

## **Bob Thornburg**

**Interview by Pat Cloud** – *Banjo Newsletter*, Volume XXVI No. 11, Sept 1999

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### **[Introduction]**

*My first exposure to gourd banjos was in the early 1990s at a local festival in the California Eastern High Sierras. Mike Seeger was giving the workshop and was using an amazing fretless gourd banjo to demonstrate frailing technique. Other than the obvious primal attraction, the gourd instrument he played had an original throaty sound that seemed to fit Old Time music exactly! Bob Thornburg is an American original. He has adopted the ancient philosophy of instrument making in which the materials themselves determine the unique voice and timber [timbre] of each instrument. His extensive research into the oldest forms of the banjo and his marriage between the modern building techniques and the reverence for Old Time music sound make his instruments a rare find. As Bob is fond of saying, "300 years behind the times and going nowhere." -Pat Cloud*

**Pat Cloud:** First of all, let me ask you about your background-where you're from, where you started out in this life-basic stuff.

**Bob Thornburg:** I was born in Muncie, Indiana, and lived there for the first nine years of my life. Then we moved to California. I grew up in Fresno and eventually went to college in Colorado. Then I came back to Fresno and did some graduate work at the University of North Carolina-where I first came in contact with banjo music. That was about the time of the folk boom.

**BNL:** This would be the sixties, then?

**BT:** Yeah. I went to North Carolina in 1959. I was doing graduate work in the theater department.

**BNL:** So you have been close to the entertainment thing for quite awhile then?

**BT:** Yes-actually it started then. Both my wife and I were in the theater department at UNC. During the summer we worked on the outer banks of North Carolina in the outdoor drama, "The Lost Colony." On our nights off we were part of a musical group that did folk music and that's where I first got interested in the whole thing.

**BNL:** So you're a true product of the 60s folk revival and you were near a university where a lot of banjo music was being played.

**BT:** Well, not necessarily banjo music, but a lot of folk music. Mostly, it was guitars. But I did buy an old banjo from a guy that lived near Chapel Hill, and I got Pete Seeger's little red book.

**BNL:** What was that banjo like?

**BT:** It was an old open-back; it had a plastic head. One time the head broke and so I walked in to a music store and asked for a banjo head—I had no idea they came in different sizes. The guy gave me one and of course it didn't fit.

**BNL:** Let's talk about when you first started working with wood.

**BT:** I'm probably like a lot of people. In the early 60s when I got married and started a family I had to make a living, so I just put the music aside other than being a listener. I didn't do anything with it for about fifteen years. I picked it up again while living in Bishop, California in 1974, when I started taking classical guitar lessons. I've always been a fan of classical guitar and there happened to be a teacher here. I took lessons for awhile until he left town. I had been his best student so I picked up his remaining students and became the teacher. The more I played guitar, the more interested I became in the history of guitars and the guitar itself—its construction and history. So around 1975 I decided to try to make a classical guitar.

**BNL:** Would that be your introduction into actual hands-on woodworking?

**BT:** Exactly. Except for making a foot stool in junior high school. [laughter] The more I got involved in construction, the less playing I did--that took a definite nose dive. I

built classical guitars from 1975 to 1983. During that period, I made 15 or 16 guitars. I had played banjos in the sixties for awhile and my interest in guitars led to me hanging out in music stores that had vintage instruments, and so my interest in old banjos was rekindled. I contacted John Bernunzio and bought old junker banjos from him that were kind of hopeless. I'd take them apart, see how they were made, fix them and put them back together. This would have been around 1983.

So I started finding out what made banjos tick. I have a predisposition to wanting to know the beginnings of anything I'm working with, so I kept working on banjos that were older and older, and reading more about them. Eventually that led me to gourd banjos which are, in our country, the oldest form of the instrument. I built my first gourd banjo about 1991.

**BNL:** Let's talk about gourd instruments. Your research took you to pictorial representations of banjos, old paintings and prints or woodcuts, in order to make banjos from scratch. How did you go about finding out the proper "vegetable" to make gourd banjos?

**BT:** My main resources were from a trip I made to the museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee in the mid-eighties. They've got a really neat display of old banjos. None of those were gourd banjos, but there were a lot of gourd instruments: gourd fiddles, gourd dulcimers—all kinds. That served as a starting point. I picked up the Foxfire books—one of them has an article on gourd banjos. Dena Epstein's book, "*Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*," gave me a lot of information and a good bibliography. From that point on, I started searching periodicals and working with other people's bibliographies, trying to pick up what I could about the earliest banjos known in the United States.

**BNL:** Can you give me a proper name of the gourd that you use?

**BT:** The common name is "hardshell gourd." They grow in many different shapes, but they're all the same species. They just happen to be a gourd that dries hard. They have fairly thick shells which make them able to withstand the stress of becoming banjo sound chambers.

**BNL:** The gourd is the actual fruit of the plant.

**BT:** Yeah—the gourd is actually part of the pumpkin family. It's a little confusing in that sometimes gourds are referred to as calabashes. Actually, the calabash is a rather bowling ball-like pod that grows on a tree. Sometimes banjos *are* made from calabashes. David Holt brought back a calabash from Africa, and I made him a banjo. The names have become interchangeable, so sometimes you'll hear people talk about calabash banjos when in reality they're gourd banjos.

**BNL:** One is from a tree and the other's from a vine.

**BT:** Right. There are some calabash trees in the Caribbean and in Florida too.

**BNL:** Let's move to the construction. What you actually do. First of all, do they need to be prepared and dried?

**BT:** Yes.

**BNL:** Do you then treat them with anything?

**BT:** As far as the gourds go, I buy them rough right out of the field. When I get them they've got a skin, they're covered with mud, and they've got insects crawling over them. I just wash them off and then set them to dry. In our climate, which is very dry, they'll be dry within a month or so. When I'm satisfied they're dry, I scrub them down with steel wool which takes the skin off and smoothes them up. At that point I'll determine what size sound hole I want on that particular gourd and scribe it out. After cutting the hole, there's the job of scraping the insides out. There's all kinds of fungus, seeds and who knows what inside. Then I'm ready to fit a head and attach the neck.

**BNL:** You mentioned the various ways you use to tack the skin or to stretch the skin over the front of the hole that you've cut. What kind of skin do you use? And how did you arrive at the system for stretching the skin over the head?

**BT:** Well, traditionally, the historical instruments were tack heads. There are various ways of getting the skin tight over the sound hole. I have a little machine that I use—a little piece of wood that I set the gourd on. I stretch the skin over the top and keep it taut while I put the tacks in. Bob Flesher has a similar system. With a tack head it's important that the skin is applied as tight as possible because there's not going to be any future adjustment. It's stuck there.

**BNL:** Was that the initial method you tried to use?

**BT:** Yes, it was.

**BNL:** But did you then say to yourself, maybe there's some way of making a variable adjustment to it?

**BT:** Here in California, it doesn't make any difference. You put the head on and it's going to stay tight because it's so dry here. But when I'd take a skin head banjo to the east, for example. Whether it's a regular open back or a gourd banjo, it's obvious what's going to happen to it in that humidity—it's going to slump, and in some cases, the head is going to loosen up to the point where it's unplayable.

**BNL:** And this is why Gibson springloaded ball bearings up against a tone ring to theoretically take the slack out of the skin heads in the early Mastertones that they produced.

**BT:** That's right! [laughter]

**BNL:** So you came up with this other system...

**BT:** I tried to come up with a system that allows the head to be tightened. I've settled on lacing the skin onto the gourd and placing it so that beads can be moved along the laces that will cinch up the head.

**BNL:** So two laces come down to a central point and then there'd be this variable slide that would create the tension after it's been looped around a peg at the bottom.

**BT:** Right, and that's certainly not a new system. It's used on drums, particularly African drums.

**BNL:** What kinds of wood do you use? I noticed that almost all the gourd banjos are fretless and I've noticed a certain kind of neck style that you've settled upon. Why did you decide to make them fretless as opposed to either knotted or putting frets on? Is that in keeping with a gourd banjo tradition? Do you use a truss rod?

**BT:** For the most part, my intent is to produce an instrument that has a sound and the general appearance of a 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century gourd banjo. One that might have been found on a plantation. That's the sound I'm after. Consequently, they are fretless.

**BNL:** So you're going for an "Americana" kind of style and sound.

**BT:** Which would be primarily a banjo that is more rhythmic than melodic. In addition, I try to build a banjo that's easy for modern players to play. In other words, a strictly reproduction gourd banjo would be fairly difficult for a modern player to play. So I designed the fingerboard to be a bit different than most of the originals. It's smoother. It's got some relief in it—a little dip in the middle of the neck to prevent buzzing on the strings. And it has a more modern shape, some sculpturing along the side of the fretboard that's consistent with minstrel era banjos.

**BNL:** So because people are used to the playability of a manufactured factory banjo, you're trying to strike a balance between a traditional, almost unplayable kind of rhythm instrument, to something that's playable and approaches the fretless banjos that were produced in the early 1800s?

**BT:** I could put it this way--I'm trying to make a fretless banjo that's friendly.

**BNL:** A friendly gourd!

**BT:** One that a player could pick up and in fifteen minutes say to himself, "Yeah, I could play this thing." I'm trying to make them more accessible so that they'll be played. I don't want them to end up hanging on someone's wall.

**BNL:** What are the considerations for attaching a neck to a gourd? Gourds are organic in their make-up, so every instrument is going to be different than even the

manufactured instruments. Working with such organic material, how do you make it uniform as far as playability? Do you discard some as unsatisfactory?

**BT:** There's a couple of issues here. Not all gourds are going to produce a sound that's good, and there's a compromise that has to be reached. In my opinion, thinner gourds produce better sound, but they're weaker, and you have to have a certain thickness in order to get it to withstand the stresses that are put on it. Of all the banjos I've made, over a hundred now, I've had to discard three or four because they didn't sound good. In every case the gourds were very thick, but they just killed the sound. So that is an issue—being able to pick a gourd that has the strength to endure the stress and yet is going to sound good.

**BNL:** ...And yet is thin enough to project. You know, there's no precedent for how a gourd should sound.

**BT:** That's right. Other builders have been generous with helping me. Bob Flesher has given me some ideas, as well as George Wunderlich. Nobody's going to get rich making gourd banjos. As far as I'm concerned, there's no secrets. I'm willing to share anything I learn about them with anybody. There are a few techniques that you can use to support the inside of the gourd to make it stand up to the pressure. Sometimes you have to do that to make them work.

**BNL:** Is there a truss rod?

**BT:** There's a rim stick that goes through the gourd, just like an open back banjo, and it's possible to fit interior wooden braces against the rim stick to help support the gourd. Attaching the neck is probably the trickiest part of the process, because, just like in an ordinary banjo, a lot of the ease of playability is dependent upon the proper neck angle. Each gourd being different, it is just hand work and a little time and patience to get the proper neck angle. Once you've got that, then you have a playable banjo.

**BNL:** Do smaller gourds tend to be sharper sounding and have more volume?

**BT:** Yes. The consistent thing might be that they just have a sharper tone than the larger gourds.

**BNL:** Do you strike a balance between a huge gourd and a small one? Is it a matter of what the person wants to hear or what they think is authentic? But since every one is different...

**BT:** The style of gourd I use is a canteen shape. I've pretty much settled on gourds that range from 11 to 13 inches, although some smaller gourds sound very good too.

**BNL:** In stretching the head, is there a general rule as to the tension that is standard?

**BT:** In my system, I lace a head on loose. I begin with very little tension and then, because of the tensioning beads, I can go back and start to tighten the head. I can do that as many times as I want. I try to stretch it as much as I possibly can without tearing head. Then of course it's going to tighten up more when the head dries out. They're put on wet. I just try to get them on as tight as I possibly can.

**BNL:** And you use calf skin?

**BT:** Calf skin and goat skin.

**BNL:** What kinds of woods do you use for the neck?

**BT:** I think I get the best sound out of a mahogany neck, but I've used cherry, walnut, maple and paduke.

**BNL:** How many banjos do you have in stock? How many different kinds of choices do people have if they're interested in checking this out? Is there any place that you exhibit your banjos, where people could try them?

**BT:** My banjos are sold through Elderly, Music Emporium in Boston, and Lark in the Morning in San Francisco. Other than that, people buy them by word of mouth. I sell about one third of my instruments through stores, and about two thirds from mail order-type transactions. I also have photos on my web site.

**BNL:** And you have some famous clientele—Mike and Pete Seeger have banjos made by you.

**BT:** There's lots of good banjo players who have been my customers. You can hear some of them on recordings: John Herrmann on "*From The Mountain*," [Howdy CDIOO2], Paul Brown on "*Way Down in North Carolina*," [Rounder CDO383], Dwight Diller on "*New Plowed Ground*," Mike Seeger on "*Southern Banjo Sounds*," [Folkways CD4010], and Gordy Hinnery (from the New Southern Ramblers) also plays one. I've had an incredible amount of help from banjo players giving me feedback. Two of the great joys of doing this are the wonderful people I've met, and the strange situations I've found myself in. I sold an instrument to a fellow on the East Coast that's used it in a play about John Wilkes Booth. They recently found out that he was a banjo player.

**BNL:** Oh my God! [laughter]

**BT:** I've made many friends in other countries who correspond with me: about the instruments. This has evolved into kind of a family thing. My wife Leilani has helped me, and my three sons have encouraged me, and have helped promote the banjos in different ways. One of them made a video that I send out occasionally. My older son Doug has shown the banjos at gatherings in the Seattle Tacoma area.

**BNL:** What about the transition between manufacturing classical guitars to banjo gourds?

**BT:** Big difference. Building classical guitars is more left-brained. Most things involved are precision. You try to get your wood to a thickness within a couple of a thousandth of an inch. Placing the braces in the exact point and you try to produce each instrument uniformly. With gourd banjos it's a complete turnaround. I was greatly influenced by Francis Bebey's book "*African Music-People's Art*." In it, he describes the African philosophy of instrument building, which is basically that there's a general form for the instrument but that form is modified by the materials that are chosen. In other words, if a certain limb on a tree or a piece of wood is going to be used for an instrument, then the characteristics of that piece of wood are going to determine the size and shape of the instrument. No two trees are going to produce the same instrument.

**BNL:** It's the organic approach.

**BT:** That's right. The instrument builder, who is usually the musician too, is trying to discover what instrument is in that piece of wood or that tree. I've adopted that outlook. I hardly ever make two instruments alike. When I look at a piece of wood, I ask myself what kind of neck would fit this piece of wood best-what design, what thickness. That has made instrument building fun for me. When I start, I don't know what final form the instrument is going to take. Both the look and the sound are going to be a surprise to me.

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