

Meet Clark R. Buehling, the Gourd Banjoist

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The gourd banjo, which was replaced by the louder predecessor of the modern banjo in the early 1840s, is now making a comeback, thanks largely to the effort of Clark Buehling. Clarke began playing the five-string banjo in 1964. He soon learned how banjos were once made from gourds. In a music museum near Eureka Springs, Arkansas, he saw a “child banjo” made from a small dipper gourd. It was not, however, until he had listened to some African music and read an article in *Foxfire* (1980) describing the banjos using large gourds, that the idea of a gourd banjo began to make sense.

With no gourd banjo maker to apprentice under, Clarke began experimenting with making his own instruments. In 1979, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, he saw a gourd banjo, debatably an original made by William Boucher. Clarke based his design on that instrument, but refined it in the mid 1980s when he was able to take direct measurements from a Boucher banjo in the Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee.

Clarke now makes and sells several gourd banjos a year and continues to experiment with new designs. Examples of these experimental designs can be seen in the lower figure; each of the three gourd banjos was fashioned out of an entire long-necked gourd from the drumhead to the peghead. The larger instrument on the left was made from a ‘Hercules Club’ gourd. Although these gourd banjos are attractive, Clark admits that they do not sound as good as his more authentic instruments in which only the drumhead section is made out of gourd.

If Clarke could work uninterrupted in his shop, which he rarely achieves due to his other demanding duties as a musician and a father, he could finish a banjo in under two weeks. But as it is, he tells his customers to expect to wait two or three months from the time of their order. He uses all hand tools except for the initial rough sawing of the neck.

Clarke looks for gourds eight to ten inches across with a slightly flattened cannonball shaped end, such as a ‘Kettle’ gourd; the harder they are, the better. His current supply is ordered from The Gourd Factory near Stockton, California, where a number of gourd instrument makers go for their stock. The trick is to find a sufficiently hard gourd and to stretch the goat skin for the “drum” tight enough (others prefer calf or groundhog hide). Clarke’s banjos are built to tolerate only nylon or gut banjo strings. The modern banjo is all metal and plastic.

Why this resurgence of interest in the gourd banjo? As Clarke puts it:

It is, shall we say, close to the earth. The sound is a bit woody, somewhat like a marimba and easy to listen to. Modern banjos can sometimes be abrasive and a bit too metallic. A modern banjo is nuts and bolts; a gourd banjo is organic (and bio-degradable).

And what instrument other than a gourd banjo could give the same earthy effect for such tunes as “Carve Dat ‘Possum”, “Green Corn, Essence of Old Virginny”, and Sugar Cane Dance”?

There are at least half a dozen gourd banjo makers today, including Bob Thornberg in Bishop, California; Clarke Prouty in Lanham, Maryland; Bob Flesher in Peachtree City, Georgia; and Stan Gee in England. Another gourd banjo maker, Scott Didlake from Crystal Springs, Mississippi, who recently died, helped Clarke promote the gourd banjo.

A number of folk musicians perform and have recorded on Clarke's banjos, including Mike Seeger, **Solo, Oldtime Country Music** for Rounder Records (CD 0278), and on video, **OldTime Banjo Styles**, Homespun Video, Woodstock, New York. Most of the music performed, however, comes from the 1820s to 1860s. Clarke hopes that the beautiful sound of the gourd banjo will gain greater recognition among folk musicians composing today.

Clarke is also a teacher and player of the banjo, fiddle, and guitar. He has made a number of recordings, including **Clarke Buehling, Out of His Gourd**, where he performs on his gourd banjos. He also performs with **The Skirtlifters**, an old-time string band. For information on his recordings and gourd banjos, or if anyone knows of any particularly hard-shelled bottle gourds, write to him at: P.O. Box 744, Fayetteville, AR 72702-0744; tel: 501-442-5368.