

The Eagle Has Landed: Gibson's Limited Edition Style 5 Deluxe Banjo



From the blistering, steam-train runs of Earl Scruggs to the rolling newgrass riffs of J.D. Crowe, the Gibson banjo has embodied the tone of America for the better part of a century. Now, a contemporary music legend is helping Gibson take the instrument's classic form to a further evolution for the 21st century.

Popular from the mid 1800s, the banjo didn't really come of age until it started wearing the Gibson name in the following century. The first banjo in the Gibson line up was a four-string "plectrum" banjo introduced in 1917, but the instrument that would set the standard finally arrived in 1923 in the form of the five-string Style 5 of the Mastertone line. So revolutionary was this banjo's construction, and so stellar its tone, that legions of great pickers

adopted the principle that they weren't really playing bluegrass unless they were picking a Gibson Mastertone. The standard set more than 80 years ago is still in place today, and the Gibson banjo remains at the forefront of country, bluegrass, Celtic and country-rock picking.

Now, Gibson Original Acoustic Instruments is proud to unveil a new and exclusive variation of the Mastertone banjo. Thanks to the input of legendary folk and country-rock banjoist and guitarist Bernie Leadon — a founding member of The Eagles and a first-call sideman from Nashville to L.A. for the past 40 years — [the new Style 5 Deluxe Banjo](#) will be available in an extremely limited run of just 10 instruments, with a retail price of \$8,889 each, including a custom-shaped Gibson hardshell case and Certificate of Authenticity. Its combination of classic features, rejuvenated esthetics and unprecedented playability makes it a rare opportunity for the devoted player and the serious instrument collector.

Based on Leadon's vision for a revitalized Mastertone, with reference to a vintage banjo from his personal collection, the Style 5 Deluxe includes all the constructional considerations a top professional musician would demand today, along with an elegant new take on



the model's traditional appointments.

"The standard Style 5 and Style 4 had walnut resonators," said Leadon. "But I have an old pre-War Style 4 with curly maple resonator and neck that was a late-1930 custom banjo from the Gibson factory. It's an amazing banjo."

To attain some vestige of his rare pre-War Gibson in the new Style 5, Leadon had the craftsmen at Gibson Original Acoustic Instruments use the chrome plating of the Style 4 rather than the gold of the traditional Style 5, but with a modified version of the engraving of that latter, high-end model.

As applied to the high-quality chrome hardware on the Style 5 Deluxe, the elaborate engraving work is a site to behold, with a richness and depth that's unexpected in a chrome instrument, and a blend of buff and gloss chrome that makes the delicate leaf patterns jump from the tension ring. Leadon also suggested modifying the binding and purfling applied to the model, resulting in ivoroid and marquetry rings in the rims of the resonator, and concentric marquetry rings on its back. The back of the peghead also wears beautiful Style 5 marquetry inlays.

While overseeing the staining process alongside Gibson's skilled finishers, Leadon also made a further nod toward the sublime elegance of this instrument.

"Rather than masking off the purfling [marquetry] while the rest of the resonator was being stained, I asked them to stain it the same as the maple on the rest of the instrument," Leadon said. "The result is a beautiful texture in the look of the instrument, but it's subtler than some highly decorated banjos."



Alongside these thoughtful considerations of style, of course, was an even more careful navigation of the construction of the instrument from the perspective of tone and playability.

“What I was looking for,” Leadon said, “was a live performance banjo for the road. Chrome is harder plating and it projects really well, so it is a *loud* banjo. I also have nickel and gold banjos and they can be really sweet. But for a live performance, chrome will blow your head off.

“I also specified a radiused fingerboard, which most contemporary players find more comfortable than the traditional flat fingerboard, but it still has the pearl wreath inlays,” Leadon said. “Ultimately, this has the chrome from a Style 4, the engraving and wreath pattern like the Style 5, and the structure of the Top Tension banjos.”

In addition to his formative work with The Eagles, which included prominent banjo performances on the hit single “Take it Easy” and throughout the country-rock originators’ first four albums, Bernie’s notable picking moments include stints with Chris Hillman and Dillard & Clark in the late ’60s, The Flying Burrito Brothers in the early ’70s, John Hiatt and Nanci Griffith in the late ’80s, and Run C&W in the early ’90s.

Bernie's second solo album, *Mirror*, was released in 2004—a mere 27 years after his first solo outing garnered rave reviews in “country hyphen” circles—but lately he's been wrapped up in another pursuit that speaks to iconic Americana.

“I've been involved with NARCOA, the North American Railcar Operators Association,” Leadon said. “We travel in old motorized railcars [motorcars] that were used for railway maintenance. These excursions have taken me across the country, as far north as Alaska. It's fitting, in a way, because the train has always been such an enduring image of Americana music.” (See narcoa.org for further information).

From journeyman musician to the great American journey, Leadon has embodied the spirit and sound of a thoroughly American contemporary music like few others, and has made an unparalleled impact on the evolution of the sound come to be known as country-rock. He knows a good banjo when he sees one, too, and the Limited Edition Style 5 Deluxe embodies his ultimate dream in both looks and performance. “Put simply,” said Bernie, “it looks incredible, and it sounds stunning!”



Full specs:

Body

- Resonator – figured maple with concentric marquetry rings
- Binding – ivoroid and marquetry
- Rim – three-ply maple
- Flange – one-piece, engraved
- Coordinator rods – steel
- Tone ring – RB-75
- Head – Remo 11-inch, medium crown
- Bridge – Grover

Neck

- Wood – figured maple
- Scale length – 26.4 inches
- Truss rod – two-way adjustable with black "bell" cover

- Peghead – double cut (unbound)
- Peghead face – pearl Gibson wreath inlay
- Peghead back – Style 5 marquetry

Fingerboard

- Wood – rosewood
- Inlays – pearl Gibson wreath
- Radius – 12 1/2 inches
- Nut – bone, 1.2 inches wide

Hardware

- Plating – satin and gloss chrome, engraved
- Tailpiece – Presto, satin and gloss chrome engraved
- Tuning keys – V2 with ivoroid buttons
- Tension hoop – metal satin and gloss chrome plated, engraved

Finish

- Color – Goldenrod, gloss nitrocellulose lacquer

