

Information for this introduction comes from articles published about Scott and from [digital] conversations with his widow, Carrie Didlake. These excellent articles are:

Scott Didlake - "An Apprenticeship With The Ghosts", by Bob Carlin, *The Old-Time Herald*, Spring 1997, Volume 5, No7

An Apprentice to Ghosts, by Edward Cohen, *The Oxford American* Fifth Annual Music Issue (2001), Issue 40

Scott's approach is best described in his own words, and with the gracious permission of Carrie Didlake and Donald Nitchie, reproduced below is the text of an article written for and published in *Banjo Newsletter*, May 1985, Volume XII, No.7

BANJOS BEFORE AND BEYOND

...Making the newest oldest banjo

by N. S. Didlake, by permission of Carrie Didlake and BNL (Donald Nitchie)

SOME OF YOU MIGHT REMEMBER ME, and even wonder what ever happened to me. For those, let me say that for a number of years I worked as a writer/producer with PBS television. That left no time for writing about banjo or playing except on the back porch. Lately, I freelance write various things and - it was inevitable - build banjos. For a long time, I wanted to write a series of articles for *BNL* about the banjo before and beyond bluegrass. I never thought the first one would be about my own banjos, but so it goes...

Unlike how the violin is viewed, the banjo is seen as having "improved" with the march of industry in America and the mechanization of the instrument which that brought about. Having played on a great many old banjos of all sorts, I became curious as to what the *really* old ones were like. They were very organic, minimally mechanical instruments. They were made by individual artists or in small shops.

Since it is infinitely easier to collect, if you have the bucks, an ultra fancy vintage Gibson or Vega than it is to come by one of the tiny few plain really early banjos that still survive, the only way to find out what pre-Civil War banjos were like as playing instruments was to recreate.

I began with the wood rim type banjos said to have been made by Joel Walker Sweeney and others who were the first whites to take up the banjo in early minstrelsy- These are fretless instruments and use heads that are tacked on thin (by present standards) wooden rims. Of course, they are strung and played with gut/nylon, not steel strings.

From there, at the urging of ace early banjo music player Clarke Buehling, I moved back to make the one and only original form of the banjo as brought by blacks to the New World - the gourd banza, bangie, banshaw, bania, *the calabash banjo*.

Early references to Afro American banjos in the New World, from, say, the 1670's down to white minstrelsy in about the 1830's and 40's, when they actually describe the

banjos, speak *without exception* of calabash banjos. Clarke tells me that Picayune Butler, a black banjoist of New Orleans, continued to feature a gourd banjo as part of his act even into the heyday of early white blackface minstrelsy. A very, very few old calabash banjos still survive as museum or collectors' artifacts. Yet there are a number of drawings of the originals and many descriptions.

As far as I know, very few calabash banjos have been made in modern times. There are mine, the one made for the publication "*Foxfire*" by an Appalachian man, and the one made for Tommy Thompson of the Red Clay Ramblers, by Mike Martin. Both Tommy's and the *Foxfire* banjo are similar to a design shown in an old watercolor called, "*The Old Plantation*." My first series of calabash banjos are high-tech enhanced, jazzed up recreations of the oldest known banjo of the Americas, the so-called "Stedman Banjo."

Also, Clarke Buehling built a gourd banjo, one of the real plantation type. He cut a hole in a dipper gourd, mounted a hog bladder with tacks and strung it up with two long strings and one short drone. According to a minstrel tune, this set up is similar to the one Picayune Butler used on his own calabash banjo. Clarke's neck is the neck of the gourd itself, whereas Butler supposedly used "an old pine stick" for a neck on his three string banjo.

Not copies, but modern interpretations which keep to the original architecture and action, these banjos are meant as a memorial and tribute to the unknown Afro-American maker of the oldest banjo we have with us still. He worked in what was then Dutch Guiana and is now Surinam on the Northern coast of South America in the 1770's. His banjo was taken back to Holland, where it still exists, by English sea Captain John Gabriel Stedman, a mercenary employed by the Dutch in a war against the banjo maker's own people who had risen against slavery.

From my humble understanding of it, old African culture saw music, dance and religion as very closely related. Making an instrument was a holy act, and playing was an effort to tap into divine forces that manifested on the material plane as music. In making the first "banza" of the series, I tried, with each stroke of every tool, to hold these things in high consciousness. And I focused my intent on not just "making a banjo" but in creating a two-century past-due thanksgiving, and paying of respect to one of the people who planted the seed of the banjo in the New World. It seemed the least we banjoists who have followed could do. Why, the original "first banjo of the Americas" is now known not by a designation that would honor its unknown maker, but by the name of the maker's enslaver, Captain Stedman, the man who in effect *stole* the banjo!

If you have ever had a thrill in sitting down with an old vintage Gibson or Stewart or whatever, picking on it and musing about what it must have been like to play it in the times when it was first made...I can tell you that the experience of first sitting down with this "newest oldest" banjo in the world was overwhelming. Compared to even very old factory banjos, the "way it worked" was ancient and strange. On a warm Mississippi night, I sat on the front porch where as a child I had once played my first tune on a banjo uke. As the sublime, ethereal tones of that little banza tumbled out across the far-from-the-city quiet of the valley, I could feel in my hands and hear with

my ears that somebody knew for certain how to make a good banjo way back when, in the lost mists of banjo time - somebody who deserves to be remembered.

At the moment of this writing, most of the banjos in the limited Surinam edition are spoken for. My little "company," *Kalenda Banza*, is really an informal collaboration of people with various kinds of expert knowledge. I act as a designer/producer - developing the concepts and doing most of the dirty work - much like I did with PBS, with the result being banjos instead of television programs. We intend to offer both rim and calabash banjos which wed pre-industrial banjo concepts with contemporary high tech methods and materials. Our small output will be of single designs or limited editions of banjos-as-artworks. By that I don't mean fancy trapping banjos, but objects of highly innovative design. They'll be signed, numbered and documented just like any other sort of original artwork. Editions won't be repeated, and we have no plans to mass-produce "models." Those interested should write or, for three dollars, subscribe to photos of available instruments: [address removed by editor]

SPECIFICATIONS for Kalenda Banza's Surinam Banza Edition: NECKS: Beyond rare, highly figured quarter sawn African Bubinga (wrongly called "African Rosewood"). Elaborately carved in an interpretation of the original 1770's Surinam banza neck with a pegbox with compound french curves and a teardrop shaped "thumb pivot" below the drone string. Fretless. Convertible from five to the original three long/one short four string configuration. SOUNDING CHAMBERS: Seasoned, high tech structural enhanced calabashes using composite techniques. Flowering leaf sound holes. Skin heads mounted with over one hundred small brass tacks. Finished in a multi-shade textured finish that ranges from brown at head to red at back. STRINGS: Nylon. SCALE: 22 to 25 inches: TUNING PEGS: Highest quality boxwood.