

Tom Mirisola

Interview by Don Borchelt

He's a retired electrician, a big guy with a well-tuned Boston accent, the only other person I know in my town who plays the five string banjo. I was surprised when I first met him about ten years ago at a local jam, to learn that he owned one of the most talked about banjo companies in America. Stoneham, Massachusetts, after all, is not exactly what you would call bluegrass country. But as they say, you can't tell a book by its cover. Tom Mirisola, the owner of the American Made Banjo Company, and the manufacturer of the Kel Kroydon Original, New Generation, and Affordable Series banjos, grew up in a family where everyone played music, and played it together. The man I have come to know and admire has a quick, dry wit, a creative imagination, a love of detail, and unbounded enthusiasm for all things connected with the banjo, like almost no one else I know. We sat down one afternoon in my living room, just before he began his "snowbird" flight to Florida for the winter, to talk about banjos.

Don Borchelt: You started as a tenor player, rooted in your family's string traditions. What brought you to the 5-string and bluegrass music?

Tom Mirisola: It was probably around 1999, my brother was playing country music, and was competing for the country music awards at the CMA. He asked me to sit in with his band with the banjo while they were backing him up. I brought my tenor banjo, and that's when I quickly realized I had the wrong style banjo for that style of music. Even though I did hack away with the tenor in the background, that's when I went out and bought myself a 5-string banjo, and figured I had to learn somehow to be able to sit in while my brother was competing across the region. I immediately started taking lessons from my good friend Rich Stillman, who now plays with Southern Rail.

DB: What led you to start up the American Made Banjo Company? What got you into building banjos?

TM: Like everybody else, even when I



played the tenor, I was a tinkerer. I used to enjoy taking banjos apart and put them back together to see if I could make them sound- let's call it "better." I used to shop around just like everybody else did and buy parts from different distributors, then I changed the parts. Rather than start paying top dollar for everything, I figured the best thing to do was- why not start making this stuff yourself? And that's what I did.

DB: I understand that Robin Smith builds the American Made Banjos for you. It's a long way from Boston to Nashville, How did you first connect with him?

TM: When I first started this hobby, I didn't know many luthiers except for the ones around locally that worked on tenor style banjos. About that time the internet was really taking a big hold and everybody's name was out there, I went to every luthier I could find in the United States, and I gave each one a job. It may have been making a neck, or maybe a resonator, or it could be making a whole banjo, or any piece of it. I patiently sat, and I waited for them, to see how they treated me, how their prices were, and how there quality of craftsmanship was. It was more or less an interview, you can kind of call it. Like I still tell Robin to this day, you won the contest! When I met Robin, he opened up his arms and took me in. I had a million questions. I wasn't

afraid to ask questions any. I would go to Robin, and he opened up to me all the knowledge he had.

DB: Does Charlie Cushman do all the set-up for the Kel Kroydon line?

TM: Charlie doesn't do all the set up. But every signature series Kel Kroydon banjo will be set up by Charlie. With all our other banjos it's an option for the purchaser. We found that some people would just as soon set the banjos up themselves, or take it apart rather than pay the extra money for a professional set-up. So, we took the money out of the price of the instrument, to try and lower the final cost.

DB: How did you meet Charlie?

TM: I met Charlie through Robin Smith. Again, I was new to the bluegrass industry, and didn't know that many people. Robin more or less took me around by the hand to meet everybody, and that's how I met Charlie. Over a few years, Charlie and I have spent many hours on the phone with original flanges and various parts in hand, each with a pair of digital calipers, talking back and forth, going over every single measurement, every detail, to get our own parts right. Otherwise, what was the sense of building something when you can buy them cheap enough today. What we were looking for was to be *exact*. We wanted to be not cheaper than everybody else, we wanted to be *better*. Without the help of Charlie and Robin on all of that hardware, it couldn't have been done. We mailed parts back and forth, so I could look at them. We'd be on the phone for hours, them telling me what it should be, what it shouldn't be, what to look for, what not to look for. If it wasn't for Charlie, we would never have made the no-hole tone ring. I was dead set against it. We made the twenty hole Dannick ring and it came out great. Charlie was adamant that we make a no hole tone ring. I fought against the idea for about a year. Then, I finally gave in. Under his direction, we made the no-hole ring, which is now more popular than the twenty hole Dannick ring. It is a great

sound, and if anyone wants to listen to it, you can hear Charlie Cushman play a converted Style 11 with the no-hole tone ring, on YouTube (see link at www.banjonews.com).

DB: I understand that you own the Kel Kroydon trademark. How did that come about? How did you figure out that the trademark was available?

TM: In the beginning I searched on the internet, but could not find who owned it. We heard rumors that Gibson owned it, but we couldn't prove anything. At a jam I attend there was a mandolin player named Dave who is an attorney. I asked him if he could find out if anyone owned the name "Kel Kroydon." A couple of weeks later he came back and said nobody owns it. So I asked him how can I buy it? He said just fill out a trademark application, it's easy. I was a little fearful of that, so I asked him to get me an attorney, which he did. We pursued the name, and I now own that, along with a few other trade dress, copyrights of all the different designs, different peghead shapes, and styles.

DB: Do you use the same type of plastic that they used years ago?

TM: No, the original cellulose material was highly flammable, and is now classified hazardous material when shipping in the United States. We use a straight-out plastic, basically the same material they use to cover the outside of a drum.

DB: How did you recreate the Style 10 and 11 designs?

TM: Brian does all of my screenwork. He is so good at what he does, that when we digitally reproduced the designs on the Style 10 and 11, on the Style 11 one of the fret designs is crooked, and he even replicated that. That's how detailed Brian got. We did make some changes, as far as the back of the resonator for our Original Series instruments. The original 30's design did not line up right, so we realigned it.

DB: Did you put the original under a scanner?

TM: That is correct, I have access to a scanner that is the size of a king-sized bed. We have taken every single piece of a pre-war banjo, and scanned them, put them on a digital CAD system, and have them all on file. From there on, it is not very hard to reproduce, once you have these three-dimensional scanned

images. It is amazing what technology can do today.

DB: According to your website, the Original Style 10 and 11 Series banjos can be all "American Made." I'll bet a lot of *BNL* readers would like to know where you obtain the component parts. I know these banjos use the AMB Dannick tone ring, which has gotten rave reviews. I read a comment in an on-line forum from one happy customer that said it had "a mid range that no other ring has," with "a clarity and power up the neck." How was that developed?

TM: The Dannick tone ring was developed with the help of Charlie Cushman and Robin Smith in the beginning. I tried to copy exactly what they built back in the 1930s. So, I hired a metallurgist, and we were able to take samples off an original flathead. Then, I hooked up with a restoration foundry, and a friend of mine from MIT, who is a mandolin player. They all put their heads together and came up with the formula copy of the pre-war flathead.

DB: How is it different from other "boutique" rings on the market?

TM: Everybody has their own formula, let's face it. There are different ways to copy a formula. There's wet sampling, dry sampling, and then every ring maker has their own twist in machining. I'm a firm believer that there are no two pre-war banjos that sound alike. So, whatever pre-war ring a builder copied, that is what it should sound like, not like everybody else's. There is no standard pre-war sound, in my opinion.

DB: You get the resonators from Steve Gill? How did you settle on him?

TM: In the beginning I bought resonators from Jimmy Cox. Jimmy is a good friend of mine for many years. Steve came highly recommended through Robin Smith. Steve was able to make a device to put the plastic on the way we wanted, with lasers setting the alignment. Perfection at its best. Steve does a great job of installing the plastic and we've become great friends since meeting.

DB: Your advertisement says that the rims are maple rims with "varied layered thicknesses." Does Robin make those up, or do you get them from someone else?

TM: No, our rims are made elsewhere. The Dannick rims have a 5/16" center ply. What happens, we start out with a 1/4 inch inside ply, go to a 5/16 middle ply, and

then our outside ply ends up a lot thinner, especially below the flange. It almost ends up to be a veneer. So it's a little bit more than a two ply rim underneath the flange. Through experimentation, we found out with the many cuts from pre-war rims that Robin Smith gave me, we steamed them and took them apart, and found out just how Gibson put rims together in the 30's. We found that the better sounding banjos had a 5/16" middle ply, and that's why we stuck with it. It does make a difference. Also, we found that by changing the type of wood on the middle layer, it could effect the sound of the banjo. We've found so far that using cherry wood for the middle ply which is very close to maple made a very dramatic sound in the instrument.

DB: How did you go about getting the hooks and nuts done, with the original threads?

TM: Again, we had an original PW hook & nut scanned by a company in Rhode Island that gets into this fine detail. We now have a steel mold for making our brass hooks, but not our steel ones. We actually mold the brass hooks. If you look at an original prewar hook thread, a modern-day nut will not thread on a pre-war hook, but a pre-war nut will screw onto a modern-day hook. Even though the thread is 8/26. Back in the 1930s, they didn't have SASE standards, so machining standards were different than today's standards. 1930's 8-26 thread is not the same as today's 8-26 thread design. So, other hardware builders advertises, "We have 8/26th thread." Yeah, but have you got the right prewar thread? That's what we duplicate with the hooks we make. Now granted, we don't use our hooks on every single instrument we build, because they are too expensive. Custom dies and labor are expensive. We use them when we are building a 100% American made banjo. We don't always do that. Most of our New Generation banjos, under the request of a customer, can be a 100% United States made product. I know everyone has their quirks about the rosewood and other woods, and where the inlay comes from, but let's just talk about the metal hardware. There is only one fret wire supplied by Stew-Mac that is made in the U.S., and that's what we use. All of the rest are made elsewhere. On the 100% American Made banjos, rather than use foreign tuners, we

use tuners made by Waverly in Bozeman, Montana. So that's how we put together our 100% American-made instrument. At that time, we will use our own tailpiece, which is a combination of both the 1930s windows-style with the slide of cover, which came on an original Style 11, with a Presto-style nose. The dimensions and the weights are the same as a modern day Presto.

DB: Your ad says that the Affordable Series KK-4 uses hexavalent chrome. I've never heard of that. Where do you come up with this stuff? Is this a chrome plating per se? Did they use it on the old Gibsons?

TM: Yes. Hexavalent Chrome is a "plus six" process versus today's popular "plus three" process. Hexavalent chrome has that blue-ish tint & depth look that came with the pre-war Style 4 banjos back in the day. Today's chrome that is used most everywhere is trivalent, which gives you that yellow-ish tint that you see on car bumpers, bicycles, and most anything that is chrome plated. Hexavalent chrome is a very dangerous chemical. The EPA will only allow you use small tanks. One of the plating houses we get some of our plating done has the right tank & process, and offered to do all our work for us. So, that's where we get the Affordable Series KK-4 plated. In fact, Harley Davidson uses Hexavalent chrome on most of their bike parts.

All of the vendors we use—the electroplaters, foundries and machinists—are all restoration specialists. They don't make production parts, and they have a lot of 1930's experience. That's why we were so successful at replicating and producing Gibson-style replica hardware.

DB: I notice you don't use your AMB tailpiece on the standard Kel Kroydon models, you use a Presto instead. Why?

TM: The general public wants a Presto. That's the bluegrass sound. End of subject.

DB: I guess some people just don't get the concept of a plastic fingerboard. They don't want a yellow fingerboard. Did you offer the New Generation Series, the series with the wood fingerboards, from the start, or was that in response to custom requests?

TM: That was in response to customer requests. We had the sound of the banjo down pretty pat, and a lot of people liked it. But they didn't like plastic under their

fingers. So that's when we started coming out with more traditional banjo styles. Some players wanted ebony fingerboards, some wanted rosewood, so we came out with the New Generation Series.

DB: So the New Generation Series is mechanically the same as the Original Series?

TM: Yes, it's the same banjo parts that we allow the customer to build the custom instrument they want. We don't customize the Original Series KK-10, KK-11 or "Affordable Series" banjos except for a radius fingerboard. With the New Generation Series, they can build whatever they want.

DB: I understand that the various banjos of the Signature Series are the result of collaborations with individual artists, like Charlie Cushman, Casey Henry, Bill Evans, and Aaron McDaris. Are these basically "mix and match" designs from your other banjos, or are there some unique features of these banjos that depart from the Original and New Generation specifications?

TM: Everyone of the Signature Series Kel Kroydon instruments are unique to the artist. I approached each artist and gave them the opportunity to build what they thought was the best banjo possible, that they would want to represent. Aaron went with the Ron Reno Flying Eagle inlays, and a traditional style mahogany wood. Bill Evans has a Granada style banjo with an engraving he designed himself. Charlie Cushman also designed all his own engraving while using the style 10 in pearl inlay on an ebony fingerboard. Casey Henry liked the Style 11 as it was.

DB: For all the professional banjo pickers out there, is there an application form to apply for a Signature Series banjo?

TM: No, we just about shut the door on that. We have four now, and that's enough. These four players are some of the greatest in the country, and they represent Kel Kroydon and American Made Banjo very well, and it's appreciated.

DB: I saw the video of Ned Luberecki picking an AMB Affordable Series banjo, and it had a great sound. Your advertising says that you've "turned back the hands of time." Back to the "1990 collectable era." What do you mean by that?

TM: I own a 1991 Earl Scruggs Standard banjo; it's a great sounding banjo. I enjoy collecting completely original banjos,

unaltered, not cut up or anything. I knew Rick Kulesh (who provided the tone ring for those banjos) very well. Recently, Rick moved to the East Coast, not too far from where we are. I talked to him, and Rick offered to provide us with the proprietary tone ring that was used in the 1990s for our "Affordable Series" banjos. The rest of the banjo was easy to replicate, so that's what we've done. We have produced a great 90's look and sound, and we're really proud of it.

DB: Are the "Affordable Series" banjos essentially being built by Robin Smith, the same as the Kel Kroydon banjos?

TM: Yes. Steve Gill builds the resonators, the rims are the same, the tone ring is a Kulesh 90's ring, and the rest of the banjo is built by Robin Smith.

DB: Are the Affordable Series the same as the Original and New Generation banjos except for the tone ring?

TM: No, they're not. The Presto tailpiece is standard on the Affordable series. The hooks and nuts, the hoops and the tuners are by others. The rest of the banjo is made by American Made Banjo. We use two different style resonators. The less expensive non-vertical grain for the "Affordable Series" banjos and prewar style vertical sidewall grain for all our Original Series, New Generation & Signature banjos. All of these parts do lower the cost and make the banjos affordable.

DB: You have been accused of price gouging. I've heard people say, how can he make any money at these prices—\$1,900 to \$2,200—when nobody else seems to be able to? I understand that there were going limit to around 30 banjos in the initial "Affordable Series" run. Is this an experiment, or are you committed to offering these banjos into the future?

TM: We are committed. As far as making money, we are in business, we're doing fine, and we plan on being in business for a long time.

DB: Back to your banjo models. I see that you offer a basic ¼" Hoop ring in the KK46 model, and a woody rim as well. Have you considered offering banjos with a tubaphone, whyte ladie, or silver bell ring, something for the old-timey clawhammer pickers?

TM: No. No matter how much we would like to, we don't have the time. I wish I did, but it's out of the question for the

foreseeable future.

DB: So what is your main goal for American Made Banjos?

TM: To make the picker happy and put a smile on every picker's face. It's a simple business plan that works.

