

Clarke Buehling

Gourd Banjo Maker and Artist – by David Hyatt

DH: This is August 22, 2002 , Fayetteville , Arkansas ...

CB: We are in the home of Clarke Buehling; the subject is seated before me now...

DH: ...twirling his moustache! [Laughter]

DH: Ok, Clark , so tell me what influenced you to make a gourd banjo – or, your first banjo?

CB: I would say... the Pete Seeger book. That was probably the inspiration for getting started in this and years of thinking about it. The first banjo I made was a salad bowl, a salad bowl with a torn snare drum head thumb -tacked to it. I made a neck out of a piece of half-inch board that I split and screwed to the side of the bowl, and used fish line for strings and whittled the pegs by hand. That would have been my third year of high school, in 1964.

DH: I read in one of your earlier interviews that you were influenced by a school performance of Hobart Smith. Was that [banjo made] before or after that influence?

CB: After. I had been considering taking up the banjo when Hobart Smith performed at my high school. I bought my first banjo, a Kay, at the Old Town School of Music in Chicago , during Thanksgiving break, soon after that performance. That would have been about a year before I made the first one. And then, I stewed over it for many years as I thought about gourd banjos and African instruments. About 1975, I moved out to Eureka Springs , Arkansas ; there was a wonderful music museum there, Miles Musical Museum . On exhibit there was a small dipper gourd banjo with a piece of brown paper placed over the hole and glued on and thread strings and ... painted with some finger paint and things, labeled “Child’s Banjo.” I thought about that for a long time, I’d also seen the [William] Boucher hybrid gourd banjo at the Metropolitan in New York .

DH: The Boucher neck mounted on a gourd?

CB: Yeah, that’s it. ...And in England , I’d seen a cittern banjo or whatever it is over at the Victoria-Albert Museum . And that was before I’d made any gourd banjos. That was on my trip in ’71. So I had those going in the back of my head – all the time playing the banjo, old-time banjo, and picking up classic style banjo.

DH: That Boucher that you saw, I guess there's a question about whether he [Boucher] actually mounted that neck on a gourd or someone did that later?

CB: Yes, Eli Kauffman, I believe, handled it and discovered that it didn't fit very well.

DH: But Boucher was a good craftsman, so you would have expected a good fit?

CB: Yes! He was a drum maker and yes, you would expect a good fit.

DH: Speaking of Boucher, another one of your influences came from a visit to a museum in Tennessee ?

CB: Yes, the Museum of Appalachia in Norris , Tennessee . I was going through there and the curator, John Rice Irwin, was kind enough to let me handle one of the banjos, they were changing the displays on the walls at that time, the banjos and instruments and some of the instruments were accessible at that weekend, at the time I was passing through. And I took a tracing of a Boucher that he had and I used that for a gourd banjo: that pattern for a banjo that I have now. I'm not sure I got the angle of the headstock of it quite right because all I had was an 8 by 11 sheet of paper to get this off! But I laid it down, upside down, without any pegs on it, and did an outline around it [the headstock].

DH: Ok, so, all this culminated in the building of a gourd banjo? And what kind of a banjo, or gourd banjo, was that?

CB: I'm not sure which came first. About 1984, I was here in Fayetteville , and was fooling with the idea of building some banjos, and, a friend of mine, Billy Matthews, was making banjos out in Osage. He made a couple of wood hoops, single ply wood hoops for me and I made a neck for one of those, and put a piece of rawhide on it. I sold that to someone in California ; some woman came by, saw it, and stopped to talk. I don't know how she saw it: maybe I was out playing it in the front of the house or something, and she stopped her car ... so, I don't have that [anymore]. I have a photo. I'm not sure if that was before I made any gourd banjos. About the same time I started shaping necks, but I was fooling around with the idea of dipper gourd banjos at the same time as a neck on a gourd, a wooden neck. Oh! There's the foxfire gourd banjo with the long neck dipper, fitted with a wooden fingerboard.

And it [the fingerboard] stabilized it I guess, but, I hear that that banjo disintegrated, fell apart! I'm not sure they really knew how to do some of the things, they fitted the fingerboard very nicely but they didn't wet the skin! Whoever heard of putting a dry skin on a gourd? And it may not have been a very sturdy gourd. I think not. So I started noticing African instruments and investigating this. And about that same time, Scott Didlake and I got together, and I don't remember exactly the circumstances but he and Carrie came by and stayed for a while here in Fayetteville , and, we discussed this sort of thing.

DH: Reading from his letters, I saw that he had introduced himself to you through a letter and then...later, you might have met at the American Banjo Fraternity?

CB: Yeah, yeah, that's right. I reread that letter recently and he introduced himself saying, "Hi, I am Scott Didlake" – he lived in Canada and played banjo up there...

DH: He also said that he'd like to get together with you and he was impressed that you were playing some of the classical style music...

CB: That he had attempted to learn. Yeah. I have a couple of his banjos.

DH: One of his gourd banjos?

CB: Yeah, I have a gourd banjo that he made and I have a couple that he played on: a piccolo banjo and a Stewart fretless. I visited him in Mississippi, and he had made a small-hooped banjo, and he used the Bouchet style peg head as a crank. Remember that picture [he drew] of twirling – juggling the banjo, having it balanced so you could spin it around, [he drew] these stick-figure drawings?

DH: Right!

CB: Spinning it over his head, and cranking it around! See, it's good that we wrote things down, you know? And his letters are really helpful.

DH: Yeah, that really impressed me as I read through them. I couldn't put them down. Well... he was so focused and obsessed on the topic.

CB: Yes, he was!

DH: That provided a lot of energy. Well, he was convinced he was going to make something of it.

CB: Um-hum, He wanted to make a living at it. He wanted to reinvent the banjo too! He wanted to, at some point, forget all the background and the baggage and all that was with the banjo and try to encourage the blues players in Mississippi there to take it up. He had various names for the instrument, Bangie [was one], and, he was playing around with what would be the most effective name that would *not* be banjo. And one of the things he said was "even when I'm trying to sell my act, don't say, well, 'banjo' because they'll just think, 'oh, another banjo player', but kind of skirt around that." Skirt around the idea of banjo and say what you *do* with it or whatever – describe the performance in some other way. That's a challenge

and he came up with Kalenda-Banza from reading Dena Epstein, I think. He said, “Call it the ‘Origins of American Music’, rather than ‘banjo music’”, which I try to do still.

DH: In reading his letters, he incessantly credits you with giving him the inspiration and offers to build you banjos, which he does, but my question is, was anything that he was doing, in turn, come around and have an influence on anything that you were planning to do, that you were building, the gourd banjos?

CB: Well, we discussed a lot of ideas – I think extending the tailpiece out of the gourd was one of his ideas. We were always experimenting with fitting the neck into the banjo. And I have a stack of various notepads, sketches of ways to construct banjos. And this time I’m talking about myself rather than Didlake. But we were also [talking about] all the details: “Well, what do you think of... should the pegs go this direction or should they go that direction, how many strings should you put on a banjo”. He had some... it was a big secret! He had a big secret from me and that was how he reinforced his banjos. Something I really didn’t care about because I never intended to plaster on the inside of my gourds but, he had gone out of his way to see various types of work from different artisans. He spoke to a tambourine maker which turned out to be this guy up at United Rawhide, Sol Palanski, in Chicago, about when he tightened a skin head on a tambourine you use rubber-bands to help pull it down and hold it in place and that was a helpful thing he found. Another was this thing about plastering the inside of the gourds was from shekere makers (these beaded gourds that people shake – a West African tradition). Use a plumber’s compound and that was his secret! Well, he used it on the inside and the outside and all over the thing; I think he was looking for gourds that didn’t break when they landed on the ground when he threw them in the air. That would mean it was flexible or, you know, it was harder but it was also flexible. I went for the hardest and densest gourds. We kind of went different ways – I was looking for the one that was naturally hard not one that I was going to harden. So that was one thing. Scott was sure that people at one time grew gourds expressly for gourd banjos, but I never believed that. And my ideas were to go to the banjo players and sell it to banjo players and his idea was to get away and try to find another venue for it. One of my thoughts on it though has been to find somebody who’s inventive and maybe coming from a Windham Hill style of music, dripping water music I call it, to come up with some kind of eerie style, you know, using the slides and the sustain of it. It’s a viable instrument for that type of music – nature music.

DH: They certainly have that deep rich natural sound to them.

CB: Yeah! Yeah, well, it depends on how you build it also. You could build it with big gourds but I find that the smaller the head the better, because there is less sagging of the skin in damp weather.

DH: What about the size of the gourd?

CB: Well, you have to be able to hold it! And you have to have one that’s hard. Sometimes that can limit you but, umm, you know, they’ve been made. I’ve made a couple out of large gourds. I don’t have any myself. The Akonting has a large gourd. Some of them are smaller. That one that Daniel Jatta plays is large I want to build one, but I haven’t got around to it. My shop is filled with storage stuff! And a *cat* lives back there!

DH: You’re not building too many gourd banjos these days, are you?

CB: No, I haven't built one for a couple of years. I had an order for one – I finally had to give his deposit back. I started it, I got the neck half done and then I never got any further. I've just been distracted trying to be a performer rather than a banjo maker.

DH: Now, you build it all with hand tools, is that right?

CB: Yeah. But, I have somebody else cut the neck blanks, on a bandsaw.

DH: Is there a reason that you prefer to use hand tools or is it a shop space limitation issue?

CB: Um, well, I suppose part of it is fear of loosing my fingertips and I've had several ex-students who have shortened their fingers.

DH: An issue for a musician/performer!

CB: Yeah, that and also the aesthetic of it. The figuring out how to do the cuts with hand tools was part of my development of how I was making them and I didn't really ever intend to use other, although I do have an electric drill that I did some of the holes with. But I just didn't want to make a big investment in power tools and so I was exploring the older ways making things at the same time that I was making them – since I had no real background in carpentry or cabinet making or instrument making.

DH: So, what are your opinions on the tone of gourd banjos? Do you strive for a particular sound?

CB: I strive for a projecting sound. I've listened to African instruments; generally they're very quiet, smaller types of instruments are fairly quiet and that's good if you're in a quiet environment! I wanted something I could play professionally.

DH: On a stage without amplification, or?

CB: Yeah, pretty much. And I think Scott Didlake was of the same mind.

DH: Although he talked about electrifying – internally, with a condenser mic ...

CB: Well, Scott's banjo teacher in Toronto, William Miles, was an old-timer – he played drums with Sousa's band – he believed that recorded music was not really music. There has been some talk recently that once you put music through a transistor – a microphone or recording device – then it's not music anymore, and that is much the same line of thought. It's separate from its source. When I perform I try, as often as practical, to perform without electronics. That, too, is something that we spoke of but Scott Didlake, he was very much into technology and technology came up a lot in his talk and he wanted to figure [out] how technology could help him make these things. For me I was thinking lower-tech! Lower-tech! Do something with just a penknife. What could I make with just a penknife? And that was part of the reason of using those little dipper gourds. How far back can you pull this? What is the most basic thing, and still you can make music? You know...? Well, if you were wandering in the woods and you wanted to make a musical instrument, what are some of the things you could do? Well, there are several things you could do and, one of them would be a musical bow, or a jaw harp, things like that. Aside from rhythmic instruments. And little gourd banjos! And what if you were stuck, I'd say, what if I was stuck on a desert island, I've got a gourd, and I've got time on my hands, I've got things so I can sit and play tunes and I already know all this stuff on the banjo and I was stuck out there, I sure would be bored if I couldn't play music so wouldn't I not, would I not try to make a banjo? If I were out there, I probably would! That's what I'd do if I had time enough on my hands. So, how would I go about [that]? Plant fibers and, uh, animal parts (laughs) – silly thing to think about! Oh well!

DH: Did you ever perform with any of your dipper gourds?

CB: Oh, I don't think so. I may have had one in front of a microphone at one time – in Tennessee somewhere. Well, I remember handing some around, passing some around at the Tennessee Banjo Institute. I handed one to Bela Fleck. Oh – he was amused!

DH: Um, so back to projection, what does your research show you about the relative projection of gourd banjos? Dipper gourds compared to canteen gourds or other gourds?

CB: Well, the gourds I've ended up using are cannonball shaped about eight to ten inches across. I haven't tried all the sizes. There's a lot of experimentation I have not done, but, I think with a head of about five, not more than six inches, maybe about six inches, four to six inches, with a piece of slunk head on there, which is resistant to damp weather – and a nice thin, tall bridge. I think that you can hear one of these banjos way down a block. I'm sure you could hear them a full block down on a quiet day.

DH: How do you like to attach the head?

CB: I use a bit of hide glue and hold it in place with some pegs or some tacks.

DH: You leave the tacks in? Afterwards, after the glue is dry?

CB: Yeah, I did, there's the option of taking them off, and putting a decorative strip around there and maybe replacing the tacks. You could paint on it or put some material or cloth or something down, but with

the shape of the gourd it's not an easy a thing to do. If you had a hoop, it would be easier. But once you've got that shoulders that come up across the top of the gourd, you've got a shape there that's difficult to fit...

DH: Crimps your cloth?

CB: Yes. Then, I use a lot of rubber bands to hold down the pieces of skin that stick out [between the tacks], and try to get it all clamped down pretty close – to dry as flat as possible on the edges. I'll trim around the edges razor knife.

DH: While it's still damp?

CB: After it dries. Usually I inscribe something on the perch pole – date that I made it on. I tried various ways of attaching the perch pole through the gourd. I think the last couple I settled on I just stick it in, put the tailpiece gut over it, and leave it! I've tried piercing it [the perch pole] and putting keys and slots and things but the gourd always moves or changes shape a little bit. Then if you want a new gourd, if that one breaks, you could send the neck back for another gourd, which by the way no one's ever done! Um, maybe they break and they throw them out, I don't know. I can replace a gourd. I've replaced a skin a couple of times. On my own [banjo] I've replaced a skin. If you get different size gourds, you want a little extra perch pole with more stick on there so that you can fit a different size gourd on it. The trickiest part is fitting it tight and I think some banjo makers don't really get a good fit and they'll shortcut some of that – they don't make a heel on the banjo so they don't have to fit the heel to the gourd, but, if you look at those photos I gave you of that strange gourd banjo...

DH: That “mystery” gourd?

CB: Mystery gourd! See how they fit that heel around that gourd? There's more work in that than in any other part of the instrument! I had those pictures early on when I first started making – had those pictures to guide me and I think those were from John Bernunzio who couldn't remember where it came from.

DH: Yeah, I've got those pictures posted on my website – we'll see if anyone can identify it. I think that banjo is in a museum in Georgia .

CB: Yeah! That would be interesting!

DH: Ok, so you like to get the skin really tight then?

CB: Yeah, but I pull it, I kind of wrestle it on in my lap and I pull it with my fingertips. I don't use any extraordinary method to stretch it on there. I figured if I pull it too tight, someone's going to leave it in the

sun and it's going to split. So I just kind of wrestle it in my lap and go across, put a couple of tacks on this side, go across the other side and just kind of pull it with my finger tips while its wet. I'll pre-drill holes. Look for a little dark spot and put the point of that tack in it. That's pretty tricky looking for a predrilled hole! Have you tried that?

DH: No, I punch those as I go along!

CB: First couple I did that way –I had a little pricker that I think was a small awl that was for cleaning an electric shaver or something a couple of years ago that I used to start the holes but when I start hammering them with a tack hammer, I think, I'm going to crack one of things! So I try to do a more thorough hole but it's easy to get a hole that's too big for the tack!

DH: Right.

CB: You want a snug fit! So, there you go. You got to figure all that stuff out and get everything set ahead of time. You need rubber bands – large rubber bands. Pieces of inner tube cut into strips.

DH: Do you think the type of wood you use in the neck has an effect on the tone?

CB: Yeah! Well, yeah, you want a dense wood. But then you have to watch out for too much weight so you have to trim the neck as trim as you can and the peg stock as thin as possible. One thing I haven't done much work with is the box type of peg head. The violin style. But I have done that on dipper gourds. Then, I generally don't use dipper gourds. Also, I'm not one for hand whittling pegs anymore. That's a pain! I have a shaver but those things don't work very well! It's enough to use the reamer, getting the holes cleaned out with a reamer to the right shape. Another hard thing is to get the peg holes all parallel! They seem to get all skewed. Probably that's the drill bit wobbling or something. Do you have that problem too?

DH: When you're reaming them out, you have to be holding the reamer parallel with the holes or it...

CB: Or it makes it wobble!

DH: You have to be as careful with the reamer as with the drill bit.

CB: Yeah! Well, and the grain goes right through it so as soon as the moisture changes, well then things are going to close up in some direction and you've got an oval shaped hole, anyway. At that point, a good thing to do would be make a sleeve – re-drill them or something!

DH: How many gourd banjos do you think you've made?

CB: You know, I've never numbered them. I thought I'd start pretty soon numbering them! There ain't that many. I don't know, a couple of dozen, probably. I've sold all but the one that I have here that I play on and that early one that I have on the wall. Dipper gourds I generally give away.

DH: Do you perform with your gourd banjo?

CB: Yes, I perform on it sometimes.

DH: And you've recorded an album with that banjo?

CB: Yes! "Clarke Buehling, Out of His Gourd". It's on cassette, but I've had numerous requests to do it on CD. I guess I'd have to expand it. They're not selling as fast as my other CD's.

DH: Right.

CB: But tapes still do sell. But I need to get more on CD. Now, I don't have time to do all that stuff right now. I can't seem to get around to it. Ahhh, too much to do, too little time...[sighs all around]

DH: Do you have any other recording projects using the gourd banjo in the future?

CB: No, I didn't have anything in mind to do any more recording with it. Like I say, maybe I'll expand that one, or, maybe occasionally a piece on a banjo recording. We'll see. Other things I have coming up are: finish up this ragtime recording and maybe do a minstrel recording. Maybe there's a chance then to do some gourd banjo on the minstrel one that we're thinking about doing next. After that I see doing classic style of stuff that's not covered in any particular style. Stuff that's all in between that doesn't get recorded. Galops and stuff...

DH: What do you think the future holds for gourd banjos and gourd banjo makers?

CB: [Laughs] the future! The future doesn't look that good. But, um, I think as long as people are making them, people are buying them and people are having fun with them, [that] they'll continue. Maybe it'll be a fad that will kind of fade out but people haven't stopped making them and people are selling them and people are buying them so maybe it is something that will be a tradition. Maybe someone will come out and make it big thing! Do a soundtrack to a movie or something with a gourd banjo and it'll bring a big lift to the market!

DH: Maybe there'll be one in a video game or something like that to capture the attention of youth!

CB: Yeah! Well, right now the purpose of it seems to be people who go into schools and do school programs. They say "here's the origin of the banjo" or "here's some very early African-American music and I'll do it on the gourd banjo" – and that seems to be where people are using them.

DH: I've seen evidence of a bit of that – from some top players too.

CB: So, I think, and then to promote the gourd banjo, we have to have a banjo contest, a *gourd* banjo contest. Not a gourd maker's contest but a composition contest. The contestants must compose and perform pieces that they've written for gourd banjo, maybe with open-ended variety. You could do something where you must do it in a certain form, and that might be OK to give people rules to follow to help them compose, like you've got to do a waltz, then you've got to do a polka, or a... but then have a category that you can do whatever you want and you can do... make sounds of dripping water or something if you want.

DH: Ok. [Laughs] Need to send that dipper back to Bela Fleck for a fusion piece...

CB: All gourd orchestra! We should do that! I think I'm trying to recapture old culture – ancient culture. Gourd orchestra! Say now, here we go, this is something we need to take on tour. We can open up for the Flecktones with the gourd orchestra. We'll have a one string bass gourd, maybe played with a bow or something. [Laughs] Or a gut bucket gourd! And, umm, different size gourds and then play all this kind of fretless sounding music... Hawaiian kinds of stuff... slide around and twang and have this kind of gourd resonance and write some pieces for it. Maybe serial pieces that kind of like twentieth century serial music with some percussion with it. I've got some ideas here for some pieces! [Laughter]

DH: Speaking of fretless, did you ever think about putting frets on your banjos?

CB: I never wanted to except with the idea of tying on frets in the viola da gamba style. I have a diagram for doing that. I think you need a curved fingerboard for that to work effectively. You might sell them with gut frets tied on it or even notched. Little notches on the edges of the fingerboard to set them in a spot and sell them to a beginner! With a "take 'em off later" when they learn to play! (Properly!)

DH: And did you ever think about an arched fingerboard?

CB: Thought about it. I don't think I could make one. I don't have the facility to make one properly. Dippers have arched fingerboards, by the way.

DH: They're built in!

CB: Yeah, they're built in, I guess. [Laughter] Now Scott would fret with fretwire. Greg [Sule] Wilson has one that's fretted. Now that's a tricky thing in itself, anyway. But I think that gets away from the idea – the original idea, to use frets.

DH: Were there any other contemporary gourd banjo makers that influenced you in any way?

CB: I saw some things that I said I didn't want to do. Oh, I don't know. I wanted at one point to do some wood burning and coloring on the gourds and neck carving. I just don't have the patience. Or time. I knew I would never get my money out of it! Now, Horger Knight does that. And I've seen others had done a little bit of carving on the heel.

DH: Yeah, you mentioned an idea of carving some vines on the heel.

CB: Vines, yeah, with gourd leaves. Leaves dyed into – shoe dye is good for gourds. For a while I was going to contract with a woman out in California who did that, sister of a friend of mine but she decided she didn't want to do that. I was going to fit and send her the gourd and have her decorate them and sign them, and then put it on the gourd and sell it for whatever it costs, with her costs added.

DH: She was going to paint the leaves on the gourd?

CB: Yeah, various things – she did fish and things... That was one thing that Scott and I talked about too was that each instrument should be its own work of art like a painting. Like a... "This is a Monet, this is a Renoir, this is a Didlake, this is a Buehling...". Each one would be significantly different, at least in the decoration on it, or carving on it. Individualize it. For a while I was naming them but it didn't catch on. I thought maybe giving an instruction. I did ask a couple of people if they would name their banjo when they got it, when they received it, after they played it. I don't know if that happened.

DH: So, did you and Scott have any other *different* ideas about marketing these things?

CB: Well, yeah, we were going to be in friendly competition. He suggested, like Fairbanks and Stewart, we would have fake rantings about whose was better than the other and all this stuff, and have these kind of appear in places and uh..

DH: Popular media?

CB: Yeah, right! Time magazine! Where we would have tests and stuff. But that didn't quite happen. He died before that came to fruition.

DH: Well, Clarke, our time is up. Thanks for sharing your insight into contemporary gourd banjo making.