



Universal

Chuck Ogsbury and OME Banjos

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Sound



EVERY DAY, CHUCK OGSBURY MEDITATES ON THE MOST acclaimed banjo designs of all time. Then he gets to work and tries to make them even better. Ogsbury, the founder and mastermind behind OME Banjos, is one of the world's premier banjo makers. OME is a relatively small concern, but for a company that only builds around 150 instruments per year, OME produces a wide variety of banjo styles. In fact, their production is so varied, drawing from so many classic designs, that a trip through their catalog practically traces the convoluted history of the banjo in the early part of the 20th century. 🖊️



ABOVE: Chuck Ogsbury in 1994 with the OME Renaissance.
LARRY SHIRKEY

OPPOSITE: Chuck's daughter Tanya Ogsbury polishes a Megavox resonator prior to assembly.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Drawing of the OME Renaissance model.
ED BRITT

The open-back Minstrel and Old-Time five-strings, for example, have the simple wooden rims of banjos built around 1900 while the fancier Traditional five-string open-back has a tone ring that recalls the banjos from around 1910. The Classic Jazz four-string has a shell, flange and resonator inspired by the Silver Bell banjos that Bacon & Day started building in 1924 while the Standard Jazz weds a resonator with the tone ring of the Traditional open-back in a manner that is similar to the Vegaphone Deluxe that appeared in 1926. The Megavox Jazz owes its distinctive styling to the Vegavox that was introduced in 1927, and the five-string Bluegrass series has the three-ply maple rim, die-cast flange and flathead tone ring similar to those pioneered by Gibson in the 1930s.

Even though Ogsbury has been inspired by some of the greatest vintage banjos, his instruments are more than just replicas. His instruments update the classic designs in a way that honors his forebears, but Ogsbury adds cosmetic and structural twists that mark his banjos as distinctly OME.

Learning to Love the Banjo

Chuck Ogsbury was born in Kentucky and raised by a family that valued well-crafted things. "My mother loved and collected antiques," Ogsbury recalls. "She used to take me along on her buying trips when I was a kid. From a very early age I was fascinated by the antique firearms we would find from time to time. I can't really explain why I was so drawn to the old guns, but there was something magical about the way the old gunsmiths combined metal and wood. They were functional but they were also so graceful and well made. In a way, I think my passion for antique guns was preparing me for my future because when I saw my first banjos up close, I saw they had many of the same qualities — that they were also an art form in wood and metal. I had an instant passion for them as well."

Ogsbury was surrounded by music when he was growing up — there were plenty of bluegrass pickers in his area — but when he was young he was content to listen rather than play. He did make a couple of half-hearted attempts at learning guitar while he was in Kentucky, but he didn't feel inspired to start playing seriously until 1956, when he left home to pursue a degree in engineering at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

When Ogsbury arrived at the university, the urban folk revival was in its early stages, and the campus coffeehouses were filled with young musicians fumbling around on guitars, dulcimers and banjos. "There was a lot of interesting music going here in Boulder in the late 1950s," he says. "Most of the people my age were into Pete Seeger, the Kingston Trio, the Weavers and, a little later, Peter, Paul and Mary. And a lot of great musicians lived here back then. I remember David Crosby and Stephen Stills were around a lot, and I went to school with Judy Collins. There was also Karen Dalton, who was a magnificent singer and played my banjos. Karen and I were really close. She was a powerful woman and





Archibald L. Camp with a long-neck ODE in 1961.

really important to a lot of us around here. She was a big influence on Tim Hardin — it was very sad when she passed away a few years ago.”

Like many other students at the time, he began to seek out older players and he was lucky to run across A. L. Camp and Darius “Diz” Darwin. “A. L. Camp was an inspiring person in my banjo career,” Ogsbury says. “I met him about 1958 and he must have been 80 then. He had been in Boulder for decades and he first learned to play the banjo in the 1890s. He played classical banjo in the style of Fred Van Eps and Vess Ossman, in that real old Victorian style. He said that in the 1920s he had to switch over playing four-string because people then wanted jazz and didn’t want to hear his old stuff.

“He had a tiny music store in his house and, while I didn’t take official lessons from him, I did hang out with him a lot. He really knew a lot about the old banjos. He was alive when S. S. Stewart, Bacon & Day and

Orville Gibson were still around and building and he really helped connect me to that early era, when what we now call vintage instruments were brand new. He was definitely from the last century — well, the century before the last century now that I think about it. A. L. Camp was a great old gentleman.”

Another early influence on Ogsbury’s banjo consciousness was Darius Darwin, a local legend who claimed to be a relative of Charles Darwin. “We called him Diz, which suited him much better than Darius,” Ogsbury recalls. “He was a little older than I was, and I have no idea where he picked up the banjo. He was the first guy I ever heard frail a banjo, which was a mysterious technique in Boulder in 1958. Looking back on it, I would have liked to have found out where he learned that style. Diz was really out in the ozone, he was from another planet, but he really got me into old-time music, which I’ve loved ever since.”

The Birth of ODE

In 1958 the Kingston Trio scored a major hit with “Tom Dooley,” which prominently featured a banjo, and the folk revival went mainstream. On the east coast, there were still lots of great, old instruments to be found and restored, but in Boulder, good vintage instruments were hard to find and new ones were too expensive. To fill the void, Ogsbury put his engineering studies to good use and began work on a low-cost, quality banjo in 1959. He had the idea of using an aluminum shell, which was less expensive to produce than the traditional wooden shell.

In 1960, inspired by the success of his prototype, Ogsbury decided to build banjos to sell under the ODE brand name. He built a batch of 100 banjos with the help of an old Swedish woodworker named Tony Jacobs. In folk circles, Pete Seeger was the most prominent banjo player, and his unusual long-neck banjo — with its three extra frets — became an object of desire for young banjo pickers. Vega manufactured the long-neck PS-5, and in short order just about every folk group was sporting one on stage. Because of the visibility of this particular style, Ogsbury decided to make all of his banjos with long necks. He priced his ODEs between \$72 and \$79 and within a few months he completely sold out.



Heel carving on custom
Grand Artist Megatone.

In 1961, Ogsbury and a friend named Dave Walden opened a shop in north Boulder and made several different banjo models and styles to meet growing demand. Ogsbury's banjos began to attract notice, and in the 1962 edition of Pete Seeger's book, *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*, he mentions "a new little company in Boulder, Colorado (the ODE company, Jamestown Star Route, Boulder, Colorado). The latter, like any reputable firm, will guarantee a neck against any possible warping."

In 1962, he moved to a new shop he built in the mountains and began filling orders in earnest, but a freak weather phenomenon nearly put him out of business a year later. "In March of 1963 I was living in a cabin in the woods, and early in the morning one of my workers woke me up by pounding on my door," Ogsbury recalls. "If he was there I knew something

bad had happened to my workshop, and I asked him if it had burned down. 'No,' he said, 'it blew down!' There is this windstorm in the mountains called a Chinook that can blow up to 140 miles per hour. Well, a Chinook blew in and flattened my new workshop. The back garage door blew off first and the wind blew inside and lifted the roof off like it was an airplane wing and carried it 100 yards away from the walls. Then the walls collapsed. The only thing left standing was the fireplace and the bathroom.

"When we went down to the site the winds were still blowing about 70 miles per hour so we had to crawl around to keep from getting knocked over. I was going through the area where my office used to be, picking up invoices and other things like that, when I was shocked to hear the phone ring. I used to have this big old roll top desk, and it had survived the building's collapse



ABOVE LEFT: The ODE workshop in early 1963.
COURTESY OF OME BANJOS

ABOVE RIGHT: The ODE workshop after the Chinook blew it down.
BILL MANSFIELD

with the phone still in it. So I answered the ringing and said, ‘We’re not open today. Could you call back next week please?’ Luckily, I had a lot of friends who helped out with the rebuilding. We poured the walls full of concrete so it wouldn’t fall down next time. I’ve heard of other builders getting burned out and flooded out, but I’m the only one I know of who was blown out.” Within a month, ODE was back in production in a rented space.

In 1964, a young man from Ohio named Creston “Kix” Stewart hitchhiked out to Boulder to work with Ogsbury at ODE. Stewart had an impressive knowledge

production, Ogsbury had built around 1,900 of them, and to this day, they are still prized by pickers.

Along with making banjos, Ogsbury and Stewart began to produce replacement parts for instruments, an idea that was new at the time. In those days, parts were really only available from the manufacturers, and if you had an old instrument that was no longer in production, replacement parts were impossible to find. As sales of the parts increased, Stewart realized there was an even larger untapped market than he’d suspected and he eventually left ODE to form Stewart-MacDonald, which is now one of the largest instrument part and supply businesses in the world.

After Stewart left, Ogsbury found he didn’t have the energy to run ODE by himself. He had never really planned to start a banjo business, and the day-to-day grind was wearing him down. Also, Ogsbury witnessed Bob Dylan’s electric set at the Newport Folk Festival in

1965 and realized that acoustic folk music’s days were numbered. In 1966 Baldwin, a large musical instrument company, offered to buy ODE, and Ogsbury agreed. At the time Baldwin was looking to expand their business beyond pianos and bought many smaller instrument companies, including Burns Guitars, Sho-Bud Pedal Steels and Gretsch.

The new owners immediately changed the name on the banjos from ODE to Baldwin, but when sales dropped they realized that people didn’t want Baldwin

of vintage instruments, and together they designed a whole new line of banjos with traditional wooden rims, including several bluegrass-style instruments with flatter tone rings. Thanks to the folk revival, bluegrass was emerging as a popular form of music, and ODE quickly made a name for themselves with their well-made bluegrass instruments. The banjos were labeled style A, B, C, D, E and F, each fancier than the last. With the introduction of the new line, Ogsbury retired the aluminum-shell banjos. In the few years they were in

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banjos — they wanted ODEs. So they changed the headstock logo to Baldwin ODE and, a few years later, they went back to just ODE. In 1980, Baldwin stopped mucking around in the banjo business altogether and closed ODE.

The Birth of OME

Free of business commitments for the first time in a long time, Ogsbury hit the road and just wandered for a few years before settling down in the mountains west of Boulder. Despite his best efforts to stay away from banjo making, Ogsbury was asked by three potential partners if he wanted to start a new banjo company. Although he was initially hesitant, Ogsbury finally relented. As a nod to his former company, they replaced the “D” in ODE with an “M” and called the new banjos OME. “I was in the hippie stage of my life and I was into the idea that the chant ‘OM’ was the universal



sound,” Ogsbury says. “I also found that by changing the ‘D’ to an ‘M’ I could get a registered trademark out of it, so that’s what I did.”

During his travels, Ogsbury had come up with some new ideas about how to build banjos and he had devel-

oped some interesting sonic and ornamental concepts he wanted to try. Ogsbury set up a shop in the mountains in Gold Hill, Colo., to work on his ideas, but his partners wanted to open a larger workshop in Boulder. Due to this disagreement, Ogsbury limited his involvement: he set up the company and worked on the artistic and structural designs while his partners actually built the banjos. The new system worked well enough, and by 1975 OME was making 350 banjos per year, mostly five-string open-backs and bluegrass instruments, with a few tenor and plectrum banjos.

By 1978, two of the partners had burned out on banjos and left Ogsbury and their partner Ed Woodward with the company. Ogsbury decided to become more involved in the day-to-day running of the company and came back to full-time banjo building. In 1988, Woodward left and Ogsbury was back in control of OME. And now, 30 years after making his first banjo, Chuck Ogsbury was once again the sole owner of his

LEFT: Creston “Kix” Stewart at the ODE workshop in 1964.
BILL MANSFIELD

RIGHT: Chuck Ogsbury designing the OME in 1970.
OME BANJOS



ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT:
Jubilee Open-Back,
Grand Artist Megatone 5-string,
Mogul Megavox tenor,
Monarch Classic plectrum.
COURTESY OF OME BANJOS

OPPOSITE: Irv Webber, who was the
pattern maker for ODE and OME,
at his workbench in 1964.
TOM MCKINLAY

own banjo company. While full control gave him more responsibilities and more headaches, it also meant that he was free to pursue his vision, wherever it led.

Open-Back Banjos

When Chuck Ogsbury designed his first banjo in 1958, he chose to build a five-string open-back. Over the years, the popularity of this banjo style has waxed and waned, but no matter how slow the sales were, Ogsbury knew they would never truly go out of fashion. These days, old-time music is as popular as it ever was, and consequently Ogsbury's been making more and more open-backs each month. At the 2005 International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) convention, Ogsbury's open-backs seemed to dominate the stage; they were played by Abigail Washburn from Uncle Earl, Roy Andrade from the Reeltime Travelers, Phil Wade from the Wilders and Ricky and Molly Skaggs.

One of the reasons Ogsbury enjoys building open-back banjos is the diversity of playing styles in old-time music. There is no one "holy grail" open-back that everyone wants, unlike in bluegrass, where a certain model tends to predominate. This has allowed Ogsbury to think creatively about building styles for open-backs in ways he never could for bluegrass banjos. He can build instruments where the end of the fretboard is scooped to allow the player to produce a mellower tone by picking further away from the bridge, for example, or make a scroll-shaped peghead for that pre-war (pre-Civil War, that is) look.

OME has four different pot styles for open-backs, which are all available with 11" or 12" rims. The 11" rims sound lighter and respond a little quicker while the 12" rims have deeper overtones and longer sustain. The Minstrel pot has no tone ring, and the head rests directly on the hard maple rim. It is dark and resonant and great for vocal accompaniment. The Old-Time pot





LEFT: Chuck Ogsbury at OME in 2006.

RIGHT: Gustavo Silva marks a maple block before cutting it into neck blanks.
COURTESY OF OME BANJOS



has a small rolled brass tone ring to bring out a little more volume and clarity. The Traditional setup uses a complex tone ring based on the spun brass Bacon & Day Silver Bell tone ring. It has more power and punch but still retains the open-back banjo sound. Lastly, open-back models are also available with a cast bronze Megatone bluegrass tone ring and a snap-on resonator for an even brighter and louder sound.

“I look for a really lively response and a deeper, more bottom-end sound,” Ogsbury explains. “A banjo is naturally more top-ended anyway. I like more bass, more depth and a woodier sound. I do not like a tinny- or metallic-sounding banjo. Going to the 12” pot and the wood rim has really produced that sound I am looking for in open-back styles. I think that is one of the reasons that a lot of professionals are picking up on our open-back banjos.”

Bluegrass Banjos

As well as making five-string open-backs for old-time players, Ogsbury is trying to crack the bluegrass market. Unlike the old-time world, where there is no accepted standard banjo, the bluegrass world expects their banjos to sound just like the one Earl Scruggs plays. “Well, the bluegrass market is pretty solid on believing that the pre-war–style Gibson flathead is the standard,” Ogsbury says. “Builders that want to tap into that market have to have a similar sound to that. To do this you have to stick pretty close to the vintage banjo design. So we do something like that, but we try to do it better.”

“Regarding the Gibson Mastertone banjo,” Ogsbury says, “there is a lot of myth involved with its design and use. First of all, the design was originally made for



four-string tenor banjos. Very few original five-string Mastertones exist. The large majority of old Mastertones are not original but have custom-made necks, tone rings and other parts put on the tenor banjo pots. Even the much sought-after original flathead tone rings varied considerably in material and design used. There is not one design but many variations. The idea of one perfect, holy grail, pre-war flathead banjo design is mostly a myth. The critical ingredients of the design that create the classic bluegrass banjo are a flathead, sand-cast, bell-bronze tone ring, a one-piece zinc die-cast resonator flange and a three-ply maple rim — all of which OME uses. There are of course other ingredients that can vary. The depth of the pot, the size and fit of the neck and the other metal hardware used all combine to give the final performance of the instrument.”

At the heart of OME’s bluegrass line is Ogsbury’s

vision of traditional ideas combined with modern refinements. These banjos have the crisp attack, bright sound and quick decay needed for fast bluegrass picking, but also have a huge tonal and dynamics range that make them well suited for many styles of music. Bluegrass players who play OME banjos include Kipper Stitt from Pine Mountain Railroad, Eric Weissberg, Tony Furtado and Pete Wernick.

Jazz Banjos

Like their open-back banjos, OME’s jazz banjos show creativity in their design and construction that would not be possible in the bluegrass market. The jazz banjos come in four different necks: four-string tenor, the longer four-string plectrum, a hybrid four-string tenor/plectrum and six-string guitar banjos. For the pot

LEFT: Rich Sharples doing final setup.

RIGHT: José Prado sanding a neck.

designs, Ogsbury updated older styles made by Vega, Bacon & Day and Gibson. The Standard Jazz uses the tonal system from the bluegrass models. It is the most popular of the jazz banjos and is very well balanced and tonally expressive.

The Classic Jazz is an update of the Bacon & Day Silver Bell line of banjos. It is very bright and loud and is easily heard above the other instruments in a traditional jazz band. The Megavox is a deep-walled resonator instrument reminiscent of the Vegavox banjos made by Vega in the 1920s. It has a deeper sound that is very resonant and responds easily across the entire playing range. All of these keep the spirit of the original but modernize and improve upon them for today's market. Indeed, these OME designs are considered by many to be better than the originals.

OME four-string banjos are a common site at festivals for traditional jazz and can be seen in the hands of many pros. Many of these banjos have amazing engraving, inlay, carving and painting. In general these are custom instruments that can take more than a year to



carving, the dye coloring and their custom inlaying are all accomplished by some of the finest artists around.

Players are also choosing OME four-string open-back banjos for Irish music. Irish banjo playing is an offshoot of Irish fiddle and mandolin playing. It has become popular for modern Irish folk musicians to find tenor banjos with slightly shorter necks and tune them to mandolin tuning (GDAE) or tenor

tuning (CGDA). This provides them with another instrumental voice for picking waltzes, jigs and reels.

OME in the Future

Chuck Ogsbury is justly proud of the banjos he and his crew produce. "Everything we make is an original instrument," he says. "We don't really make copies. Also, we build a large variety of instruments that can appeal to almost any type of banjo player. Our quality, craftsmanship and attention to detail are exceptional and we put more time into building our banjos than anyone in the business. All this makes a banjo that sounds, looks and feels great."

There are so many good builders out there today it seems that we are in another golden age of fretted instrument building in America. Many players agree that the instruments made by smaller companies like OME are the most desirable instruments being built today. Not surprisingly, Ogsbury agrees. "When the 'factory' mentality takes over as a company grows into larger production, something very essential to quality is lost," he says. "At OME, we build only 150 instruments a year, which is a far cry from factory production. Every OME is a handmade, hands-on, personally built instrument. Our banjos emphasize outstanding quality, which higher production shops can't equal."

produce because of the extra work involved. This tradition goes back to the instruments built for the vaudeville stage, when virtuoso musicians wanted banjos with as much visual flair as possible. OME's decoration techniques often utilize designs from vintage instruments while possessing a quality that is recognizably OME. The metal and mother-of-pearl engraving, the wood-

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“At the same time, building quality banjos requires a significant amount of investment in design, tooling and building of the metal components, which a one-man shop cannot do,” he continues. “OME makes more metal banjo components than anyone in the business, and this gives us another competitive edge in the high-end market.”

Amazingly, Ogsbury has designed almost every part on OME banjos, rather than buying stock parts from companies like Stewart-MacDonald, the company founded by his former partner. Ogsbury does have his metal parts fabricated by off-site subcontractors, but he owns the tooling on these parts and they are made only for OME. This adds up to almost 50 different suppliers, all of which need to match OME’s rigorous quality standards. This production format means that OME is big enough to make a unique product at a reasonable cost but small enough to give personal attention to every instrument. If you call or stop in, it is likely that Ogsbury’s daughter Tanya will spend a big part of her day helping you find the perfect banjo. If you take your banjo to get set up, it goes right back to the shop for the master builders to handle it personally.

As a designer, Chuck Ogsbury is always looking to the future and he can usually be found working on his next design. One of his most recent innovations is a hybrid four-string banjo that he calls the tenor/plectrum. The scale length on this banjo is a compromise between the long-scale plectrum and the short-scale tenor, a design that allows the bridge to be placed toward the center of the head, which produces a very sweet, round and deep tone. This 22-fret instrument has a 23.375” scale and can be tuned to tenor (CGDA), plectrum (CGBD), octave mandolin (GDAE) or guitar tuning (DGBE), making it useful for a variety of different styles.

Ogsbury has also been working on guitar-banjos recently. Guitar-banjos were used as jazz and ragtime instruments in the 1920s and are making a comeback of sorts. Ogsbury has been building them as custom orders over the years — including one for the late Reverend Gary Davis — but now he is adding them to the standard catalog. Recently, Ogsbury has started building guitar-banjos with open backs, 12” pots and simple tone rings. This combination of features produces an instrument that is deep, resonant and warm, perfectly



suited for vocal accompaniment, old-time music, jazz or ragtime.

The first thing you notice when you step into the OME banjo workshop is that Chuck Ogsbury has put almost no effort into decorating the space or making it a comfortable place to hang out. But a quick glance at the banjos built by Ogsbury and his crew of four luthiers shows that the creative energy that could have gone into making their shop look nice has instead been directed into crafting some of the most exquisite instruments ever to grace a stage, recording studio or living room. And isn’t that where a luthier’s efforts should ultimately be directed, into crafting a work of art that a musician can use to create more art? 🎵

ABOVE: Chuck Ogsbury at OME in 1962.

BILL MANSFIELD

OPPOSITE: Headstock of Grand Artist Wildflower.