see videos posted by his customers as well. In fact, one of the first videos on the website is by the owner of banjo #2. With more than 13,000 hits, it has contributed to a number of inquiries about additional banjos. “That’s a great thing about YouTube,” Peterson says. “It’s free advertising.”

Today, his is a short commute to work, just down the front steps and around the house to his basement workshop. It’s no small irony that an instrument from a primitive era is being heard around the world thanks to the Internet. And thanks to the abundant natural resources available locally, Peterson’s work is the real deal.

Unlike guitars, where the wood used to build the body of the instrument is crucial to the resulting tone, most of the sound from a fretless banjo comes from the vibrating skin on the banjo head. The only place sound waves actually hit wood is on the bottom hoop. This makes the choice of wood less important to the sound. “I tell people to mostly go by looks,” he says, although he thinks there are subtle differences between the woods. “Walnut seems to be a little brighter, whereas cherry and chestnut seem to have a little more mellow tone and maple seems to give you a little more volume,” he says. “But if I build two all-walnut banjos, they’ll each have their own characteristic sound. I think it has to do with the tree’s growth pattern.”

Peterson favors the dark look of walnut, but admits the next banjo he builds for himself will have hoops made of



Left to Right: John Peterson, Barry Schoor, Gil Adams

wormy chestnut. The last banjo he kept for himself was his 100th instrument. It’s on the first video on his YouTube channel and is all walnut with inlaid brass on the top half of the neck.

With more than 350 hand-made banjos under his sanding belt, so to speak, he still remembers stories behind many of them. One of his favorites involves a banjo he built for his wood supplier, Willie Trivett, whose sawmill in western Watauga County has been in the Trivett family for generations. “After dealing with Willie for about three months, I figured I’d better take a banjo out and show him what I was doing with his wood,” Peterson says. “That’s when he got the idea for me to build one for him.”

Trivett admits he’s not a banjo player. Instead, he wanted an instrument he could put on his mantle in honor of his grandfather, who built a farmhouse on the family property in 1874. During his ongoing restoration of the house, he came across rare wood his grandfather had milled and used in the attic. “There were two or three pieces on the corner of

the house that were curly poplar,” Trivett recalls, adding that he also discovered some curly maple.

The end result was John Peterson banjo #290, an instrument built from trees felled during the Civil War. A four-by-four curly poplar beam is now the banjo neck and curly maple forms the hoops. You can see and hear this remarkable creation on Peterson’s YouTube site at www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDSKYW00vpl.

There’s an obvious irony to John’s use of modern technology to market a type of banjo that became rare when frets were added to the instrument in the latter half of the 1800’s. His use of YouTube and e-Bay helps him market his banjos across the country and overseas.

Those same marketing opportunities may give potential luthiers—the traditional name for makers of stringed instruments—incentive to try building mountain-style fretless banjos. Peterson lives up to his website’s name, [carryinon.com](http://www.carryinon.com), in volunteering to help others carry on the old-time music tradition. “I have a photo album on my Facebook page showing how to build one,” he says. “I’ve

had a few people contact me wanting to build one for themselves and asking me how I do things. I’m willing to help.”

He’s currently producing a video showing step by step how to build an old time banjo using Trivett’s Civil War era wood. And you can hear him play in Boone at the Jones House Thursday night jams and in Valle Crucis Sunday afternoons at the Mast Store Annex.

By necessity, John Peterson is working on his repertoire of songs, in part because he posts a music video for each new banjo he builds—a collection surpassing 350 instruments. “The problem,” he said, “is I don’t know 350 tunes, so there are a lot of repeat songs.”

That’s a problem John Peterson is sure to overcome in due time.

Musicians interested in purchasing a fretless banjo can order a custom-built instrument from John’s website, www.carryinon.com. Fretless banjo-building information can also be found in the 1975 book, *Foxfire 3*, which has a chapter describing several dulcimer and banjo builders in the region 40 years ago, including Stanley Hicks.