



# Banjo NewsLetter

*THE 5-STRING BANJO MAGAZINE*

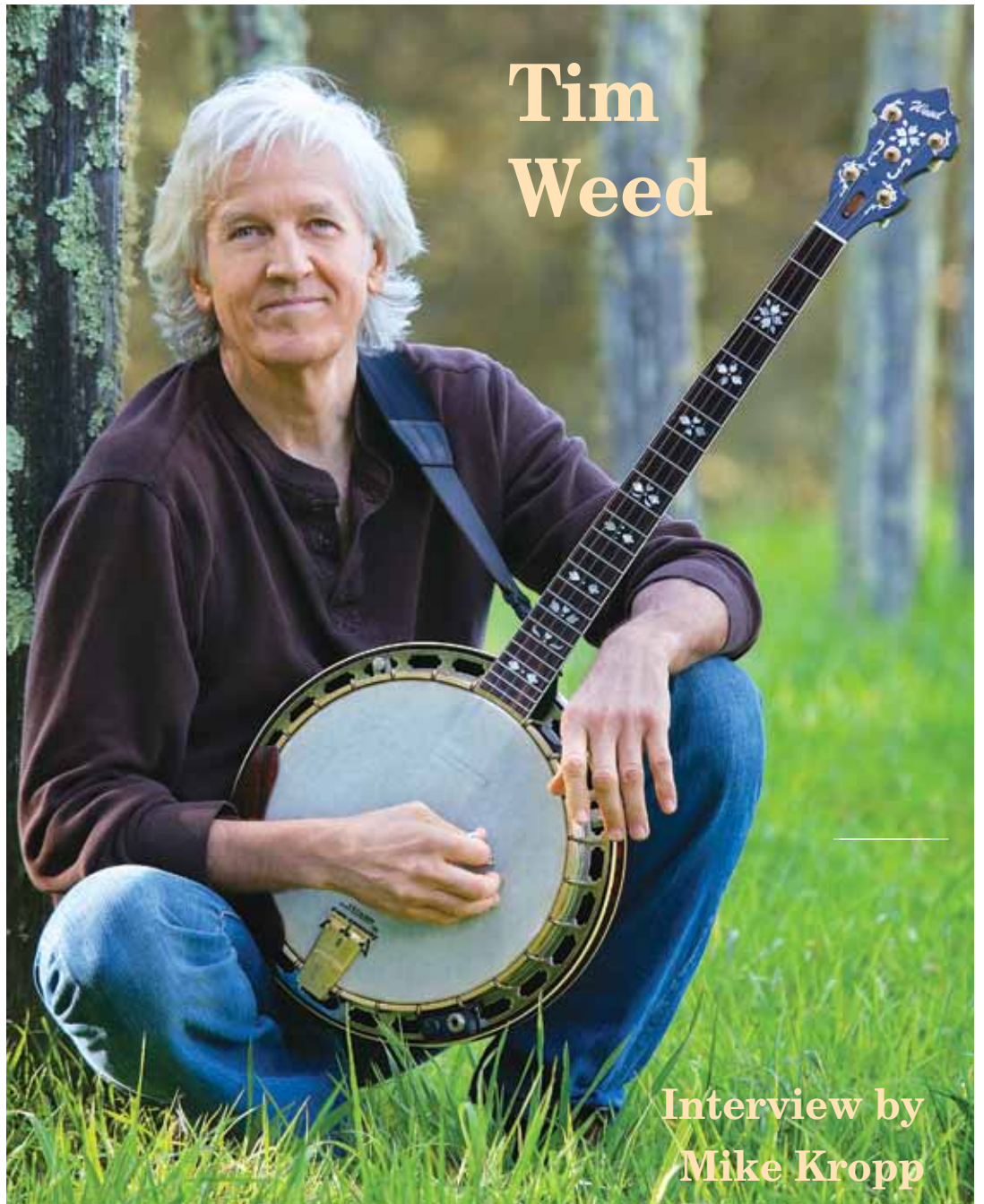
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**ABC**

**John Cohen**



Tim  
Weed

Interview by  
Mike Kropp

# Tim Weed

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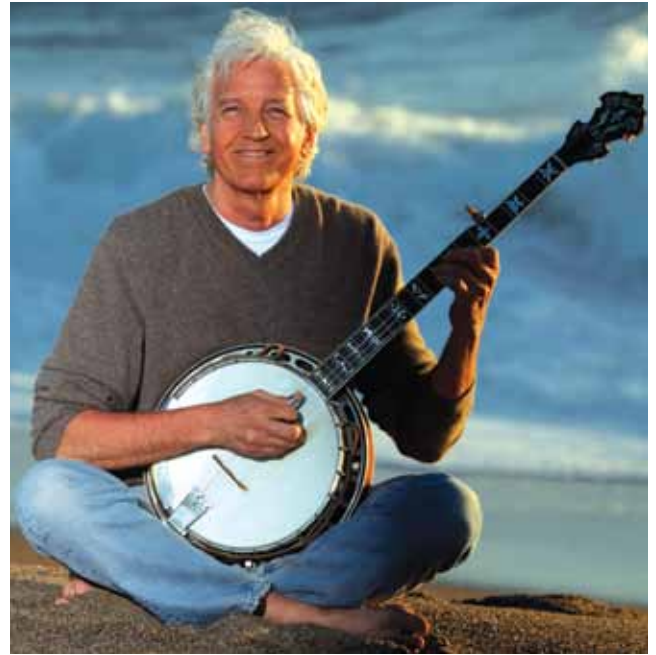
Every once in a while, if you're lucky, an unexpected and wonderful experience unfolds. My first exposure to Tim Weed's superlative banjo playing, and our subsequent friendship, was one such happening for me. By chance, my wife and I found ourselves in Tucson, Arizona. We were on our way out of town and saw the sign for The Folk Shop. Of course I had to stop in and see if there were any interesting new or vintage banjos to check out. I immediately bonded with the proprietor, Paul Blumentritt, regarding all things banjo. After playing several banjos, Paul asked if I had ever heard the playing of Tim Wiedenkeller (Tim Weed). I hadn't. He then pressed Tim's recent CD, *"Malagros"* into my hands and told me that I was about to be blown away. I graciously accepted and we took off out of town. We popped the CD into the player and I almost drove off the road—the music coming out of the speakers was amazing. So began my introduction to Tim's playing. His execution was flawless, with great tone and dynamics. We were listening to Tim's original compositions—a melodious mixture of bluegrass, Spanish, classical and jazz. Wow! This guy had to be the world's greatest player I'd never heard of. I thought I'd heard most of the great players—well, add Tim to the list!

The album is all solo banjo, which is quite a challenging undertaking. The first time I heard it I thought, let's do that again. I probably listened to it five or six times when driving in the southwest. It's very engaging; some is so beautiful you just want to keep hearing it again, but it covers a lot of ground. So I ended up telling everybody to go out and buy it.

Fast forward a few years. I finally met Tim and heard him play solo live

at the winter Namm show while he was demoing and performing at the Recording King Booth. I was blown away again, and discovered he is an awesome bluegrass player as well. We talked briefly and remained in touch with the idea that we would arrange for a *BNL* interview.

Finally, just before Christmas 2011,



*Tim Weed, photo by*

Tim, Bill Evans and I rendezvoused at a studio in Petaluma, CA. Rob Turner, EMG President, had been working diligently on a new banjo pick-up, and Tim, Bill and I had been assisting Rob separately. Our studio meeting was the culmination of this process. We played many tunes that day with the prototype pick-ups installed. I got to know Tim better and we really bonded as players and friends. I got to hear Tim play an even wider range of music that day—a delight for me. —Mike Kropp

### **Tim's Background:**

Tim comes from a musical family. His mother was a singer/pianist, and his Dad played clarinet occasionally. His sisters took piano lessons and his older brother played guitar. Music was ingrained in Tim early on. Tim became a soloist in the church boy's choir when he was 7. He studied trumpet from grades 3-11 and played in the school bands.

In 1975, at age 16, Tim's first memory of connecting with the banjo was hearing some 8 track tapes of the Eagles and

Jim Mills

Poco. In his room, Tim joyously played air banjo on his tennis racquet when the banjo came over the speakers. He heard *Duelin Banjos* around the same time.

Tim was becoming addicted; his sister's boyfriend Ralph gave him the Dirt Band's "Circle" album.

At age 17, Tim's Mom bought him his first banjo for \$60. Tim heard Bobby Thompson's playing on Hee Haw and recorded the shows to learn the banjo parts. Tim started jamming with other players and was even learning tunes by the Who, Yes, and Led Zeppelin. So, Tim's musical career was off to a prodigious start. He then met Greg Rich (luthier extraordinaire). Greg taught him *Slipped Disc* from Larry McNeely's record. Not too shabby, learning a Charley Christian jazz standard so early on!

In 1978 Tim played in the short lived band, the Sunnyside Boys. He then joined the band Last Chance, and performed at the Golden West Bluegrass Festival in Norco, California. During its few years of existence, Last Chance helped produce

some of today's most influential bluegrass musicians, including Stuart Duncan, Gene Libbee, and Alison Brown.

Tim lists his early banjo influences as follows: Bernie Leadon (Eagles), Rusty Young (Poco), Bobby Thompson, Jerry Garcia, Eric Weissberg, Marshall Brickman, Greg Rich, Abe Brown, Larry McNeely, Bill Keith, Earl Scruggs, Craig Smith and Pat Cloud.

Tim's was further exposed to a wide range of music by his mom and friends. He attended performances by the LA Philharmonic, Larry McNeely, Merle Haggard, Joe Pass, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, Christopher Cross, Larry Carlton, Kenny Loggins, Country Gentlemen, Bill Monroe, and Ralph Stanley.

#### Tim's Observations:

*Advice on Recording:* I believe the key is "frontloading"—being prepared. It only takes one terrorizing experience to make you go home and really practice! Early in my life as a musician, I was taught that you *don't* record until you're ready; and that recordings last *forever*, so

they better be good.

- Studios are almost always air-conditioned which can be a shock to your instrument, so dress warmly and make sure you've got your electronic tuner nearby to stay perfectly in tune.

- I often bring my own personal favorite headphones. My favorite mics for recording the banjo are Royer 122 ribbon mics —often in conjunction with a large diaphragm tube condenser.

- I personally *never* use compression on the banjo and have strong aversion to that sound. I'm a die-hard vintage analog fan and prefer tubes and tape.

#### Teaching, Learning and Practice

Let's say that there is a "universal bank." The amount of hours you deposit as deliberate listening, study, practice, and performing will earn you immeasurable returns. It's pretty simple: the more time you put in, the more you'll get out of it; plus the importance of persistence.

As a predominantly self-taught musician, I want to stress the importance of mindful observation:

1. Repetitive deep listening and learning—slowing the piece down to discover the correct notes and nuances. Learning by ear vs. tab—this is music folks...*sound*. And I highly recommend The Amazing Slow Downer.

2. Watching and closely studying the actions and results of accomplished players and implementing what you learn.

3. Learning from YouTube is an extraordinary opportunity but can be a Catch-22. Unless the presenter is an experienced and reputable teacher, the skill required to determine the validity of an offering exceeds the content of the offering. There is an overabundance of free, *bad* teaching out there—be careful!

4. I always encourage aspiring players to seek out others to regularly play with!!!

5. I'm a firm believer in neural programming—refining a mechanical action and repeating it until that action becomes internalized. I find that the very best music is produced when the internalized song is playing the hands rather than the hands playing the song. Ultimately, technique disappears enabling undistracted pure expression and you play and react according to what you feel.

6. I can't overemphasize the importance of *timing*. I am a strong advocate of practicing to an accurate metronome whenever possible. At first,

#### Quotes from Tim's peers:

Bobby Thompson: "It's a great CD; he takes the banjo further than most other banjo players. He plays chromatic banjo extraordinarily well. I loooooove his banjo playing!"

Dawg (David Grisman): "Tim can play everything from hardcore bluegrass to Bach. His original banjo music is grounded in many traditions, including Indian classical (he's the Ali Akbar Khan of the banjo) and I'm very impressed with his considerable composing skills. His album "Milagros" is a gem."

Bill Evans: "You won't believe your ears when you hear Tim play banjo. He brings a staggering technical ability to his sophisticated original compositions, which themselves reflect his advanced harmonic and developmental ideas that draw upon classical and world music traditions. He can make the banjo sound like an orchestra or he can rival the most outrageous flamenco guitarist you've ever heard. But most importantly, it's all in the service of music that moves the heart and soul. There are just a very few banjo players in the world who are capable of playing like this—you have to check Tim out!

Peter Rowan: "Tim's multifaceted playing brings unusual influences together in a classic bluegrass approach, from old-time to flamenco with eastern spices. It's a tasty blend!"

Greg Rich: "I first met him at a jam session in Huntington Beach. He knew I was taking banjo lessons from Larry McNeely and wanted to know if I could teach him Larry's *Slipped Disc*. In just one 30 minute lesson he not only learned how to play it note for note but nailed the speed, timing and technique almost as good as Larry himself. His creative style combined with technique is just amazing."

Ryan Cavanaugh: "The first thing I noticed about Tim's playing is that he knows how to use space very well. He's not constantly playing notes and he knows how to let his music breathe, utilizing the banjo's sustaining overtones, harmonics, and of course...silence. Banjo traditions all seem to involve unabashed virtuosity (which Tim brandishes as well) however Tim, like so few, has transcended the need for speed when the music calls for it, using his wonderful sense of lyricism and integrity."

John Balch: "Fantastic musicianship! Wonderful compositions! Listening to Tim's classical banjo music, I realize the limitless potential of this instrument in the hands of a true master. I'm amazed when a banjoist can approach a classical piece. This is entirely original music that is both contemporary and classic. It is not an adaptation of historical music written for other instruments and transposed to banjo. "Milagros" is vital new music conceived and performed to exploit the unique capabilities of this instrument."

get comfortable playing with the click on the on beat and then, place it on the offbeat. Observe how different these feel. Learn to identify and play ahead, behind, and in the middle of the beat. Learn to use the metronome as a jamming partner. It's all about feel and finding that "pocket." I've had to work really hard at it.

7. I always implore aspiring players to play quieter as they play faster to promote meticulous technique in their practice.

8. Lessons can be invaluable, and with the advent of Skype video, your options have increased immensely.

- If you're taking lessons, videotape them!—at the very least, the highlights. Audio recording is also effective.

9. "Playing" your instrument. Don't underestimate the importance of "noodling." Figuring out melodies in your head *and* just exploring sound.

10. Use *tablature* for reference only! The right hand *must* follow the left hand.

11. The Role of Rolls: simply to increase coordination and speed. I advise to play as many rolls as possible - mixing them up as to develop independence between the T, I, and M. Which Roll to play?—*none*, play music!

I: I'm sitting here with Tim at IBMA. Your music has a Spanish, classical, almost Baroque sound. At times, I get sort of a lute feel; the music has a regal quality. Did you wake up one day and your banjo was out of tune and you started playing and this stuff came out, or was this in your head all along? How did you start playing this style, which is kind of something all your own?

T: Purely by accident. I hadn't been playing banjo much for almost fifteen years. I was working full-time as a composer and producer and studio musician, on guitar and as a singer, with occasional banjo but very rarely. And I really hadn't practiced the banjo in probably fifteen years.

I: What kinds of music were you producing?

T: All kinds. I was in LA and it was anything from country to rhythm and blues to funk to jazz-oriented to pop.

I: Electric or acoustic guitar?

T: More electric than acoustic. And one of the things that I ended up doing, which was a natural progression for me, was become a film composer. Not by training but by nature, my grandfather was

a composer and conductor.

I: So your influences early on would be more of classical?

T: Not so much. The music I grew up playing on trumpet is probably the reason I'm not a trumpet player today. We were playing the pop tunes of the day, like Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head. But I never liked the music.

I: So how did the classical, Spanish flavor end up in your music?

T: I think it was just from being around it through my grandparents. And my mother used to take me to a lot of classical concerts.

I: Yesterday you played something that almost sounded Slavic, Eastern European. I find with your music, it's a really amazing synthesis of world music. And yet, as a banjo player, I hear banjoistic things. I feel it's not just playing melodies, or that someone gave you a score to play, and it was written for piano and now you're playing it on banjo. This is really banjo music! I use the word banjoistic. I'm sure you could take a tune from your Moro Glenn and play it on another instrument, because it is good melody, but some of

that music doesn't suit the banjo. When someone recreates something that has been played before as a traditional music form on banjo, sometimes it works and sometimes it sounds funny. But you're a banjo player, so this is what comes out.

T: Well I actually wasn't a banjo player at the time.

I: So you didn't write Moro Glenn on the banjo.

T: In fact, all these tunes happened to be written on the banjo, but I wasn't hearing them for banjo; I was hearing them as orchestration. The first song I wrote was a concerto. I heard the banjo more as a solo piano part. So all those tunes, although they came from the banjo itself, the actual physics of the banjo and the way it's played and the thing that I love about it—the ability to play in the linear fashion with that fluid sound, the chromatic or Keith-style. To me, a lot of the melodies coming out on my banjo were not banjoistic, and they surprised me more than anybody. And having been predominantly a bluegrass banjo player that had started to delve into classical and jazz in the late 70's, and without finding any kind of audience

interested in hearing that kind of music, I switched to guitar. But what I discovered was, the banjo. Writing it, I was thinking, wow I'm going to have to use this as a film cue, thinking of rewriting it in a different way.

I: So my comment about it being banjoistic would really have to be amended to say, the stuff sounds great on the banjo. And it seems that you've created a technique-oriented....

T: Melody-based techniques.

I: As I watched you play yesterday I saw certain repeatable right hand—I wouldn't call them patterns but lets say moves—with some moving chords and some voice leading that is really banjo-y. You talk about emotion and being evocative. If I were to summarize what you just said: the banjo was a vehicle for creating these tunes, and that's how you

*Glenn*

wrote them.

T: I had the banjo in my hands at that time. I'd been hired to play with a local orchestra in Hawaii, where I lived. And I had to pull the banjo out and practice all these parts, and in the process of practicing I began to regain some fluency. This was during a time when I was writing orchestral cues

I: What's an orchestral cue?

T: An orchestral cue is a piece of music for a particular scene, like action in a film. I did a lot of documentary type things. And so when those passages started to come out on the banjo, they were coming out in a way that I probably wouldn't have come up with on guitar, because they were series of notes and other things that were happening as a coincidence of having the banjo in my hands.

I: And also the way the banjo is tuned, the fifth string, the technique involved

T: Right. But the first tune I wrote was

twenty-five minutes long. I started to write a second one and I thought you know I should orchestrate the first one. And I sat down to do that and this crazy realization came over me that I didn't even know what key it was in. Because I was writing purely from a creative standpoint of stringing musical passages together, that sound good without having any theoretical constructs or foundation. Is this music that you wake up in the morning, hear something in your head and then play it? Or is it premeditated?

T: I'd have to say all of the above. I don't have a particular way. I love this quote by James Taylor. They asked him to explain his songwriting process. He said, "Let's get one thing straight: I don't write songs; I wait for them."

But in its purest form, and what I've been lucky enough to experience at times, is just the expression of emotion at any given time.

I: Which leads me to another

question, regarding the sounds of different banjos. When I first met you, you were demonstrating banjos for Recording King. I think because of the way you set up your banjo, you can get a lot of sustain—which really helps in your music, because it's not like machine gun notes coming out, although there are a lot of fast arpeggiated passages that you play. Talk a little bit about why you have a preference for that type of sound, and we'll talk a little bit about this new banjo that you had Larry Feohea make for you. What's up with the sound, and how you perceive a banjo to sound? I mean obviously your banjo's not going to sound like Earl's...

T: I think the sound I aspire to is a sound that was cultivated in me through decades of being around very well known vintage instruments. I grew up near Randy Snoddy, a great Orange County vintage guitar/mandolin guy, and so I got to play thousands of instruments, magical instruments that would just come to life in your hands, that had rich, warm sounds. They were never too bright or thin or edgy or nasally.

I: So therefore you've played a bunch

of old instruments, including flathead Gibsons. They can do that. There are other banjos that can do that too.

T: Well, just all those instruments, guitars, mandolins, it just seems like um... first of all, I just gained this awareness that that's possible. I've run across a lot of people who've never played one of those instruments. And I've got to play probably literally thousands. So that gave me this intellectual property, that one hand ruined me, because it's so hard to get and hard to find, and expensive, but that's kind of always what I've strived for—warmth. And what moves me energetically and vibrationally is warm rich tones rather than bright or brassy tones.

I: So let's talk about your banjo. It looks like a one-piece flange, Gibson.

T: It's an original one.

I: Oh, so that's the rim, so no tone ring. Does it have the brass tube?

T: Yeah it does.

I: It looks like an original flathead. This one has a curly maple skinned resonator. Is the neck maple or mahogany?

T: Very old piece of African mahogany. Incredibly light.

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I: Slightly radiused. It's got a wider nut, just wider all the way around. The fifth string is channeled underneath the fingerboard, and magically erupts at the fifth fret. Very sweet sounding banjo. It's not a clubby neck but it's wide with lots of navigation on it. Pretty wide string spacing. Really gorgeous sounding instrument. You have a renaissance head on it?

T: No, it's a prototype decalf head, an artificial calfskin head. We're on our ninth prototype.

I: Obviously there are heads that claim to do that but they don't. They come close.

T: I've used calfskin for twenty years.

# wernick 1/2 page ad

I: Yeah, and that's another thing you have a calf skin head on your style three flathead. It sounds great. It's a real magical instrument. So this one seems to be built to order. I notice you use a 2" bridge?

T: It's a 2" tall bridge

I: ...and you told me yesterday about string spacing. Bluegrass players have leaned more towards Crow spacing, which is a wider string spacing. I've played this banjo and it's very easy on the right hand. How did you come to that wider spacing?

T: Larry Brown, who is kind of a legendary set-up and repairman from Los Angeles, suggested it. It was around the time when I first played one of my early classical pieces for him. I was living in Hawaii but I'd save all my instruments to bring them back and have him work on them and I played him one of those pieces and he loved it. He is one of these geniuses who has extraordinary insight. He handed me several bridges and said, "Do yourself a favor, go try three different bridges. I predict that you'll like a bridge with wider spacing and a taller profile." I went to Mexico and stayed for a week in a house on the beach. I had a Nechville banjo with me. It had an easily adjustable neck, so I could adjust the neck angle to compensate for the taller bridges and all of that. And it had a fairly wide neck, not unlike this banjo. I got very scientific about it and really studied it and recorded it and played to metronomes and I discovered that my playing had improved in both clarity and accuracy and speed with wider spacing and a taller bridge. Which is highly counter intuitive.

I: And why is that?

T: Because it infers that your fingers are traveling wider distances. I've always subscribed to the notion of economy of effort, economy of movement and this is the direct opposite of that.

I: It's very small distances but as a banjo player it could feel like big. I adhere to that same thing, less is more. I've never moved my fingers more than I've needed to, but I played this banjo and it was really easy to play. It wasn't like I had to adjust to it. It wasn't like I had to go 'oh man, these strings are so wide, I'd better get like an extension for my thumb or something". Do you have the specs of what that spacing is?

T: Yea. It's either 15/16 from end to end, first to fifth. Or it might be 1 and 31/32.

I: And then equally divided. It's a pretty interesting concept. In terms of tall

bridges and wide fingerboards there is definitely a trend towards that. And I find that more with players who are playing other styles besides just bluegrass.

T: Being an electric guitar player for so long, Martin guitars are radiused and you know it made sense to me, especially with a wider neck and not only that but you know this isn't a progressive concept; top tensions all have radiused finger boards.

I: There seems to be a trend towards radiused fingerboards.

T: I wonder how Earl felt about it.

I: And on the other side of the coin the pre-war Gibson style banjos definitely had slimmer necks. I have some banjos that are like that. I seem to prefer the wider necks.

T: This neck also is 24 frets and it's a shorter scale, 25.5 " scale. So that makes the reaches even easier.

I: Interesting. Still sounds like a banjo. When I stood outside earlier listening to you play, I heard the sound of the dreaded metronome. I say dreaded as a joke. But obviously it's your friend. On your desk are your computer, your metronome and your picks. Have you always used a metronome?

T: No, I started using a metronome because I started working in LA in the studios with players that had that metronomic timing. I realized I needed to sit down with a metronome. I had a good friend who was an A list studio guitarist. He told me 'you know, I locked myself in the closet for a year with the metronome'. I looked at him as this extraordinary player and I thought, wow, if he did that, then...

I: I think some people get the idea that if you play with a metronome you're going to be playing mechanically. That's not necessarily true. The metronome reminds you of where the beat is. I believe Tony Rice said that if you're in rhythm and you know where the beat is, you can play the game a little better, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be right on top of the beat. We know many banjo players who are known for playing a little behind the beat, or a little ahead. But knowing where one is *is* important. So do you practice with the metronome all the time or do you use it as a reference, like if you're learning licks do you keep speeding up the time so you can get more facility with what you're doing on the right hand? How do you use it?

T: I do all of that. I try and use a metronome whenever I can. I know of some excellent players who will put the beat on one, then they'll switch it so the





beat's on two and four, and then they'll switch it so the beat's on the end of two. I've never gotten to that point but I imagine that if I were going deeper into it then I would start playing with that as well. I find that just playing with it on one or just two and four is really good for me. And I find the most important thing about playing with a click is not learning how to respond to an audible signal, but how you internalize that pulse. I have a very firm belief, and I say this to students: what I really want people to understand is that my discovery—within myself—is that the highest level of perfection in my playing comes from the internalized song playing the fingers, instead of the fingers playing the song. When our attention goes to the small mechanical motor movements, and these instruments are demanding in that way, it's not like piano where one finger is creating everything. We need both hands to create one note essentially. And it can really use a lot of brainpower. If however, that feel, that song, that melody is internalized, that internalized song will interpret the song better through the hands than the other way around. So for me playing with a metronome is more about how do I get that feel ingrained in my core?

I: That's very interesting. I've never heard that before.

T: When you watch some of the greatest players that are really known for their time, like for instance a friend just took me to see a Chris Thiele concert. His time and his groove are just really incredible. And he can't hold still. I don't know what would happen if he held still. I play with Brazilian musicians that just have this extraordinary sense of time. It's full body movement.

I: Do you tap your foot when you play?

T: Sometimes. I consciously worked hard to get out of the habit of tapping my foot, for working in the studio.

I: Well yeah, there you can't.

T: But when I play onstage there is movement there

I: So tell me why you're actually at IBMA.

T: I was hired to come demonstrate the new banjo pick-up built by EMG. EMG's owner Rob Turner invited in to evaluate it over two years ago. EMG is one of the leading pick-up manufacturers in the world. They pioneered active pick-ups—pick-ups with batteries. They're really known for what they've done with

electric guitars and basses. They kind of revolutionized the Humbucker coil pickup technology.

And I had a custom Strat made for me in 1984 with an EMG pickup. The only people I knew that had EMG's were studio players. And so when Rob contacted me I thought that was neat, because I loved EMG back then. And then I probably got together with him 15, 20 times. We were recording banjos with extremely high-end studio microphones— recording everything: pick-up, direct signal pickup and microphones. Rob went home and studied that and said okay, what's missing, how can I make this sound like that?

And she ought some advice from other players like Bela. And the end result is that he came up with this banjo pick-up that I believe is really the best.

I: What makes it so good?

T: It installs in two minutes and uninstalls in one minute. There's no alteration to the banjo; it's not invasive. And, it doesn't change the sound in any way. The bottom line is, it makes the sound louder, without feeding back. And it's a Humbucker pickup, so there's no noise, no hum.

Each subsequent version led him to develop this technology where he made a preamp installed on dual coils that then made them become microphones. So you're not just hearing the metal strings vibrating, or the tiny metal sim that's picking up the head tone—you're picking up the actual acoustic resonance within the chamber of the banjo.

I: Which is interesting because I've known Rob a long time, and he explained to me how air actually has quite a lot to do with pick-ups. Anyway so you're here, demonstrating this pick-up.

T: The nature of great legendary pickups is that pickups have a particular sound. And that's not the case with this pickup. In the purest form all you ever want to do as an acoustic musician is sound louder when you need to.

T: Essentially four very different sounding banjos.

I: So that's why you're here at IBMA. Out in California I saw the breadth of your playing, and I think what you're doing is unique. Is there anything you can talk about with your right hand technique? You said that some of your tunes don't have rolls but there are really banjo-y moves. When I was watching you yesterday I was watching your right hand and sometimes

I see repeatable patterns. Are those techniques that you created for the songs, or are they based on techniques you already had, or are they guitar techniques...?

T: Most of these unorthodox techniques have come as a result of me being a slave to the muse.

I: I notice that you do a lot of arpeggiated types of things, which to me sound more arpeggiated than...um melodic style, or chromatic. It doesn't seem to fall into either of those. I mean it's melodic in the sense that each note is a melody note. Did this come from practicing scales? Practicing arpeggios, or is this just like what you say, a slave to the muse? That's what you heard, so let's find it on the banjo?

T: Let's find a way to make it work. And that's exactly right. I'd play a passage and intuitively want to take it somewhere else.

I: I wouldn't call you a position player. Like in bluegrass, where you play out of a certain chord formation...

T: No, that would make life a lot easier.

I: But your right hand does do repeatable things, by virtue of having the fifth string. Like if you're going up the neck, how much of the fifth string, or are you going to play like the A on the 5th string seventh fret or the 7th fret of the first string you know of the ninth fret of the second string. Banjo is not like a piano. You could play the same note in a lot of different places. Is that dictated by your right hand or do you fall into things like where you're going to play a passage

T: Occasionally there are melodies or scale passages or lines that I hear that just don't really lay out well on the banjo. And what often happens is that I come up with something that I like even better, that I wasn't even hearing in my head.

I: Is that driven by how you're going to play it on the banjo?

T: Yes, so the banjo as a tool facilitates melody as well. So it goes both ways.

I: Did you study scales quite a bit? Were you a scale player or a mode player

T: No, I pretty much don't study scales or arpeggios or modes. I think the trick comes from just deep listening.

I: You mentioned Bill Keith and obviously Bill solidified that whole melodic approach. Did you, early on, learn some of those Bill Keith-types of melodies? I don't hear a lot of the typical chromatic, bluegrassy melodic scaly-type stuff. I don't hear the half step chromatic

type of motion.

T: I can do both those things.

I: But were you a big proponent of melodic style? Obviously it's turned on something in you because you play melodically but I wouldn't say it's like too many other people.

T: One of my favorite things about the 5-string is that ability to play linear passages that are more pianistic than anything else. In fact when I was preparing to record "Milagros," I realized that, much to my horror, there were three songs that I couldn't remember writing. I couldn't recall where they came from, where I was, and I usually have a real time stamp on that. I didn't understand that. I just remembered suddenly playing them. And they're all hard enough that you don't just suddenly play those songs. So there was kind of this time warp involved. So I recorded the tunes and then gave the CD to a friend of mine who is a touring concert pianist. He has an encyclopedic brain that knows most of the classical literature ever written. He made a copy and sent it to a friend who is a professor even more well versed than him. And the two of them sat down and listened and luckily their report was that they found a lot of different influences. They could site baroque and classical and romantic and chromatic classical and modern and even atonal. A lot of Russian influences, some French and some Spanish.

I: I hear the Russian influence too.

T: Yeah, I love the Russians. But they couldn't find anything derivative. The one observation they made was that it reminded them more of piano literature than anything else.

I: I think that kind of sums up the scope of your playing.

T: Or at least the right hand of the piano.

I: Which is kind of significant. So right now are you playing any bluegrass gigs?

T: Yeah, I love playing straight ahead bluegrass.

I: Actually when I heard you playing bluegrass banjo, I heard nothing that would have tipped me off to this other kind of music you play.

T: I did a series of concerts this summer and one was with a good bluegrass band that had Wayne Sprouce playing fiddle. It was hardcore bluegrass, and then a couple nights later I played a set of original music. I assembled a ten piece band for that, and people were a little confused and disturbed.

I: Well that's because you're confused and disturbed. So it seems that to play the tunes you do, and to get to a point where you don't have to struggle through them, that must take a lot of practice. What's your typical day like? Do you play banjo every day? Do you have a practice regimen?

T: No, I wish I did.

I: Did you ever?

T: Yes

I: Any advice to a player is coming up?

T: I got my first banjo on my 17th birthday, and mother says I practiced eight

to ten hours a day. And I got pretty good pretty quickly and ended up being in a band that was doing festivals in a year.

I: When you sit down and practice do you play tunes? Practice licks? How did you learn that stuff?

T: The way I learned to play in the very beginning was by recording things I wanted to learn on my dad's reel to reel recorder and then turning it to half speed. And a lot of what I recorded was Bobby Thompson, from "Hee Haw." Somehow I knew the music in between scenes wasn't

The other news is, I'm developing this artificial calfskin head that I'll be releasing soon.

I: Will that be available through you?

T: Yeah, in the beginning. I've become so addicted to calfskin, and like I said, because I play solo, it has really given me a deep appreciation for the tone of high quality, well-tuned calfskin, and so I need to find a way to replicate that without the constant maintenance.

Roy Clark. And that's what really attracted me. Bobby and I became friends shortly before he died. He really loved hearing that.

I: So you were drawn to that melodic stuff right away.

T: I was. But probably the first real banjo player I ever saw was Greg Rich.

I: Now I know Greg Rich as a luthier and designer: the guy who turned Gibson around, and who really knows about old banjos and recreating that tone. But I was surprised when you said he was an influence because I've never heard him play. But he taught you "Slipped Disk."

T: I only took one formal lesson and it was from Greg. And he told me a funny story a few years ago; he laughed and said, "I have to come clean. I could never play "Slipped Disk."

I: But he could teach it. So he was part of the southern California banjo scene.

T: He lived where near where I grew up. He was a friend of Larry McNeely's. He quickly turned me onto Larry. He said you've got to go see Larry, so I went with my best friend Jeff to McCay's, and little did we know that Larry was the opening act for the first David Grisman quintet concert. And David was a heavy influence on me as well.

I: And I know you've played with David and lots of other people.

T: My record is on his label now. Artistic Oasis.

I: Many musicians, due to circumstances, are part time. It sounds to me you're a full time musician. How long have you been supporting yourself playing music, making music, creating music, and doing exclusively this?

T: Since I graduated from high school. 1977. Now and then I've done various interesting odd jobs. I lived in Japan and worked as a record producer. But mainly west coast and Hawaii as well.

I: What's the new news? What would define what's happening with you now?

T: "Milagros" was just recently remixed and remastered by a great engineer. And in the process I found several takes that were better than the ones I had put out the first time.

I: When did you record the album the first time?

T: Late 2004. And then our engineer disappeared. He had bipolarity syndrome. So I mixed it and mastered it. And you wouldn't think solo instrument is tricky to mix but there were four mics. So now the overall sound is much more expansive.

And now, having done hundreds of solo banjo concerts of these complex and often times slow and sustained pieces of music, it's given me a unique perspective that I don't think many banjo players have. Of getting microscopic about the tone and about what you're putting out. There's nowhere to hide. There's no rhythm guitar, no solo instruments and so it's given me the ability to get really really detailed at looking at it.

The other news is that I'm about to release another record called "Soul House," which is original vocal music, with me as vocalist. It does have banjo on it as well, and it's in a variety of different styles. It's got three other musicians on it, and some of pieces are highly produced and some are sparser. I produced it. They're all my originals, along with one traditional African song.

And, I spent a lot of time, especially this summer, playing with a great fiddle player, Blaine Sprouce. He's on my new record, but we also began recording a new duo record. I don't know if it will be exclusively banjo and fiddle duets, but I think that we'll also take some of the lesser-known Kenny Baker tunes that he knows and loves, and do them in a chamber music style.