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# The apprenticeship of Banjo Pete

How did a Hampden punk rocker end up as one of the world's last builders of 18th- and 19th-century-style banjos?

By Chris Iseli

At some point in their lives, all true music lovers go on a hunt for the roots of the music that stirs them. For punk rockers like Hampden's Pete Ross, the search generally leads to New York and London and Washington, D.C., to the anti-commercial, do-it-yourself ethos of punk progenitors like the Ramones, the Clash, Bad Brains, Wire, and the Fall. But for Ross, the search has also included an unusual detour. For Ross, it has also led back to the American plantations of the 18th and early 19th centuries—and to a chance meeting in Mississippi with a dying man who passed

on the knowledge and skills Ross needed to carry on a musical tradition that might have otherwise died as well.

Ross, 33, plays bass for The Fuses, a Baltimore punk band whose sharp, angular music and even sharper, politically conscious lyrics have garnered them considerable acclaim both here and points far and wide, and he works as building superintendent for the Baltimore-based independent music distributor Morphius Records.

He is also one of the last people in the world who builds gourd banjos of the sort built by the very first banjo makers and players in the United States: the West

African natives who carried the tradition and craft with them when they were brought here as slaves.

Although the connection between banjos and punk rock might not be immediately apparent, Ross's interest in the early instruments originally stemmed from his interest in the do-it-yourself tradition he had found in punk. It was the late 1980s, and Ross was working at a record store in Silver Spring, Maryland, near his hometown of Wheaton. On one particularly busy afternoon, he put a record of a string band on the stereo.

"It was a field recording of rural black musicians playing the music that later evolved into bluegrass," Ross recalls. "I had no idea what it was at the time—I just threw it on because it was busy. About three songs into it, it grabbed me, and it just kind of guided my interest from there. I started pursuing the history out of curiosity and a little bit out of punker ethics: I wanted to find a place in American musical history where it was uncorrupted by the marketplace." Although that part of his search was a dead end—"If you go all the way back to these banjos," he points out, "the people who made them were here because of commerce"—he realized that he had stumbled onto a part of American cultural history that had been largely forgotten, and that he wanted to revive.

"I had been reading about the instrument as it was originally played by slaves," Ross says, "and I wanted to hear one, but I knew there were really none around. There were a couple of iffy instruments, but their provenance was uncertain, so I just decided to build one."

In his research, which drew on the resources of the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the private collections of other banjo enthusiasts, among others, Ross unearthed some written accounts from people who had seen slaves building their banjos, but most of what remains of the early history of the instrument exists only as drawings on the covers of old sheet music and paintings of plantation scenes. With these flimsy scraps of historical record as his only guide, Ross hit the wood shop at New York's School for the Visual Arts, where he was studying at the time.

**Bona fide banjos: Pete Ross and two of his hand-built gourd banjos, modeled on the earliest versions built in America by West African slaves.**

He completed his first banjo in 1992. Two years later, just after his graduation, a trip to Mississippi led to an even more direct connection with the banjo's history.

He was traveling with his then-girlfriend, who was visiting family in Jackson, and he had been told by other banjo enthusiasts that he should try to get in touch with a Jackson native by the name of Scott Didlake, who had been following a similar thread of banjo history. When Ross called, Didlake invited him to come right over. When Ross arrived at the apartment where Didlake lived and worked, Didlake took him right into his shop and put him to work.

Didlake was a colorful character in his mid-40s whose omnivorous curiosity about life's mysteries had led him to pursue his interest in this lost piece of cultural history with the same intensity as he devoted to his interest in conspiracy theories and UFOs. He had studied banjo-playing with a nearly 100-year-old man in Canada who had himself learned the craft from a popular banjo player of the 1890s. And if he was a little overly anxious to begin passing what he had learned on to Ross, it was not without reason: Didlake was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease.

"I didn't meet my old girlfriend's family at all on that trip," Ross says with a laugh. "I was at this guy's place the whole time. On the second day, a friend of his followed me out and said, 'Look, he had given up on finding an apprentice before he died, but he wants you to come back and study with him.'" Ross initially balked at the proposition. His girlfriend would not be graduating for another year, he told them; maybe he could come back then. In the meantime, he went back to New York, and Didlake tried to instruct him via telephone. But it was nearly impossible to communicate some of the ideas verbally, and as the realization sank in that Didlake probably wouldn't live another year, Ross decided that he had no choice but to return to Jackson.

"It wasn't the easiest decision I've made," Ross says. "I ditched everything in New York. My relationship with that girl did not survive. But it seemed like too important a legacy to let it die out with this guy. I just couldn't let it all go."

For the next six months, Ross slept on Didlake's couch at night and spent his days learning Didlake's techniques. On some days, Didlake was able to join Ross in the shop. On other days, when Didlake's

condition prevented him from getting up, Ross sat beside his bed at a school desk, taking instruction from him and using templates to pantomime the assembly of the banjo parts. Then Ross would go to the shop and try the techniques for real, returning after each step to get Didlake's thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

Didlake passed away less than six months after Ross returned to Jackson. Ross stayed another six months, working in Didlake's shop and living in an abandoned electronics shop on the back lot of the property where a couple of Didlake's friends lived, and then he headed back north—back to Maryland.

THESE DAYS, ROSS RUNS HIS OWN business, called Jubilee Banjos, out of a cramped basement shop in the Hampden rowhouse he shares with his girlfriend of the last several years. The walls of the shop are lined with bins holding dozens of dried gourds, which Ross buys from growers in Mississippi and California to use as banjo bodies, and stacks of pine and cypress scrap wood, salvaged from 150- and 200-year old houses, from which he carves the necks. It takes him four or five full working days to complete each instrument, which he sells for between \$600 and \$700. Aside from the band saw that sits in one corner (which Ross uses in cutting the basic shape of the neck because, he says, "not being a field hand, I don't have the muscle to do it by hand"), Ross tries to stick exclusively to the tools and materials available to the builders of the instruments he uses as historical referents.

Although Ross's banjos are perhaps the purest forms of the instrument still in existence, they don't look or sound much like what most people imagine when they think of the banjo. The heads and strings are made of animal skin, not plastic, and they have real gut strings rather than steel ones. They're pitched lower than modern banjos, and because there's no metal in their strings or bodies, they have a rounder, more mellow sound than the brittle twang of today's instruments.

"What most people think of as the banjo is a post-industrial instrument," says Ross. "There's a lot of metal up in that rim."

As far as he knows, he is the only gourd banjo maker working today who hews so closely to the examples set forth in the few surviving images and written descriptions of the earliest American banjos.

"There's only one other guy I know of

who's doing these early banjos, and he's taking a different approach," says Ross. "He's using the historical instruments as a stepping-off point for his own instruments, which have some historical influence but aren't reproductions, strictly speaking." Even Ross's mentor used some contemporary materials, partly in the interest of making his instruments more resistant to the natural elements (temperature, humidity) that can deleteriously affect Ross's banjos, partly in an effort to place the historical instrument in a contemporary setting. Still, Ross says, Didlake's fundamental aim was the same as his own. "He was really motivated to redeem the history, to give voices back to these anonymous people who are so central to our culture," he says. "I feel much the same way, and I think that's one of the reasons why he took me on as an apprentice."

Ross's knowledge of and strict adherence to period techniques and traditions have created a fairly high demand for his work, particularly among museums that want to represent the instruments of the late 1700s and early 1800s in their exhibitions. Ross's work has been commissioned for an exhibition on the history of the banjo in Boston, for the Blue Ridge Institute's traveling exhibition on "The Banjo in Virginia," and for display at Virginia's Appomattox Courthouse. Last year, he gave a talk in Williamsburg, Virginia, about the documentation he has compiled on the banjo's history, which led to a request from the Katonah Museum of Art in Westchester, New York, to write about his findings for publication in the catalogue for its upcoming exhibition on pre-Civil War banjos. This month, the Museum of Musical Instruments in Brussels, Belgium, will celebrate its upcoming exhibition on the history of the banjo—which will feature two of Ross's reproductions of circa-1800 instruments—with a concert of banjo music performed on instruments from the exhibition.

Ross and his girlfriend traveled to Belgium in April to hand-deliver Ross's banjos, stopping first in England to do a little celebrating of their own—at a festival featuring Mission of Burma, Wire, and the Fall, three seminal bands in the punk rock tradition where Ross's passion for music took root in the first place.

It seemed an appropriate detour for Ross to take. E