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Made By Hand

String Instruments Used in Old-time and Bluegrass Music

By Ken Farmer

Sometimes words aren't enough to say what you feel. I find myself at a loss whenever I try to describe my first magical listening moment when I discovered Appalachia's music, but it is always worth a try.

In the fall of 1972, I attended the Galax Fiddler's Convention, which spans several hot August days. The small town of Galax, in southwest Virginia, swells to over 20,000 people while hundreds of musicians come to compete for prizes in stringed instrument categories, folk songs, and traditional dance. Friday and Saturday nights are reserved for the old-time and bluegrass band competitions. As I roamed the parking and camping areas listening to the bands warming up, I found myself in the middle of an old-time band. It was an all-male group dressed in blue jean overalls and straw hats. The instruments played included a guitar, banjo, mandolin, two violins (called twin fiddles), and washtub bass.

As I stood in the center of this band playing *Soldier's Joy*, I felt the hair standing up on my arms and a sense of intoxicating joy and energy. The performers radiated Joy, and the audience beamed energy back to the band. Many who love live music have been in a room infused with the magic of outstanding performance. An event like this is an electric, transcendent experience that takes us to a beautiful and joyous place. At that moment, I thought to myself, "Man, you've got to get some more of that stuff!"

While listening to more bluegrass music and learning to sing and play it myself, I realized that most musicians had factory-made instruments such as Martin guitars, Gibson mandolins, and banjos. But I also noticed some of the old-time musicians were playing on homemade banjos, fiddles, mandolins, dulcimers, and more.

Looking at the history of these instruments also opened the door to the music's origin. For instance, the banjo was originally an African instrument played by those enslaved in the southern United States. It eventually got mixed in with the guitars and violins played in a Western folk tradition. African-influenced music met Scottish and Irish fiddle tunes and ballads, and a truly American musical genre was born.

Throughout early Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley, and the Appalachian Region, there were family bands, parlor groups, and individuals who needed instruments to play music. Still, they were

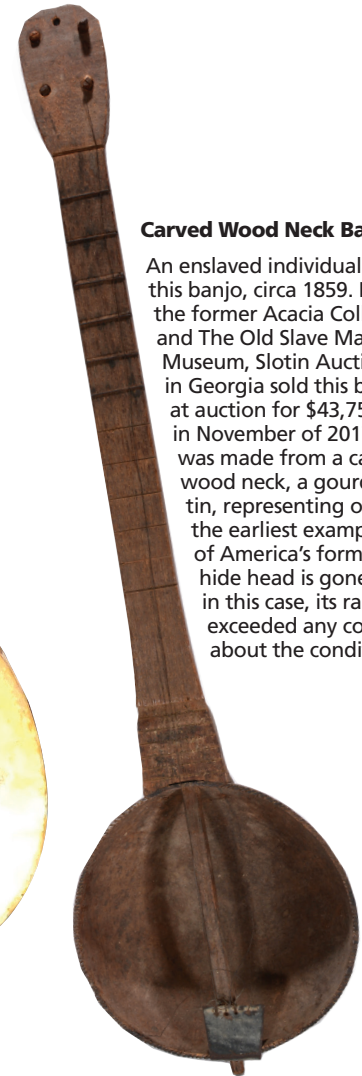
Virginia-made Fretless Banjo

I recently bought this fretless banjo on the Facebook marketplace for \$350. It has a walnut neck, oak rim, and groundhog hide head. It descended in a Staunton, VA family, and the inside of the head is signed in pencil, "J.S. Jonlon, 1898, Penrose (?), VA." It is very simple as instruments go, but I love that it is from Virginia and dated pre-1900, though I am still trying to figure out the town. This banjo is an excellent example of an instrument being homemade but made by someone with skill. On the other hand, I've seen some make-do banjos with heads made from cigar boxes, tortoise shells, and even empty oval ham cans. Some blues artists have even spoken of stretching a fence wire on a porch post and plucking it to create musical notes.



Carved Wood Neck Banjo

An enslaved individual made this banjo, circa 1859. From the former Acacia Collection and The Old Slave Mart Museum, Slotin Auctions in Georgia sold this banjo at auction for \$43,750 in November of 2017. It was made from a carved wood neck, a gourd, and tin, representing one of the earliest examples of America's form. The hide head is gone, but, in this case, its rarity far exceeded any concerns about the condition.



not always easy to find, so sometimes homemade instruments were the only option. The most prized homemade instruments are confirmed made before 1890. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a "Stradivarius" violin could easily be ordered from Sears & Roebuck, along with various other inexpensive musical instruments. It is interesting to note that mail-order companies made playable instruments available to the rural poor, predominantly African American musicians.

Today, advanced collectors seek homemade instruments with a folk quality, with carving, inlay, or paint decoration, making them more attractive to the eye. If you look around, you can find simple examples for a few hundred dollars.



Folk Art Carved Violin

This nineteenth-century Folk Art Carved Violin depicts a carved top with the scroll, possibly representing a Jenny Lind-type bust. The carving retains the original painted surface. Homemade country fiddles are not rare, but the folky painted carving pushed the price far past the pre-sale estimate. This banjo was sold at auction by Jeffrey S. Evans and Associates for \$4,357 in November of 2019.



JEFFREY S. EVANS AND ASSOC.



Appalachian Folk Art Carved and Painted Dulcimer

Appalachian folk art carved and painted dulcimer, double-bouted style with three strings, scrolled head, and heart-shaped cut-outs in the soundboard. Original chrome-yellow, green, and red paint decoration. With a custom iron display stand. Attributed to West Virginia maker Charles N. Prichard from the late nineteenth century. Collection of the late John and Lil Palmer, Purcellville, VA. It was purchased in 1993 at the Howard County Antiques Show from Robert Burger, Mt. Vernon, OH. It was also sold at auction by Jeffrey S. Evans and Assoc. in 2014 for \$4,800 with an estimate of \$800-\$1,200. I remember thinking I would pay \$2,000 for it—the joke was on me.

JEFFREY S. EVANS AND ASSOC.



Arthur Conner Fiddle

This twentieth-century violin was made by Floyd County, VA craftsman Arthur Conner. His distinctive fiddles come in four- and five-string models, and he made them for many famous musicians, including bluegrass and country music star Ricky Skaggs. Notice the beautiful curly maple back and the distinctive ram's head carved at the top.



Homemade Guitar

This homemade guitar is from our collection. I liked it because of the body's unique shape and the fact that it plays and sounds good. It's likely from the first quarter of the twentieth century when arch-top guitars gained popularity. My wife Jane and I were informed it was from the Bluefield, WV area.



Ronald Mize Handmade Dulcimer

This handmade dulcimer is by Ronald Mize, a southwest Virginia craftsman who made over 100 instruments. In the 1970s, I visited him in his shop and have always loved his work. This dulcimer has a chestnut top with a walnut neck, back, and sides. The tuning pegs are crafted the "old way" using pure friction for tightening and loosening. Many modern players use geared tuners, which are easier to manipulate.



Ken Farmer is a lifelong resident of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. He and his wife Jane have been avid students and collectors of Americana and Southern material culture since they married in 1974. Since his teenage years Ken has been a musician and singer of traditional Appalachian and American Roots music. As a performer he became interested in the songs, history, objects and stories of his native Southwest Virginia, which led to him the antique business where he has worked for over 40 years. Ken has also appeared on *Antiques Roadshow*, as a specialist in folk art, decorative arts, and musical instruments. Ken runs an antique and fine art appraisal and consulting business that serves collectors, estates, and individuals throughout the mid-Atlantic.

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kenfarmerllc.com

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slotinfolkart.com

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frontporchville.org