



Hand Crafted by  
*Roger Skipper*

**Maker of Music and  
Fine Instruments**

Written by **Dan Whetzel** Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

*Roger Skipper's* musical instruments are well known to Western Maryland bluegrass musicians. Each handcrafted instrument is built to suit the tastes of those who enthusiastically gather to enjoy homemade music and good times. Roger's marketing area has grown over the last several years, extending beyond the Tri-State region toward metropolitan centers. And that success is due to satisfied customers who spread the word that quality built bluegrass instruments are available at Roger Skipper's Custom Instrument workshop in Garrett County.

A person who builds stringed instruments is referred to as a luthier. Once a more common term, the lone instrument maker has become as uncommon as the skills necessary to earn the title. The processes associated with making instruments have been modified in recent times due to manufacturing techniques that reduce production costs by eliminating workers. Today, luthiers are often skilled hobbyists who relish the intrinsic benefits associated with craftsmanship. So how does one become a luthier?

In Roger's case a deeply religious upbringing fostered his love of music. "I was born into a community that had music but little else. We attended a Pentecostal church as many as seven times a week. Singing and music were as ubiquitous there as were Bibles." He picked up the acoustical guitar before the age of ten to play in church. But soon, "I got together with cousins to play the 'devil's music,' which was mostly fiddle tunes mixed with Celtic and cowboy music."

High school years brought a desire to own an electric guitar but not the financial means to purchase one. By combining carpentry skills with his father's woodworking tools, a rudimentary instrument was crafted in a short

period of time; it featured glued pieces of wire into the neck and hand-wound pickups around surplus magnets.

Roger's introduction to bluegrass music was a bit more conventional than his initiation into crafting instruments. Attendance at a bluegrass festival in Moorefield, West Virginia, proved to be a wonderful experience. "It felt like a homecoming; the music was addictive." Bluegrass festivals have since become a portion of him and his wife's lives. In the process of attending bluegrass festivals, he has acquired the skills necessary to play the bass, banjo, and mandolin.

At a bluegrass festival in 1985, the Skippers had an opportunity to meet a luthier from Gassaway, West Virginia. Intrigued by the instrument maker's handiwork, Roger began to closely examine the processes and products. Convinced that he could build bluegrass instruments, he began work on a mandolin within a week. "And, I immediately acquired unsolicited orders for two more, then a third, and a fourth."

At the time Roger owned a construction company, while managing a supply home center in Canaan Valley. Free time

was scarce and instrument building was necessarily modest—one or two per year. An ever increasing work load brought major changes in Roger's life, eventually causing him to turn in the office keys and walk away from an established day job. Soon after, however, he unlocked new doors leading to academic experiences at Garrett College, Frostburg State University, and Vermont College.

Roger's bluegrass and luthier destiny continued to unfold and intertwine with a faculty member at Frostburg State University. Dr. Gerald Snelson, English instructor, also had a passion for bluegrass music and acoustical instrument making. Their mutual love of music proved to



**The fancy inlaid peg head of one of Roger's banjos shows in detail some of his intricate inlay work.**

be the genesis of a long term friendship. “He’s ultimately become a dear friend, a wonderful supporter in both writing and musical careers, and my number one customer.”

Continued academic success provided the inspiration for writing four novels. Three novels have been sold, one published, and one scheduled for publication in 2009. Daily life eventually settled into a routine of writing in the mornings and shop work in the afternoons. In recent times Roger has shifted more work to the shop.

Local trees supply most of the wood necessary for the manufacturing process. Recently a tremendous red spruce tree cut by friend and fellow luthier, Garland Maust, provided a lifetime supply of tonewood (top wood). Red spruce is prized by acoustical instrument makers but difficult to find, due to over harvesting by the early 20th century aircraft industry. The famous original Martin and Gibson guitars, which command hundreds of thousands of dollars in today’s market, were built from red spruce. Curly maple is used for the backs and sides, while fretboards and bridges are constructed from tropical woods, usually ebony. All instruments are signed and numbered.

In response to the typical question, “How long does that take?” Roger responds, “Depending on how elaborate and intricate the instrument might be—extent of inlay binds, purflings, engraving—an instrument takes an absolute low of around 50 hours to 200 plus hours to complete. I recently built for my wife a carved upright bass that took even longer.”

All the bluegrass instruments are built in his Garrett County workshop: guitar, mandolin, bass, banjo, fiddle and the resophonic guitar (Dobro). Customers include a retired member of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, acquaintances with second homes at Deep Creek Lake and, of course, musicians he meets at bluegrass festivals. “I can still provide a base-model mandolin with top notch sound for less than three thousand dollars, a fraction of what competitors charge.” Often instruments have been given “to those in whom I discern a desire to play an instrument, but lack the financial means to purchase one.”

Roger is enjoying life. “It just couldn’t be better. I’m doing what I like to do with just enough money that I don’t have to beg or steal, and not enough to worry over.” Playing bluegrass music provides another reason to enjoy life. Roger and his makeshift bluegrass band, Rickety Split, may be heard around Garrett County where members play for enjoyment, not money.

Life just doesn’t get any better.



**Top: Roger with the first mandolin he built and the most current one, (unfinished).**

**Middle: Final finishing of a new mandolin; gentle scraping allows for fine detail.**

**Bottom: Roger’s signature inlay on one of his banjos.**