

Scott Didlake – “An Apprentice With The Ghosts”
By Bob Carlin

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It is always bad news when a friend leaves this world for whatever may exist, if anything, beyond our corporal existence. It is especially painful when that comrade is in the music field. And, almost unbearable when the compatriot dies before their expected time. Such was the case of Scott Didlake, still in his 40s at the time of his passing. Scott was a banjo maker who brought a combination of high-tech thinking and handmade artistry to the field, applying his studies to the manufacture of gourd instruments.

When it comes to hand-crafted gourd banjos, Scott Didlake was perhaps the Orville Gibson or the J. W. Day of that instrument. A ceaseless experimenter, researcher, and innovator, he brought modern techniques and materials to the oldest of banjo designs.

Scott said, "I wanted to create something you couldn't put in a machine and erase – something tangible. They're meant to be a memorial to the West Africans who endured so much and laid the foundation for American music. I believe their spirits still inhabit those sound chambers."

Born in New Orleans, Scott Didlake grew up 35 miles south of the state capitol of Jackson, in the rural Mississippi town of Crystal Springs. As Didlake's student Jason Smith has written, "Many true natives of Crystal Springs are ancestrally bound to the landed aristocracy which was so prevalent in this state, a system and way of life which centered around agriculture, especially cotton, slavery, and around the well known plantation. When this system collapsed after the Civil War, this aristocracy, from which Scott and many others are descended, became the poor white sector of this region, the class which was the product of a phenomenon known as "downward nobility" in Scott's words."

Didlake was first exposed to the banjo by his uncle Harley Gordon, a two-finger picking five-string banjoist. The first tune Scott learned, around the age of 12, was "Redwing."

Banjo players were scarce in the Mississippi of Scott's youth. "So," Scott said, "whenever there would be concerts with banjo players, 'we'd go down to watch them. Once, I got to meet Earl Scruggs by simply putting on a string tie, a striped sports coat (the band uniform of Earl's group), and carrying my banjo case, walked backstage. They just assumed I was supposed to be there. So, Jerry Brooks (another area banjoist) and I went up to Scruggs' dressing room. He was a very nice guy. He was very willing to share licks and he proceeded to sit down and gave me and Jerry a lesson. I never did, or was able, to copy Scruggs' style, so what I developed was a improvisational three-finger style that wasn't really bluegrass.

"I went on to college," Didlake continued, "and became involved in other things and quit playing. I spent nine years during the 1970s living in exile in Canada. I began to play

again. As I had this high stress job, I found that I played more and more, and it became very important to me in that it was the only true release I had that I enjoyed. And I took claw hammer banjo lessons.

"I came into contact with other banjo players 'round and about Toronto. So I went to visit a woman whose name was Caroline Moyer, and Caroline told me about William Miles, her teacher, and set it up so I could have a lesson with him."

Miles (1878-1979), 95 years old at the time and a former student of the great banjoist Alfred A. Farland, was often cited by Scott as his mentor. Didlake had initially gone to talk with William Miles about making a documentary on him, but was convinced to stay and take lessons. He studied the classic finger-style for five years with Miles, learning to read music in the process.

Scott often felt the irony in the lack of interest in William Miles professed by Didlake's bluegrass cronies of that time. When he informed them that one of the premiere players of the style that influenced Earl Scruggs lived down the street, "there was absolutely no interest in it, no interest whatsoever. None of these people ever went and even visited Miles, who was a living banjo treasure if there ever was one."

When asked the single most important lesson taught by William Miles, Didlake said "he believed that music was live experience, he did not believe that recordings were music, and what was important to him was that we learned to play his music, which we did." In other words, recordings did not keep music alive. The only way music truly survives is through people's playing.

"Later on" I returned to Mississippi," said Scott Didlake, "and I no longer had people to play duets with, which is very important in the classic style of banjo playing. I had no students (Jason Scott being the exception), and so I was left to my own devices. I returned to innovating, which is how I started out as a kid. What I really did in my own playing was to combine all the styles that ever existed, and I would play clawhammer, and bluegrass, and classic licks in my music. I sought to integrate them all and ultimately, being dissatisfied with the nature of the instruments I had, I wanted to make my own based on the original form of the instrument, made out of gourds by slaves. And I wanted to take their original technology and modernize it, add frets and make modern instruments which new forms of banjo music could be played on."

His first gourd banjo was made 11 years ago, a copy of an instrument made in 1700s Surinam, South America. As Jason Scott puts it, Didlake was interested in "the recreation of the process" of growing gourds for banjos. Toward this end, he consulted experts from top horticultural scientists to developers of aircraft for human powered flight.

Scott felt that the secret to a good gourd banjo lay in the way the gourds were raised and then prepared to be sound chambers for the instruments. He began germinating calabashes on his homestead in Crystal Springs, taking a year of cultivation. Didlake used pre-Civil War Mississippi heart pine or wenge for necks, paduk for fingerboards,

rosewood or ebony for tuning pegs, and moradello for tail pieces. Modern Fiberskyn (synthetic animal skin) was Didlake's head material of choice, attached to the gourd with brass nails.

As *Craft in America* by Phyllis George (The Summit Group, 1993) describes his banzas: "When the process is over, the result is part instrument, part beautifully designed object, part living history, and part homage to the West African musicians – the 'ghosts' whose contributions have been forgotten. 'From them,' Scott said, 'I learned that you don't make a banza – you grow one, and the cultivation of a fabulous calabash sound chamber is the agrarian secret to their lost musical art.'"

Jason Scott writes that Scott saw these instruments as representing the root of an entire culture: musical, racial, political, social, and economic. "All these things are tied up in the story of the banjo," said Didlake. "Through all these times banjos have had their heydays and their lean years, and that cycle has seemed to have happened and come and gone, and come and gone, and come and gone again."

Didlake made about 50 instruments over the last 10 years of his life. Owners include the Mississippi State Historical Museum, the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and John Hartford. Scott's banjos can be heard in appearances by Joe Ayers and Tony Trischka, as well as on their recordings, including *Minstrel Banjo Style* (Trischka and Ayers) and *World Turning* (Trischka), both on Rounder Records.

Another goal of Didlake's was to widen the appeal of the instrument from old-time banjo enthusiasts and historians to contemporary players of all kinds of acoustic and electric music." Towards this end, he began making three- and four-string instruments that could be easily played by any musician, novice and accomplished alike.

Scott was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) in March, 1994. Scott Didlake died on October 25, 1994.

I visited Scott during the summer before his death. He had been making an effort to preserve the information needed to manufacture his instruments. "It's sliding from me into the hands of somebody else," he said. Didlake had hoped to pass his skills full-circle to young African Americans in Mississippi, a wish that went unfulfilled. Richard Nolen and Jason Smith assisted Scott in the making of his last instruments. Pete Ross, a young artist from Maryland, moved to Mississippi at the end of Scott's life to take over Kalenda Banza.

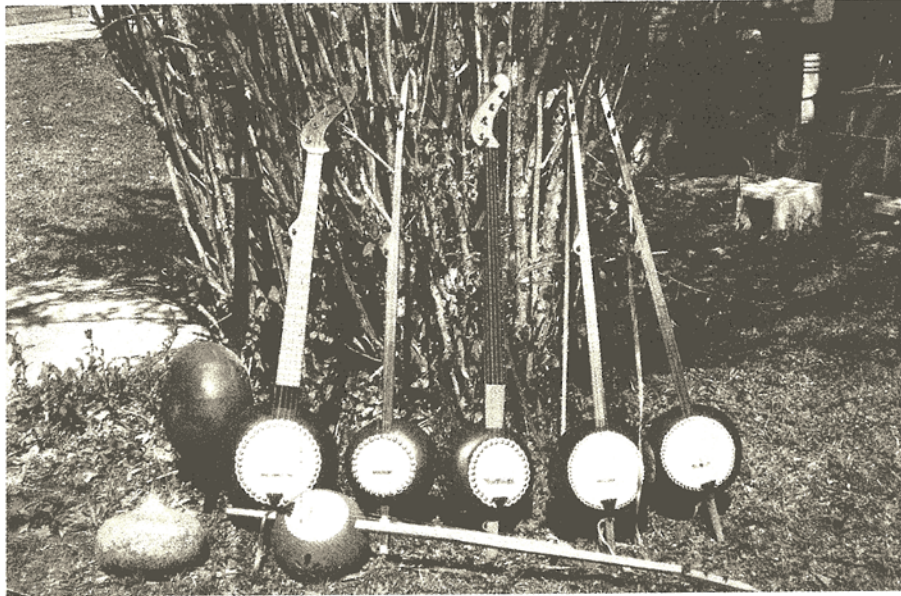
"To bring back the genesis instrument of southern music and render it in modern forms," said Scott Didlake, "I served nine years as an apprentice to ghosts. It is for them I have made these instruments; for their memory, for their honor, for all they endured and what they gave us in spite of it all, which is nothing less than American music in its Afro-Euro entirety."

Information for this article comes from Scott's own recorded words and archives, and is courtesy of his widow, Carrie Didlake and Pete Ross, including: "Straight From the Heart" *The [Jackson, MS] Clarion-Ledger*. Sherry Lucas, 9/6/1994; interview by Jason Smith, 5/5/1994; interview by myself, 9/1994. The future of Kalenda Banza is somewhat up in the air. It is unclear if Pete will keep his workshop in Mississippi and what form Ross' future instruments will take.

Bob Carlin is a performer, a teacher of traditional music, and a recording artist whose initial influences included Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham.



courtesy Carrie Didlake



courtesy Carrie Didlake



courtesy Carrie Didlake

Photo bottom-L-R: Richard Nolen, Bob Carlin, Scott and Carrie Didlake, Jason Smith at the Didlake apartment, Jackson, MS, summer 1994