Interview with Pete Ross
Colonial Williamsburg – November 9, 2002
By David Hyatt

D: Pete, tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born, lived and such.

P: I was born in 1969 in Washington, DC, but the family moved out to the suburbs of DC in Aspen Hill, Silver Spring, which was just a continuous post-WWII, track housing, amorphous blob of suburbs. Once I moved out of my folk's house, I still lived around that area for a while. After high school, I worked, did a little community college, stuff like that, and when I was 22, I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York.

D: When did you first develop an interest in music?

P: Well, I had piano lessons when I was in elementary school. My parents took me out to see classical music and stuff like that all the time. My teacher was a serious classical musician, but I lost interest pretty quick. It was too restrictive for me. In high school I started playing guitar in punk rock bands. That was a pretty inspiring scene to be involved in.

D: When did you first get exposed to banjo/old-time music?

P: When I worked for the Parks Department, they had an old-timey band that played the Harvest Festival every year. But then I started working at this really great record store. It was run by a guy who was deeply involved in all sorts of great music – jazz, blues, and country music. It was one of the few places I could buy Punk at the time. And so I got slightly exposed to more stuff I wasn't interested in before. Then one day it was real busy, and without any forethought I threw on a record to play just to keep music going in the store. It was the Altamont Black String Band record and somewhere along the third song it just completely captured my attention. And that's when the obsession began.

D: Remind me, where are you at this time?

P: I was probably 20. I was living in group houses or living with my girlfriend, still playing in punk bands. Then, I just started to figure out what the heck it was I had heard. They had put the record in the Blues section because they were black bands. I didn't know what it was because it did not resemble bluegrass, country, or blues.

D: So, you were starting from scratch!

P: Yeah, trying to find more music like the stuff on Altamont. A year or so later Some of the customers more involved in this music told me to go to Galax, and I bought a banjo there. I was just gradually finding out more about the history of the instrument. It was a whole series of revelations. One of the first was how little history had been published! And having been exposed to the banjo from having heard a black band, I thought, "Well, this is a black instrument." This is a real revelation because that is the opposite of the cultural stereotype of today. Then you trace the history back through minstrelsy and find it was sort of a big pop cultural boom. *That* was a big revelation. It is pretty offensive stuff, but it's kind of fascinating too. From minstrelsy you trace the thread further back to the early accounts of slave music. White people writing at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century seemed pretty amazed by black music, and by the instrument they thought central to it – the banjo.

D: And when did you decide to build a banjo?

P: Shortly after the Galax trip. Considering the birth of our popular culture – minstrelsy with its roots in the folk culture, the culture of the slaves, I realized how important all that is, and then I wanted to hear the root, core instrument in the earliest accounts of the banjo. I found there isn't one in existence. In 1991, I went to see the gourd banjo in the Met. Somebody had taken a Boucher neck, and they just worked it on to a gourd. You could see where the original rim had been on the rim stick, the crude work to fit the neck to the gourd. So that was a letdown. But as I'm turning up earlier images, none look like that banjo anyways. There was a woodshop at the art school, so I started making them in an effort to hear what it sounded like, circa 1800 or so.

D: How did you go about that?

P: I tried to deduce what would make sense. It never made sense to me to try to have a separate joint for the rim stick, so I just had a continuous piece of wood that ran all the way through, and it turns out that's the way the spike lutes are made in West Africa. I still used that curly peg head even though I'd already realized that, "no, this isn't right; it doesn't make sense to model it after the 'Boucher' gourd banjo."

D: Did you make another?

P: I made a bunch more. I kept improving on them. I ended up doing my senior thesis based around all this stuff. It was a controversy at school in the Fine Arts Program. Some teachers thought it was great, and some of them didn't approve at all because it was too functional to be fine art. I did a whole display around it that had many other elements aside from the banjos.

Then, the summer after I graduated [1994] I took a trip with my girlfriend at the time; we stopped at Galax, and then continued to Jackson. I had already corresponded and talked with a bunch of other people, including Clarke Buehling.

We had talked, traded some music and pictures of banjos and things. He convinced me get in touch with Scott Didlake. So I called Scott up, and he said, "come on over, bring a banjo!" Soon as we got to Jackson, I went over to his place and he put me right in his shop.

D: Like, you had lunch, and then you walked downstairs and started working on a banjo? (Laughs)

P: Pretty much! I don't think we even had lunch. He wanted to show me the shop. His apartment was one floor and he had one room set up as a shop. We talked and he showed me how he had everything all rigged out. I got up the next day and went back to Scott's place. That day, after we were done, his buddy Richard followed me out and said, "Look we have been trying to find an apprentice, and kind of given up on it, but Scott thinks you're the guy, so we want you to come back."

D: What was your reaction to that?

P: Well, I was stunned but I had in the back of my head a hope that sort of offer would come. After we returned to New York, I had a daily phone call with Scott that lasted a couple of hours. He would try to explain everything to me. We realized that wasn't working, and then there were a couple of days that he was really sick and I realized I just had to go back. So I did.

D: What was the apprenticeship like?

P: I got there in the evening. The next day we were in the shop and it was intensive right away. Within three days of getting there he had a bad day and had to go to the hospital. That's the way it would proceed, some days he could come with me to the shop and explain something to me, put me to work on something, other days he couldn't get out of bed. We had an elementary school desk sitting next to his bed, and I sat there taking notes of what he said. Occasionally I would make a drawing of what he was explaining and show him that: "yea exactly, that's perfect," or he'd have me re-draw it. Sometimes I would have his templates with me. I would mime assembling the templates to make sure I understood what he was saying. I would go into the shop, which was in the next room, and try what he had explained to me. Then I'd go back into the bedroom; get a thumbs up, or a thumbs down. He died just a few months after that. But we had gotten to the point where he relaxed and he said, "okay you got it, you got enough, you understand all the procedures." I continued there for about a year and then I moved back east.

D: How many banjos did you make during that year?

P: Around a dozen. And then, once I got back I was broke. I had to move back to my parent's house. It took me about a year to make enough money to get my own

place and get my shop together. I had some tools already, and Don Rusnak gave me some tools from his banjo business. I made a bench, got a band saw. Part of my research centered on finding out what tools would have been in the hands of somebody building an instrument in the 1800's, and what tools a slave would be allowed to have. I've always assumed that there would be pretty skilled carpenters among slaves.

D: Did you pick up where you left off in Mississippi?

P: Well, I went to my own sensibilities as far as materials go. The painted gourds, the exotic neck woods that Scott used – I went to one that was "all natural," and with no fillers at the neck/gourd joint. Another important difference was to have the banjo pitched at an early to mid 19th century pitch instead of the modern G pitch.

D: Tuned to E?

P: Yea, down to E or even F. Gut strings, not nylon strings. I was moving back towards some of the historic things that interested me.

D: I think you mentioned that you prefer the four string [three long and one short] over the five, why is that?

P: They play better. The tone is better. Aesthetically, it looks right too. I've made five-string ones, but I think that the bass string just dampens the head. It kills the attack. They seem consistently that way. There are historic reasons as well. If I'm going to make a replica of some image from the 18th century, four strings are all they show on any of those. The results we've had with five-string gourd banjos could offer an explanation as to why those earliest banjos were four-stringers. Songs in the Briggs book [1855] and other tunes I found from early black sources are done without that bass string.

D: What is your current focus?

P: I'm just constantly refining the banjos, constantly trying to get closer and closer to the 1800 banjo. I have two divergent paths; one is the historic path and I also keep messing around with Scott's ideas. I'm using the production of the instruments to sort out the nature of the original banjo. I'm trying to match those images from that earliest period, predating the influence of minstrelsy and commercial production. The last few years I have also had chances to examine West African instruments, and that influenced the head arrangement.

D: What criteria do you use when you are looking for a gourd for a banjo?

P: Well the ultimate gourd is one that has a very hard, thin wall. The guy picking

a gourd for a banjo in 1800 [that ended up in an engraving or painting] probably used some selectivity. If I copy the banjo from the painting, I have to select from many, far more carefully, to find a match, so that if you hold the banjo next to that painting it is shaped the same as that painting.

D: And is a good sounding gourd on top of that! Are there any construction techniques that you have that are sort of specific to your shop and that you see as unique in any way, or that are your trademark?

P: I don't know if anybody else is using just period tools. I use wood that's salvaged from buildings put up in the mid-19th century or older. This way the look, feel and hardness of the wood is as it would have been in the oldest banjos. The types of wood I use are based on historic references. As far as outcome goes, I worry about getting the string action good the whole way up the neck, which is pretty flipping tricky on a gourd banjo.

D: So what does the future hold for you and Jubilee Gourd Banjos?

P: I don't know, there are other things that I'd like to do. I would like to reproduce gourd fiddles. I might start taking my research seriously in an academic setting – go to graduate school.

D: Do you see yourself as being a teacher?

P: Yes, part of the aim is to bring this voice back to life that has been so central to our culture. You want to give other people those revelations you first had when you discovered this history. The best thing is the realization that, "well this is a banjo, which to my surprise I see came from Africa, so then whites and blacks were communicating at some level from a very early time," whereas we tend to think of these cultures as being totally segregated and acting in opposition to one another. Despite the institution of slavery, and all kinds of horrible racist laws and edicts from the top of the white state and society, common folk interacted and behaved like people do. It's kind of like, you hope if you put enough gourd banjos in the world and you say it's a gourd banjo and this is why there are gourd banjos, even if people never see on one again, they walk away with this realization that "well our culture worked in different ways then I had thought." You're going to change the perception of how people have interacted in our society all this time, and this will change our way of thinking of American history.