



Jake Schepps

Profile: Philippe Revel's Banjos

The Old-Time Way

July 2008

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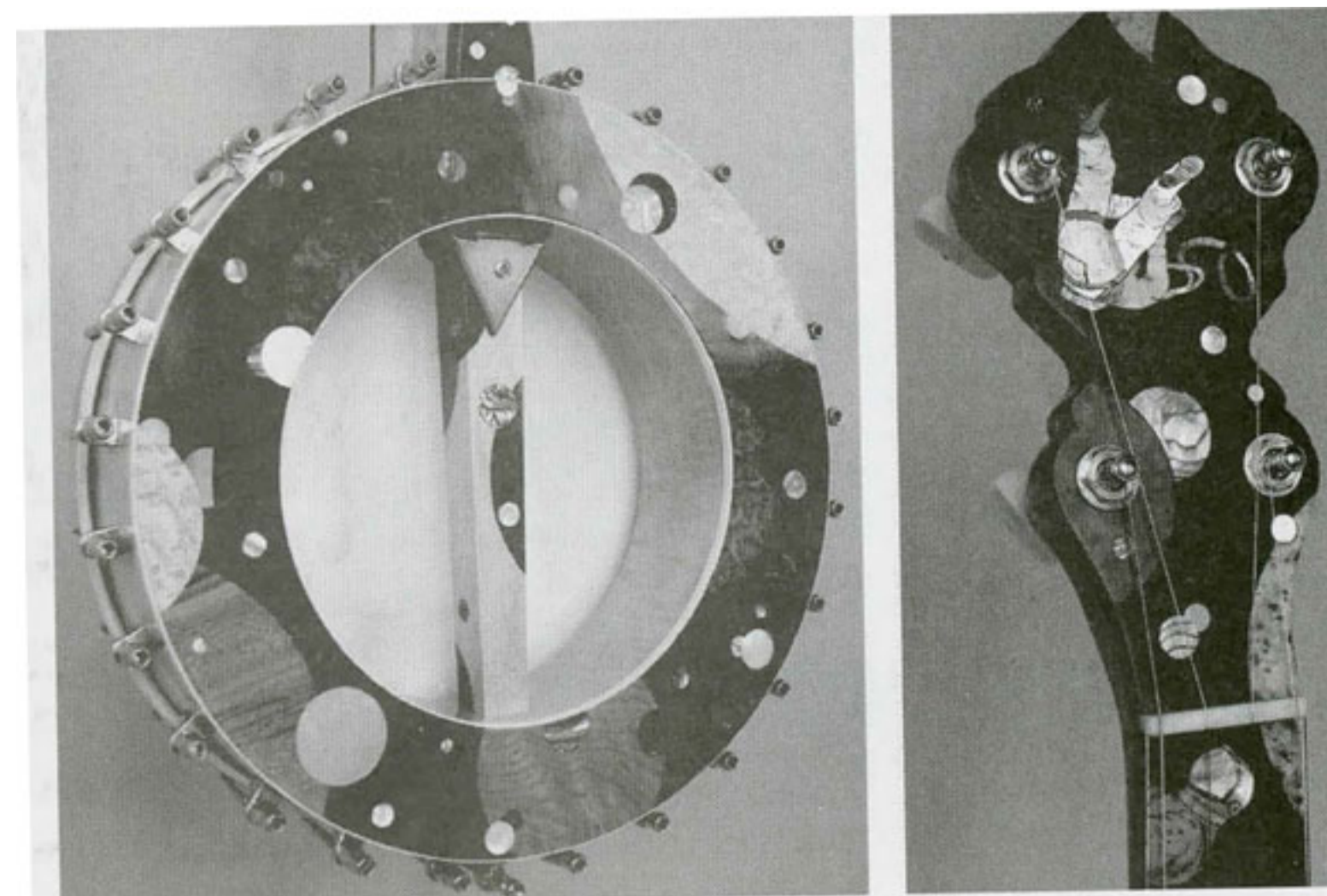
Butter on the Biscuit and Jelly on the Side

## Philippe Revel: a luthier in the sky...

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By Gerard De Smaele



Details from Philippe Revel's banjos: "Angel Banjo" (above), "Space," and "Flying!"

Music connects us with the soul it expresses who we truly are and links us with the infinite universe. It turns spirit and feelings into sound. The sound of an instrument is the expression of a dream for an absolute, a lifelong quest for many musicians. A musical instrument can be beautifully designed and decorated. However, if it isn't playable and doesn't sound pleasant, all this work can be in vain. Banjos can be seen as works of art, but they're not only decorative objects. They are most appreciated when they are functional instruments with a design which reflects the aesthetic tastes of the owner.



Heel detail from "Angel Banjo"

The banjos of Philippe Revel are unique. If his instruments are not standardized, it's because he has preferred to explore all the classical models of the great American banjo tradition of the period 1870-1910. His imagination has led to the creation of distinctive instruments which combine the luthiers' and the musician's ideal. In each of his instruments his purpose is to express an original concept in which a more or less elaborate decoration will take place as part of the whole. I find there are some similarities between the decorations of one of his banjos and a contemporary book binding in which the bookbinder subtly adds his design to the thought of a writer. Philippe is one of the contemporary banjo makers who show us that there is still plenty of space for creative luthiers respectfully inspired by the perfection of the great banjos of the golden years like Fairbanks, Cole, Bacon, Dobson, S.S. Stewart, and others, to freely improvise on design while

not compromising on sound. His curiosity has also pushed him to start exploring the field of Minstrel and gourd banjos.

My first meeting with Philippe was in 2003 when the "Banjo!" exhibit was set up for the Musical Instrument Museum ("MIM") in Brussels, Belgium. I was very disappointed to discover that the Revel banjo I had chosen for it could not be displayed in one of the showcases or in the catalog of the exhibit. My regrets were still amplified when later on I had a closer look and played this instrument: the "Space Banjo".

Philippe is a man of the air-he has a passion for single line kites and fighting kites; he also pilots much heavier Boeings for Air France, though generally not at the same time. For more than 20 years he has cut across skies and it is not surprising that Space has become the theme of two of his banjos: "Space Banjo" and "Flying!" On these two instruments the back of the Bacon-style internal resonator has been decorated in an original and asymmetric way, including the holes.

He often uses Savarez Alliance KF strings which have been made for lute and baroque guitars. This firm produces these synthetic gut strings in Lyon, France. They are stable, long-lasting and can handle more tension; you can even choose the tension you want. The result on the instrument is a rich, powerful and balanced tone as I could see myself.

Though the banjo is seen to be the true American instrument, we are not surprised to see them also built in Europe, mostly in England. If we can find Tenor and Mandolin banjos made in France in the 1930's in the Akira Tsumura Collection, another less-known source (Henri Bouasse, "Acoustique, cordes et membranes" Delagrave Library, 1926) proves that some 5-strings were also built in France in the beginning of 20th century. In the 19th century the minstrel shows were also seen in France but the language was a serious obstacle to its popularization. In France, the success of this instrument was more naturally concentrated on instrumental music for classical banjo and jazz music in these years when American folk music was still unknown except by some very few specialists.

As with many other French people, the first contact Philippe Revel (born in 1955) had with the American banjo was by chance. In the 1970-80's, the "folk revival" reached Europe through folk-clubs, radio broadcasts, and festivals. Pete Seeger, The New Lost City Ramblers, Derroll Adams, Steve Waring and some others were the American banjo ambassadors of the time in France. It is during this period that Philippe built his first banjo from a saucepan. In 1993, Philippe concentrated on making his second banjo, a more sophisticated model this time, with a Whyte Laydie tone ring and pearl inlays, called the "Nature banjo". In 1998, he began making banjos in earnest and today his modest output reaches a small clientele. He is distinguished among many other European banjo makers.

Our amateur luthier is encouraged by his musician friends: Eric Stefanelli, Polo & Nadine Burguiere and some American musicians and collectors like Hank Schwartz, Pete Szego and Bob Smakula. His preferences among contemporary US banjo makers are Doug Unger, John Gough, Kevin Enoch and Bob Anderson. In the future his original and refined instruments are certainly destined to become nice collector pieces. You can see his instruments on the net at: <http://revelbanjos.com>

Gerard De Smaele, Feb. 2006

(following an interview in Nov. 2005)

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