

Rob Bishline & Bishline Banjos

By Eddie Collins

From adolescent banjoholic to prominent contemporary banjo builder, Rob Bishline has lived the life of banjo. Always the innovator, Rob explores ways to craft better, more affordable banjos while continuing to make time to instruct the next generation of pickers. Bishline Banjos is located where Rob was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Bishline's early exposure to music included visits to his grandparent's home where both his mom and grandmother would play the family organ. "It was really my Grandpa who seemed to have the most fun. He wasn't a great player, but used to have a blast playing his old banjo uke. I really enjoyed that looking back now," reflects Rob.

Like so many who catch banjo fever, it was the banjo sound that always caught Rob's attention when listening to the radio or watching TV reruns of shows like "Andy Griffith" or "The Beverly Hillbillies." "When I first heard Dueling Banjos on the radio, I just flipped for that sound! I loved radio at that time. I would be listening to Jim Croce or the Grass Roots and then BAM! —Dueling Banjos!"

Rob began messing around with his Grandpa's banjo uke, but soon realized that wasn't the sound he was hearing. Lucky for him, there was a 5-string banjo behind the counter at a local service merchandise store. "I knew I had to have that thing so I mowed lawns all summer long and saved my money and finally came up with enough cash to buy the very last one they had in stock."

From that point on, banjo was pretty much a 24/7 infatuation. Bishline encountered trouble in his early learning as there were few resources available and he didn't have an instructor. "I bought a Mel Bay book and it was for chords in C tuning and I think it taught you how to hold a flatpick, but I just knew I was not getting it right."

Many pickers remember that breakthrough instance when things come together and make sense. That moment came in an unusual manner for Rob. "I tried to tune the banjo to a G pitch pipe,

but to me that thing sounded like a duck call! I couldn't relate the duck-call sound to a banjo string sound." In frustration, Rob was goofing around blowing the pitch pipe and discovered he could play Taps on it. "Then it hit me—if I tune the banjo to play Taps, then it would be in tune. It was all about the intervals to me—the relationship and distance one note has from another.



Rob Bishline, David Haddock, Andy Oatman and Frank Davenport

I had that banjo for eight weeks before I could tune it so my progress was awfully slow, but I think I learned a lot about using my ear."

There wasn't much available in the way of instruction for 3-finger style banjo in the early 1970s. The first significant help Bishline got came from answering an ad he found in the classified section of a "Popular Mechanics" magazine—a book and 45 record by Bill Blaylock. According to Rob, "It had tunes like *Cripple Creek* and *Old Time Religion* in it. Having that little 45 record was what really helped me because I could try and match my sound to his. It made all the difference for me to hear what I was trying to do."

Realizing he had an ear for music, Rob was encouraged to try and copy breaks from the few banjo LPs he had by slowing them down to 16 RPM. After learning on his own for about eight months, he discovered Bobby Anderson was teaching

5-string banjo at The Guitar House in Tulsa. Rob rode his bike to his weekly lesson and Bobby help him clear up some of the things he was doing wrong. The arrangement didn't last long as Anderson soon left to go play on the road. Scotty Ward took over that teaching position and he and Rob became friends. "He started to let me play in his band and go on gigs

with him. That was a thrill and a great experience playing with a real bluegrass band."

No one in Rob's family listened to bluegrass and being a product of the 70s, his influences were all over the map. "I loved all the 70's folk rock stuff like James Taylor, Jim Croce and Gordon Lightfoot and then the Southern Rock stuff was cool, too"

There was a bluegrass Radio show that Rob would stay up late and listen to on Saturday nights. Also, a local TV show, called "The John Chick Show" featured bluegrass on Friday mornings. "I would always check that out, which would sometimes get me in trouble because I would be late for school getting so entranced watching the banjo player and trying to figure out what he was doing."

Going to school didn't completely distract Bishline from his banjo studies. He carried a practice "banjo board" he had made out of a 2" X 4" and five simulated wire strings with him at all times. During study hall, or "goof off hall" as Rob

liked to call it, he'd be holding a book to read with the left hand and practicing his rolls with the right. He remembers he

had a history teacher who played 4- and 5-string banjos and was very supportive of Rob's obsession with the instrument. Rob

actually got the chance to play on "The John Chick Show" with his instructor, Scotty Ward, making him somewhat of a

Here Comes The Sun

G tuning: gDGCD. Arr. by Rob Bishiline.
By George Harrison

The tablature is written for a 5-string banjo in G tuning (gDGCD). It consists of 10 staves of music. The chords used are D, G, A, Em7, F, C, G, D, A, A7, E, E7, and F. The music includes various fretting techniques such as double stops, triplets, and hammer-ons. A section of the music is marked 'repeat 4 times' and includes a 'tr. Asus' (trill) instruction. The piece concludes with a final chord of D.

celebrity back on campus.

The main banjo players Bishline was listening to were the ones he could find on records. Thus, Carl Jackson, Eric Weissberg and Earl Scruggs were three of his early influences. Since he had so few albums, he would play the ones he had over and over. "I had the Earl Scruggs Revue's *"Live at Kansas State"* album. I learned a lot about improvising from that. I also remember trying to figure out some of Eddie Shelton's *"Banjo Expedition"* album."

Shortly after high school, Rob's real life musician experiences began. He primarily played with Pat Richardson throughout the Midwest and back East as a duo in clubs in the Philadelphia/New Jersey area, and sometimes busking for hot dog money down at Penn's Landing in Philadelphia. The duo format kept expenses to a minimum, so Rob was able to make a living playing music. He eventually played closer to home at Silver Dollar City and Branson, Missouri—some with his first banjo instructor, Bobby Anderson. Rob was versatile enough to sometimes play banjo and other times play guitar.

Backtracking a bit, Bishline got into teaching the banjo when his friend and teacher, Scotty Ward, decided to leave his teaching spot at The Guitar House. He recommended that Rob take it, but owner Bob Long thought Rob may be a bit too young. "Bob eventually asked me to come on board. I was a junior in high school at the time and it was a great experience. I apologize now to all my very early students at that time. I could play, but I had trouble writing tab and I really had to pay attention to what I was doing—slowing things down and making sure I was accurate so I could teach it properly."

Eventually Rob realized there was more to teaching than writing out Tab and giving students a recording to listen to. He elaborates: "One thing that's changed over the years is my philosophy of 'using the banjo as you would your voice.' If you can hear the melody in your head and you can play that melody with your voice by singing or humming, then you should be able to do that to some extent with your banjo. When we learn songs as kids, people don't tell us when to tighten our throats to get a high note, we do it instinctively and we learn the intervals of the melody, finding the distance from one note to the next. I think learning to relate to the banjo fingerboard

in the same way is very important."

Rob still utilizes tab in his teaching, but places more emphasis on finding notes on the fingerboard and having the student find his own instinctive way through a simple melody. You can view video results of some of Rob's instruction by visiting www.bishlinebanjos.com. From time to time he updates the "videos" section with performances from his students.

So just how did Rob Bishline go from banjo player/enthusiast to banjo builder? "I had always tinkered with my banjos and guitars and was curious about the building process, so in 1983 I took a guitar building class at Roberto-Venn out in Arizona. The course had the students make one acoustic and one electric guitar. And if you had enough time in class, you could build your own side project—mine was a banjo neck."

After having made a few banjos on his own, Rob formed a business partnership in 2005 with Andy Oatman and Frank Davenport that resulted in Bishline Banjos. Recognizing that there were many quality banjo makers already out there, the company set out to distinguish itself by creating instruments that could be easily modified to include customers' wishes. So even though there are different models of Bishline Banjos, you are just as likely to see a custom, one-of-a-kind instrument. Rob is particularly sensitive to getting good quality banjos into the hands of young talent and consequently now offers two fully professional models for under \$2,000.

"I like to try new things with banjos and check out some of the possibilities," says Rob. "I have been experimenting with carbon fiber because of the weight/strength ratio and we are coming out with a model with a carbon fiber flange. I think it raises some eyebrows, but that's all I've used for my personal banjo now for about two years. It lowers the weight of the banjo, but I can still use a full weight tone ring. The weight feels more like a woody banjo, but with a bit more horsepower."

Short scale banjos with tunneled fifth strings and radius fingerboards are two of the more common options preferred by those ordering custom instruments. Bishline believes that not everyone wants the same sound, so he's happy to consider many options in putting together a one-off banjo. With such open-mindedness from a builder, it makes sense that progressive players would be drawn to his instruments.

One such player is Danny Barnes, who plays with both Dave Matthews and Robert Earl Keene. Rob first met Danny, who was playing with Tim O'Brien at the time, when he stopped by the Bishline booth at IBMA the first year he attended. According to Rob, "Danny played a few of our instruments and we just talked banjos for a bit. I really enjoyed his perspective on banjos and music in general. He's an extremely musical guy and he plays intelligently, but also with total abandon."

Barnes had a show to play with Tim so he left, but came back Sunday and the two were joined in an impromptu jam session by Ned Luberecki. "Afterwards, Danny wanted to buy a banjo and we worked out the deal. About a year later he started playing different venues and needed a different type of banjo that would not feedback when he played in high-volume bands with drums and horns. That's when we created the Danny Barnes model," explains Rob. The model has a wood rim and tone ring, which cuts down on feedback and makes for a good picking banjo as well as clawhammer instrument, which is a style that Danny also plays.

The banjo building business is keeping Rob busy enough that he has a full-time employee, David Haddock, who helps in all aspects of the building process. He still teaches between 15 and 20 lessons a week. He doesn't get out and play very much right now, although he is picking with a trio that includes Rick Williams on guitar and mandolin and Roy Hood (who also happens to teach banjo) on bass. Look for them to become a little more visible around the Tulsa area doing weekend gigs and the like. While Rob doesn't have any solo recordings other than an 8-track tape

from the 70s—“*Here’s What Do,*” he has recorded tracks for songwriters in the area. His current goals for the company are to continue to improve the banjos and be more self-sufficient, to increase the number of models in their line-up and offer instruments like the Madera—a mandocello sized wooden instrument that plays like a banjo.

As for advice to those learning the banjo, Rob sees a lot of beginners with too much information and not enough practice on technique. “They may have twenty tunes they can kinda pick through, but they sound about the same as they did 18 songs ago because they’ve continued to add material to play without polishing the old stuff. For older students I would say, have patience and try to start to jam with others as soon as possible to help you

learn and help you set goals. It can be a big motivator to have some folks to pick with.”

When asked what he hopes to be doing in twenty years, Rob says, “I hope I’m still building, teaching and playing the banjo. It’s meant so much to me throughout the

years and it’s never more than an arms length away. I love to make people happy with an instrument that inspires them to play and I love to see the joy it brings students when they achieve a goal and begin to make music on their own.”

