

## History of Ome – Reprinted From Banjo Newsletter Interview With Chuck Ogsbury

One thing you notice from the start is that Chuck Ogsbury is eminently likeable. He is sincere about his instruments, sincere about his love for the banjo, sincere about wanting to make the best banjo that can be made. Throughout his career as a banjo maker, Chuck has never considered quantity as the ultimate goal. Instead, Ogsbury believes in quality. He is ever searching for the “right” tone, which as banjoists know, is a quest rather like trying to find the right star or the right person.

Ogsbury has had a double life as an instrument maker. He first came on the musical instrument scene by making the ODE banjo, one of the favorite instruments of the folk revival era. In his first life as a maker, Chuck produced around 1,900 ODE banjos, ranging from basic aluminum pot long-necks to fancy bluegrass models. As Chuck states, many people remember or own ODEs he made in Boulder and like them.

Yet, true to his notions of an ever-evolving quality for which he constantly strives for in his instruments, Chuck thinks that the OMEs, the banjos of his second life as a maker, are so much better. One thing is sure: just as he was not able to leave the Boulder area for long, neither was he able to leave the manufacturing of banjos.

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BNL: Was the banjo your first instrument?

CO: I started out playing guitar, two or three years earlier than the banjo, but I didn't get very far. A poor teacher and a poor guitar ended my first attempt. That was when I lived in Kentucky. As a boy, I'd grown up around bluegrass but it wasn't until later, when I moved to Colorado in 1956, that I really got into playing music.

At that time I was in engineering school at the university. We'd take a coffee break between classes. I remember walking from the engineering area into the cafeteria next door. You had to go through this place called the Timberline Lounge where the mountaineering people hung out. There was a lady playing guitar and singing, and some guy playing the banjo. It just totally blew me away. Actually, the “lady” turned out to be Judy Collins. I don't know who the banjo player was but that incident inspired me to start playing the guitar again.

About a year after returning to the guitar, I came across a fellow frailing an open back 5-string banjo. I'd never seen that done before. It was hard to tell how he was getting all those notes out of that banjo. That “Devil's Instrument” must have cast a spell over me. I had to learn how to play like that. His name was Darius “Diz” Darwin, a relative of Charles Darwin. We struck up a friendship.

Then I met a local banjo player named Al Camp. He was in his eighties and still played banjo. Al and I became friends and I used to hang out at his house and listen to his stories. He started playing the banjo in the 1890's, classical five-string style. When the boom of the 1920's came along, he got rid of his five-string and picked up a 4-string. Apparently, nobody wanted to hear Victorian banjo playing in the 20's. Later, Al went back to the 5-string. He ended up being recorded by Folkways. He played the old tunes, waltzes, and marches on a nylon-strung 5-string banjo. It was Al and Diz who got me started playing the banjo.

So folk music was becoming popular. I heard the album, “The Weavers at Carnegie Hall,” and that was very special for me. After that there was the Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Odetta, and many others. I was taken away by it all. Boulder then was kind of a “hot spot” for making your own

music. There were many artists coming through the area. But more importantly, there were lots of students who would get together and play. I joined in.

BNL: What got you interested in making banjos?

CO: A few years ago, I went to this wonderful psychic woman for a reading. She didn't know who I was, what I did, or anything about me. During the session, she mentioned that she saw me building musical instruments. "How did you know that?" I asked. "Oh, you've been building instruments in several lives," she said. "The first time was in Egypt." Now this not only ran a chill through my entire body, but it got me to thinking. Did I really build instruments in Egypt? Were they banjo-type instruments? Were they for the rich, the poor? This was an interesting idea, and could explain lots of things.

Well, in this lifetime there were two things that inspired me to build banjos, besides playing. First, I grew up intrigued by building with metal and wood. My mother was in the antique business in Kentucky and I would go looking for treasures of the past with her. In the process, I became interested in antique firearms to the extent that by the time I turned 14, I was a professional gun trader. It was during those years in the trading business that I fell in love with the use of wood and metal as an art form and began learning vintage design techniques with those materials.

Later, while in college, about a year after I got back into playing music, I started picking up old instruments in the second-hand stores and pawn shops in the Denver area. I would bring these old beauties back up to Boulder, make them more playable if necessary, and with a few lessons, turn my engineering classmates on to playing guitar and banjo. This turned out to be a very fulfilling experience for me.

It was this experience, of making your own music that I really fell in love with. It was so different than the 40's and 50's, with the big band thing. Instead of being a spectator, you could make your own music by yourself, or with a friend or two. It was a wonderful discovery for me.

As time went on, my sources for finding good, used instruments started drying up. Colorado just didn't have the wealth of vintage banjos that the Eastern states did. About that time, I had this idea to make a banjo with an aluminum pot as a way to make a good-sounding, inexpensive instrument.

I didn't know all that much about instrument building, and at the time, there was hardly any information available on the subject. I did have, however, a friend, Justin Pierce, who was a musician and a machinist at the R&D physics department at CU. With a little encouragement he made for me the first prototype aluminum pot and I added a Kay banjo neck. That was around 1959. Amazingly enough, it sounded surprisingly good. After playing the prototype for a while, I decided to try making a hundred of these instruments.

BNL: Were you still using the machine shop in the Physics building?

CO: No (laughs). By then, I hooked up with Tony Jacobs, an old Swede who lived in the North end of Denver, a seventy-year-old wood worker. In those days, there just wasn't anything available for a beginner luthier and I needed someone with experience to show me the ropes. Tony had a lifetime of experience with wood. His classic old wood shop that you'd go in, you could barely move around.

He had wood stacked everywhere, in the shed, in the back of his house. And of course he had a giant wood burning stove right in the middle of all this sawdust and wood chips. Totally amazing that the place never burned down. He gave me my first lessons in woodworking there, to the degree of how to produce a hundred instruments.

BNL: A hundred!

CO: I think I built 25 cases to go with that first hundred. They were coffin-shaped to fit the long-necked banjos. They were solid wood cases and probably cost me fifty bucks each to make, but I sold them for twenty-five.

BNL: Is that what you were focusing on, the long-neck banjos?

CO: Yes. The first hundred I made were long necks. That's where the market was then.

BNL: I loved those long-neck ODEs! A friend of mine played one that he had gotten from an old folkie named Erik Hord who played banjo. Erik ended up being "Doctor" Erik Hord on a lot of Mamas and Papas albums. I thought that banjo was a-

CO: (chuckles) killer?

BNL: You bet!

Well, in those days it probably was! I made the first hundred in 1960. They all had long necks, an aluminum pot, and a flathead configuration. They had maple necks with a walnut center stripe, and had two peghead shapes. One was a guitar-ish rectangular shape. The other was a turn-of-the-century, symmetrical, figure-eight type peghead. Each banjo was \$72 dollars, but I had some with a little nicer wood for \$79 dollars

BNL: Ah. The good old days.

CO: And the case was \$25 bucks. One funny story about those cases involved a customer who was a good open-back banjo player and also did his share of drinking and then some. He had an old '41 Ford coupe, and somehow he forgot to put the banjo, in that case, back in the car. He ended up baking his car up, and drove right over his banjo. Didn't phase the case or the banjo.

BNL: For \$25 dollars? That's the kind of case everyone needs.

CO: About 1961, I hired one of my best friends, Dave Walden, to help with production. Dave was a musician, and he got into the whole ting. Together, we set up our first real shop in a 900 square foot building in North Boulder. We then started the second production run which included some standard scale length 5-string banjos, 3 frets shorter than the long neck styles. I also experimented with arch-top integral tone rings where the tone ring was cast into the wall of the aluminum rim. This cut back on unwanted overtones and gave a cleaner response. There were many experiments with the aluminum rim. The final version evolved into a closed chamber system, similar to the Gibson arch-top. It was again, a one-piece cast unit.

By 1962, the ODE line included a full offering of 4-, 5-, and 6-string banjos, in open-back and full resonator styles. Things were really going well. Orders flowed in, our cash flow was strong, and we were rapidly expanding.

BNL: Things were really booming then?

CO: Yes. Our shop was no longer adequate, so I bought an acre of land to the west of where we were, and had a local contractor put up a 2,400 square foot building on it. We moved into the new building in December of '62 and soon filled the much larger space.

But the good times didn't last long. Three or four months after we moved into our new shop, a 110 mph Chinook wind roared down the mountain, tore off the roof, and blew in the cinder block walls. I couldn't believe the damage. The only thing left standing was the bathroom and the fireplace, and I didn't have any insurance.

BNL: What were you feeling then?

CO: As I stood there that morning looking at the devastation, the wind still blowing so hard you had to crawl to keep from being blown over, someone handed me a bottle of whisky. I took a big swig and started picking up the hundreds of pieces of paperwork blowing about. Work orders, inquires, bills, caught in bushes, fences, and other tight places. The phone rang, I crawled under a section of the roof resting on my roll top desk, "Hello, we're not open today, could you call back next week?"

You just started doing what had to be done. Start cleaning up the mess, start moving to a new location. Fortunately, I had some great friends, and they pitched in. We moved everything to a rented warehouse the next two days and were back in production within a month. The old building materials

were recycled and reused. With the help of friends, a lawsuit, and a new contractor, the shop was back up again in a few months. This time, slightly bigger and with the roof firmly attached, and walls poured solid with concrete and steel.

BNL: When did you start making wood rim banjos?

CO: About a year later, a young guy who had hitched-hiked out from Ohio asked if he could work at ODE. He had this dulcimer that he'd made, and it wasn't too bad. He had such enthusiasm for what we were doing, I said, "Ah, let's give it a try." His name was Kix, or Creston Stewart. He owns Stewart-MacDonald Guitar Supply now.

Kix and I struck up a dynamic friendship. We also formed a great design team and helped each other's ideas blossom. Kix had a lot of knowledge about vintage instruments. I had the ability to build these things. So, together we designed a whole new line of ODE banjos.

BNL: A friend of mine had an ODE, a long-neck banjo that had a wooden shell and separate metal tone ring. Was Kix one of the motivations for ODE making that?

CO: Kix had a lot of influence there. What happened was, when Kix and I got together, ideas flourished. We inspired each other to push beyond the boundaries of old designs and techniques.

We both wanted to build world-class banjos. The first thing we did was to start making the wooden-rim models. The open-back styles had a brass bracket band and the bluegrass banjos had a one-piece cast-brass resonator flange. I also designed new inlays, the ODE Style "D" pattern.

BNL: Was this an experiment then?

CO: We did a lot of experimenting, especially with tone rings. We finally settled on a cast bell-bronze flat-top design used on all our new banjos. These became the new line of ODE instruments which eventually became the Baldwin ODE banjos. That was the style "B", "C", and "D" Baldwin ODEs. They were and still are excellent instruments.

We also started producing planetary-gear pegs and a complete range of banjo parts, including arm rests, tailpieces, tone rings, flanges, everything. We even had a parts catalogue. The parts line eventually became the Stewart MacDonald Guitar Supply Company.

It took about a year and a half to do all this. That was 1965. I had a lot of energy in those days! (laughs). Back then, it was actually easier than it is now to get things done. ODE had twelve people employed, and though it was chaotic at times, it was fun.

BNL: In 1966, you sold the company to Baldwin. Why did you do that?

CO: Well, the whole thing, this banjo making, kind of took me by surprise. I never expected it to turn into a business. I did it because - you know - you're kind of young, you take chances. I didn't really expect it to grow into what it did. As fast as I built the ODEs, they'd sell. The company seemed to take on a life of its own, as these things do. You get picked up and carried away. Then Kix left. He was homesick for old friends and family and went back to Ohio. I was also going through some major life changes.

The final blow came when I happened to be at the Newport Folk Festival in '65, when Dylan made his historic switch from acoustic to electric music. I sensed the beginning of the end for the Folk movement.

BNL: Is that when Baldwin entered the picture?

CO: About that same time, Baldwin was expanding, looking into possibly purchasing the Salstrom Banjo Company of Oregon, Illinois. On the day the Baldwin execs were touring Salstrom, there happened to be a banjo collector there name Clyde Richelieu. Clyde was very knowledgeable about banjos, and a strong ODE fan. He mentioned to the Baldwin people that he felt ODE was a superior instrument, and Baldwin ended buying ODE while Salstrom was later purchased by Fender. A few

years later, Richelieu purchased Strom Banjos of Brainard, Minnesota, and started building Richelieu banjos in Oregon, Wisconsin, where the company still operates under Rick Tipple.

At that point I was ready for a change. I decided to get rid of everything I had except a banjo and an old car and a guitar, and hit the road (laughs).

BNL: A sixties sentiment.

CO: After selling ODE, I ended up traveling for a while, wandering around the country, drifting. I'd found a home for the ODE company, which was Baldwin. They were good folks to deal with, had a lot of connections in Nashville. They tried their best to get me to work for them, which I did for six months, to help with the transition so they knew how to do what we'd been doing. But I had been tied down for too long, and I felt a need to change.

Baldwin kept the company in Boulder for two years. Then they moved it to DeQueen, Arkansas, in 1968. I tried to find out how many banjos Baldwin produced, but no luck. They made the Ode between about 1966 and 1968 in Boulder, and then in Arkansas from 1968 till they quit, which was somewhere possibly in the early 1980's.

BNL: Didn't they eventually sell the ODE to the Gretsch Company?

CO: Baldwin owned Gretsch then! Baldwin had been making only pianos and organs. Then they got into this corporate mode of expansion. They bought Burns Guitar of the UK, Sho-Bud Pedal Steel, an electronic harpsichord company, Gretsch and others. Their idea was to create a full-line music business the quick way, by purchasing all these companies and then introducing them into their piano and organ chain divisions. They were apparently quite successful. Baldwin was also heavily into electronics. They got into military contracts, making guidance systems for Sidewinder missiles. Finally, they got into banking, because in the piano and organ business, you sold things on time payment plans. It became financing. First, financing pianos and organs, all the way into buying banks.

BNL: Really?

CO: Yes. They ended up, I believe, buying several banks, including the Empire Savings and Loan in Denver. They expanded big, business-wise with the banking thing. But apparently, they over-expanded and had to declare bankruptcy. This, however, wasn't because of the instrument business and it probably had nothing to do with the banjo business. The banjo part was probably the one-tenth of one percent of their whole business. They had several thousand people working for them. The banjo company might have had five or maybe ten workers. When they went Chapter Eleven, they started liquidating things and ended up selling the ODE Banjo division, which was part of Baldwin-Gretsch.

An interesting point: when Baldwin bought the company from me in 1966, they designed a banner that said "Baldwin". They didn't use the word, "ODE" on the peghead originally. However, they found that the market did not want a Baldwin: it wanted an ODE. So, they added the word "ODE" to the banner. Then I heard they eventually dropped Baldwin and just put ODE on the peghead. In fact, I just saw one downstairs (at the vendors' stands), an ODE, with no word "Baldwin" on it, but it was made by Baldwin about 1980. So, the sequence of logos was "Baldwin", then "Baldwin ODE", then just "ODE". I should have checked the serial number of that one I just saw.

BNL: Is the Gretsch ODE still being made?

CO: No. When Baldwin liquidated in the early 1980's, there was an intermediate party that bought up Gretsch, or had the job of liquidating it. As I understand it, things just got destroyed and even the intermediate party went bankrupt. I heard Fred Gretsch Junior ended up buying back the Gretsch name and whatever came with it.

BNL: One of the music shops I frequent has a new Gretsch catalogue, full of fancy guitars, but no banjos.

CO: I don't know if Gretsch builds any instruments now, or only imports them. Apparently, Gretsch bought out Bacon and Day in the Forties. So ODE is now part of Gretsch and Bacon and Day (laughs). The name ODE continues, but only the name, everything else is gone.

BNL: So, when did you come up with the idea of OME?

CO: After I satisfied my wanderlust, I settled down in the mountains west of Boulder and started designing and building houses. At that time, I had no intention of making banjos again. I felt I'd designed and built some of the best banjos around, and there didn't seem room for me to do more. But by the late 1960's, acoustic music started coming back again. There was also another return to grass roots values. I recall starting to have thoughts of new banjo designs. One of the carpenters I worked with was a musician, Ken Welpton. Ken offered to help.

BNL: How did you come up with the name OME?

CO: I thought it would be nice to keep a tie with the past, which was ODE. But, Baldwin owned that name. So I just changed the "D" to an "M" and registered that trademark around 1970. About that time, I traded for a piece of land that was part of an old homestead from the 1800's, up in the mountains west of Boulder. It was at 8,700 feet and was a magnificent place, still is. So I built this big building on it and started tooling up for a shop. It suited me a lot better than being down on the plains where ODE had been. This place was a lot closer to my dream of living and working near nature.

BNL: That lifestyle is important to you and others in the West. So, you were able to live and work in the mountains?

CO: It's a complex story. When I put OME together, I didn't want to run the company all by myself. So, I gave away three fourths of it to three other guys.

BNL: Gave it away?! That's nice!

CO: Well, there it was, the old hippie days no less. Love and sharing (laughs). I put OME Company together, thinking that everybody would have the same idea: Sharing. That turned into a real interesting situation. As one lawyer said, "The only thing you can be sure of with partnerships is that they don't last long." (laughs)

BNL: Do you still have that partnership?

CO: No. After, I put the company together, designed the instruments, and got things going, my partners decided they wanted to make more of a business out of OME. They decided that they wanted to move OME down to Boulder, while I wanted to stay in the mountains. We parted ways then.

My partners ended up moving OME to Boulder while I stayed in Gold Hill. They increased production and started selling only through dealers, making mostly 5-string clawhammer and bluegrass banjos. A few, maybe ten percent, were 4-string styles. The peak year was about 1975, when the movie "Deliverance" reached its peak. I think 350 instruments were made that year.

BNL: Your partners must have had a pretty big staff?

CO: Yes. But then, bluegrass interest peaked and slowed down in the late 70's. The 80's were also slow. The festivals were still happening, but the popularity, the growth of the festival scene wasn't growing as it had been in the 70's.

BNL: After laying out for a while, when did you get more actively back into manufacturing?

Well, one by one, the original partners left the company. Kelly left in '73, and Ken in '78. This resulted in leaving Ed Woodward, my only remaining partner, to actively manage things. I returned at that time to see what I could do.

Ed had worked with me at ODE. He was a tenor player and loved the 4-string banjo. He saw our potential as building bluegrass and old-time banjos as well as jazz banjos. We agreed on high quality

but not much more. It was a very frustrating situation. For the next several years, I only worked part-time at the company. I was never really able to do what I felt needed to be done. In '88, Ed sold his interest in OME back to me, and we parted ways. It was at that time that I was finally able to get significantly back into OME.

BNL: What were some of the things you did after you returned to OME?

CO: The first thing I did was to go through every detail of design and construction of everything we produced. If anything could be improved, we made the necessary changes. "Constant improvement" became our mode of operation, which it still is today.

About a year after returning to OME, I met Ed Britt of Wakefield, Massachusetts. Ed was a long time 5-string open-back player, collector, and industrial designer. At the time, he was working on a design project which required his going to Colorado. Being that he was an ODE and OME fan, he paid us a visit. The visit turned out to be the beginning of a long friendship.

Ed later encouraged me to come to Wakefield to see his vintage 5-string collection. He also suggested that his friend, Jim Bollman, might be open to my viewing his instruments as well. Things fell together and I ended up making the trip. This was another turning point for OME. Besides experiencing more vintage banjos than I ever imagined, I discovered that Ed and I made a great design team.

As it turned out, Ed already liked the instruments that OME had been building. He just felt that they deserved something more. That "something" turned out to be a project that he was very interested in being a part of. Ed really helped with OME moving in new directions again.

BNL: What were some of the things you and Ed Britt worked on?

CO: Ed and I started out working on OME's high-end models, the Renaissance and the Grand Artist. We started by exploring the best of vintage and modern designs, and kept on going from there. That project began spilling over into other areas of our production and we eventually ended up working on the entire OME line. We worked on things for almost four years before the new models were introduced in '94. Since then, we have continued collaborating on projects as they come up. It's been a very rewarding effort.

BNL: Did you only add upper line models?

CO: Besides expanding the upper end of the OME line, we also introduced a new low end model called the Jubilee. Years ago, OME offered a low priced instrument called the Grubstake. This was a "no frills" quality banjo which sold well. I decided to improve the tonal system, and used better hardware. This created the Jubilee which I call our "Zen" series. I've always liked having at least one lower priced instrument in our line.

Another new model we added was the Magician. This banjo evolved from the fancy Renaissance which Ed and I designed earlier. I took the Renaissance, eliminated about half of the hand engraved mother-of-pearl inlays, the wood carving, and simplified the metal engraving. The result was to create an elegant instrument for less money which still captured the essence of the finer turn-of-the-century banjos. It's one of my favorites.

BNL: It seems you really enjoy the design process.

CO: I am, first and foremost, a designer and builder. That is what I really love to do. Building musical instruments is especially rewarding because of the music involved. Designing with sound adds another dimension that I have a special interest in. The banjo, in particular, is such a wonderful instrument to work with. Its construction allows for so many possibilities. Just about anything goes.

I also love to explore and discover new possibilities. I never really liked following trends or copying others. In my work, I feel the same way. I strive for something original, something new. At the same

time, building acoustic instruments has much to do with tradition, which I am also fond of. With the OME, we have sought to combine vintage and modern ideas in original ways.

BNL: What do you feel makes an exceptional banjo?

CO: There are several factors. An outstanding musical instrument is what I call a four-dimensional work of art. It looks good (two dimensions), feels and plays good (third dimension), and sounds good (fourth dimension). All are important. They must all be properly designed and executed, and should work together in a balanced way.

Ultimately, the bottom line is, if an instrument works for you, it's exceptional. Every player is unique and has different needs. For me, the idea of the "Holy Grail" banjo simply doesn't exist. No one instrument can do everything. There are always other possibilities, other options. What we do at OME is to build a wide variety of banjo models, styles, and tonal systems. We then strive to match the right banjo to the right player.

BNL: What do you mean by banjo "styles"?

CO: What we call banjo "style" is primarily defined by the type of music and playing style the banjo is normally used for. We define our three main banjo styles as: bluegrass, old-time, and jazz. Each of these may be defined further, such as: tenor, and plectrum jazz styles, or standard and long-neck old-time styles. We offer these different instruments because they all do very different things. I enjoy the different playing traditions and the different music they are used for.

BNL: What are the OME tonal systems?

CO: The OME "Tonal Systems" are what we call the complete pot assembly of the banjo, including a resonator if it has one. Presently, we offer a number of different systems. For instance, our "Megatone" consists of a flat-top cast bronze tone ring, 3-ply maple rim, and a one-piece zinc die-cast resonator flange. The OME "Traditional" system is an open-back with a spun brass and steel tone ring, and individual hold-down brackets. The "Minstrel" is an open-back with a rolled brass or wooden tone ring, offered in 11" or 12" pot size. Obviously, these three instruments give very different results.

BNL: Why did you start building 12" pot?

CO: I've always liked a big sounding banjo with lots of depth and bass. For this, there's nothing like a large pot. Our first large bodied banjo was on a Boucher minstrel style that we started building in '93. This was a fun instrument, but too different from the rest of our line. We stopped offering it not long after we started.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the larger pots on open-back 5-strings. This hasn't happened since the '20's as far as I know. For OME to take on building such a different banjo, there has to be some market for it. There has been enough interest that we now offer three different 12" pots and they all can be fitted with our "snap-on" resonator. We also are making large bodied tenor and plectrum styles.

BNL: What do you strive for in the tone of your banjos?

CO: Of the four dimensions in building musical instruments, it's the fourth, the "Tone", which is the most fun to work with. What is considered a desirable tone is often very subjective, and it is difficult to define and to measure. It's also bound up with such variables as instrument set-up, playability, response, tradition, and ultimately, with the person playing the instrument.

What we strive for in tone depends on the playing style and the desired result we are looking for. Qualities such as sustain, overtones, bass, treble, response, balance, and so on, are all important, and they all can be varied. For example, in the jazz and old-time market, there's a rather wide variety

of tonal qualities that are sought after. With these two styles, we offer several tonal systems that best give the desired results musicians are looking for.

In the bluegrass market, the present range is narrower. We offer only one tonal system, the Megatone. However, with this one system comes the possibility of using three interchangeable tone rings. The OME-PW20 for the pre-war qualities; The OME "Melodic" for slightly less sustain and more bass; and the OME-ATS for the crisp archtop performance. One instrument with three tonal possibilities.

BNL: How has developing banjos in three different markets affected things at OME?

CO: It's been a real challenge. Each playing style requires a really different instrument design. It's not simply a matter of using different necks on the same pot. The tone ring, the neck, the resonator, and how they all work together are all essential.

Developing instruments in all three traditions has definitely taken a lot more effort, but it has also helped in improving our overall quality. When we work on perfecting a particular style, we often find something that helps to improve our other styles. One example is our guitar banjo.

I started building six-string and twelve-string guitar banjos in the early sixties. We even built one for Reverend Gary Davis and Dr. Edmund Souchon, two great players. But I never really was happy with this instrument and never did much with it. Recently, we developed a 12" pot for our 5-string open-back models. We took this pot, combined it with our Silverspun jazz tone ring, a shorter 24 3/4" guitar scale, and an arched fingerboard. The result has been the first guitar banjo I've really liked. It's an outstanding instrument.

An interesting note along these lines involves what happened with two great banjo designs, the B&D Silver Bell and the Gibson Mastertone. The classic B&D Silver Bell banjos were designed by Fred Bacon and David Day to be a classical 5-string instrument. However, the Silver Bell never became popular as a 5-string, but was very popular as a 4-string jazz banjo. The Gibson Mastertone, on the other hand, was designed in the 20's to be used as a 4-string jazz instrument. Yet, time has shown that this tonal system works best for music which didn't even exist at that time, namely bluegrass.

BNL: How do you keep track of all these different models, styles, and tonal systems?

CO: It's not easy. Presently, we have about eighteen standard models, five tone rings, five resonators, and seven neck styles. This doesn't include our many custom options, the 12" models, or the one-of-a-kind Grand Artist series. In order to make all these instruments, we've had to invest in a lot of tooling, inventory, and know-how. It's been a bit challenging, but very rewarding. This year, we are putting together our 2001 catalogue which will introduce even more. I give a lot of credit to our craftsmen who build all these instruments. They really care and are doing a great job.

BNL: How do you market your instruments?

CO: With both ODE and OME, I started out selling direct. As production increased, we added dealerships. Some people prefer the convenience of buying through a dealer. Others prefer dealing directly with the builder. A good dealer makes our job easier and helps nurture the overall interest in playing. Direct sales offer a personal relationship with the customer and are helpful with custom instrument orders. We enjoy working directly with musicians as well as with our dealers. We market both ways.

BNL: I think you have a passion for the banjo.

CO: Absolutely. It's been a major part of my life for a long time now. For me, the banjo is a magical instrument that brings high energy, brilliance, and sparkle to my life. It is also a very grass roots instrument. It's somehow close to nature, the mountains, and what I consider the good life.

BNL: What do you see in the future for the banjo?

CO: One interesting difference I notice now compared with years ago is that the banjo is being used in more diverse ways today than it has been in the past. Today, there are so many fine musicians playing the banjo, not only in traditional ways, but also in other musical styles. In my opinion, this diversity is very healthy and will help keep this wonderful instrument alive and part of our lives.