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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARTFORD

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The new Hartford tonering, made of wood, began with an idea inspired by John Hartford. Now it has grown into a phenomenon where many banjo players changing away from the brass tonering design and over to the Hartford tonering. Not only does John Hartford prefer the new sound, but he has been joined by many opinion leaders such as Pat Cloud, Elmer Bird, Tom Chapin, and David Holt, all of whom play Deering banjos with the Hartford tonering. The outside appearance of the banjo is the same with the Hartford tonering or with the Mastertone style ring, but with the Hartford tonering the sound is significantly warmer and fuller. I interviewed John Hartford to get a more in depth view of the source of this change in tonering design.

**Dyanne: When did you become interested in the idea of making a wooden tonering banjo?**

John: It goes back to George Gruhn, when I started tuning the banjo low George found an A.A. Farland wood rim banjo~~x~~ made in 1905 with a 12" pot and I got to playing on it. I still have it. It sound so good you can't believe it. It's the banjo I picked "Morning Bugle" with. (album) And I loved the tone of it, the tone was so good for tuning low. So I played that on stage for a long time. Then George found me a smaller A.A. Farland wood rim and it had a wonderful tone! About that time I got to thinking that it would be nice to have this with a resonator on it, like a Mastertone size but a wood rim.

I forget what year that was, but George had a guy working for him named Tom Ventriss. So Tom Ventriss and I built a Mastertone pot but instead of putting the tonering in it we made it all wood and put a neck on it and it was wonderful. Boy, I really liked it. Then we built another one and we started experimenting with the bevel. We found out that it had an incredible amount to do with wether it sounds high or low. It had almost as much effect on the tone as the difference between a raised head and a flat head.

So then, I was really knocked out with this idea, I thought that somebody ought to do something with it. So I called up a friend named Ren Wall who worked at Gibson at Kalamazoo. Ren said it sounds like a pretty good idea, we ought to do something with it but it dragged on and it dragged on and finally he got fired for something else.

George (Gruhn) called me up one day and said. "I've got



something here that you might be interested in. I was talking with Geoff Stelling about two weeks ago and mentioned the woodtone idea to him. He got all excited about it and I just got a prototype in the mail."

So I went over and played it and it was really good, but it had a real high tone but he had a real steep bevel on it. So I went over it with a fine tooth comb and wrote down all the things he ought to change on it, particularly the bevel. He sent me another one and it was wonderful, a fine woodtone banjo. So he had them and he kept trying to get people interested in them and the they claimed they didn't like the tone or the sound of it with no tonering. Finally, Geoff said that he had an awful hard time selling them. Although I had promoted them and put my picture in the catalog. But he had an awful hard time selling them so he took the ones he had left and put tonerings in them. At that point we were safely out of the catalog, you know, I guessed we were out of the business of it. So I said, "Well, that's an experiment that didn't work." Although I still played mine and loved them. I couldn't see why people didn't like them. But I thought, "Whatever." I used to not being imitated that much anyway, so I just went ahead and did my thing cuz I go by what I love and the sound that I like.

So I was going ahead and doing my thing when I ran into Janet and Greg Deering and we started talking about it down there in California. And I said that since they were going ahead and making them, let's do it right and let me upgrade, because I had figured out some possible design changes to make from the Stelling which we then did in the new Deering. Then Greg had that idea about that granadillo tonering and that really made a good difference.

**Dyanne: How were the other woodtone banjos made?**

John: The A.A. Farlands were birdseye maple with a little tiny ebony cap on them, or something hard like cherry. But they were capped like the ones we're making. But they were not beveled off like a Mastertone, sloped in toward the center of the pot but it was a more round cap. If you imagine a cross-section like the top of a rectangle and then just draw a balanced arch on top of it, a shallow half moon.

The Stelling woodtones were the block maple rim with the top edge turned like a tonering with a 45 degree bevel on it.

Basically what it seems to be is that a shallow bevel gives a deep tone, which I like. And a steep bevel gives a high tone. I think that's basically the rule of thumb.

Dyanne: I've noticed that a number of people in San Diego have started playing Hartford tonering banjos by Deering, but it didn't happen over night, it has been a slow but steady progression.

John: You know, sometimes when you do something like that and



then it doesn't catch on right away, then you start doubting the wisdom of what you are doing.

Dyanne: Well, people are slow to change and old ideas die very hard.

John: (laugh) Aint that the truth!

Dyanne: I have observed people at festivals, if the idea of a wood tonering comes up, they are absolutely not interested in it. But when they play one without knowing what it is before hand they always like the sound.

John: Well you know, it's amazing, when I was a kid I used to hang out with an old fiddle maker and he was always telling me, he said, " You know, you ought to try to build a banjo without that tonering in there." Because he believed in wood and he was always going on about the fact that he thought that the metal tonering really hampered the tone of the banjo. And, of course, back then we really into trying to sound as keen as possible and it was kind of hard to get into that concept. But then, forty years later what he was saying started to ring back at me.

The tonering banjo has a definate place, it has a beautiful ring and a lot of sustain and a lot of overtones. It does really sound good. I still like a tonering banjo awfully well. But I just love that woody, pearly round note.

You can adjust the woodiness of the woodrim banjo by the gauge of strings you use. If you use a light gauge strings it will sound more metallic. If you use heavier strings it will sound woodier. I backed mine off a little bit, I went to using a lighter gauge strings to get closer to the metallic sound, but still get that fullness which it does. I find that you can make a woodrim banjo sound like an old prewar Gibson with a skin head on it which is awful hard to get out of a tonering banjo unless it is that old prewar thing. Of course, then if you want to, you can make the strings a little bit heavier and get a woody sound that you just can't get out of anything else. And, you know, one of the big advantages of the wood rim is the fact that they're light.

Dyanne: What recordings have you done with the woodtone banjos?

John: I recorded Gum Tree Canoe with the Stelling woodtone, Annual Waltz with the Deering and I have a new album coming out that's all Deering called "Down on the River" and Tony Rice and I are finishing up an album here at the house, and that's done with the Deering. And Vassar and I have been working on an album, just the two of us and that's done with the Deering. Everything I've done has been with the Deering. I use one banjo tuned high, in E for some songs and the other tuned in G.