

MY INSTRUMENT

Jayme Stone and his banjo

When a rare Gibson proved out of reach, the Canadian banjo player found another way to create his dream instrument. He tells **Rose Skelton** how

Reimagining the past is at the heart of Jayme Stone's forthcoming musical project, *Folklife*, an album of early 20th-century folk songs reinterpreted for the 21st century. But then Stone has always been reimagining and reinterpreting the past, including when he set about to create the exact kind of banjo he wanted – a pre-war Gibson, complete with flathead tone-ring, although he knew he wouldn't have the \$60,000 to \$100,000 that these instruments can cost.

These pre-war Gibsons are widely considered to be the best banjos ever made, and they were only produced in small numbers, and never in the same way again. The chances of Stone procuring one for himself were slim, so he wondered if there wasn't some way he could create what he wanted from what was at hand. He called up a Gibson banjo expert, Steve Huber, and asked if he would be able to take a less expensive model of pre-war Gibson, a TB-1, fit a new five-string neck and a flathead tone-ring – the ring of metal that fits onto the head of the banjo – therefore adding all-important gravity and depth to the sound of the instrument.

"Steve had this theory," says Stone, "that it didn't so much matter what style the banjo was or if it had a tone-ring. What mattered was how round the rim of the banjo was, because if you're talking about instruments that are 80-plus years old, they get warped over time. He thought that the rounder the rim, the better everything was going to fit and the better it would sound." The only way to find out how round the rim was, Huber told him, was to dismantle the banjo, put the rim on a lathe, and spin it. He agreed that if Stone could find the right banjo – and it had to be in pristine condition – then he would have a look at it.

"In 2009, I put word out that I was looking for a banjo, with the caveat that it had to get sent to Steve to be taken apart. If the rim isn't perfectly round then the tone-ring's not going to fit and the instrument won't sound right." He eventually found a contender in Maine, a 1934 Gibson TB-1. "The metal was still

shiny," recalls Stone. "Steve took it apart and put it on the lathe; he called me and said it had the roundest rim he'd ever seen."

Next, Huber fitted a modern-day replica tone-ring, and Robin Smith, who had a shop next door from Huber in Hendersonville, Tennessee, fitted a new five-string neck. The result was a success. "It's one of the best banjos I've ever heard," says Stone. "And I've played it up against some very, very nice, much pricier, original flat-heads. It really is a special instrument, so I've stuck with it."

One of the characteristics of Jayme Stone's playing is that he is stylistically dexterous with an instrument that is usually played by musicians who pick a camp – bluegrass or the more traditional old-time style – and stick to it. Stone plays a variety of styles and has a range of ways to play them, which allows him to create music that ranges from deeply traditional African-American work tunes to Bach cello suites. His Gibson needed to be all things. "There is a depth to the sound," he says of his instrument, "there's a deep resonance.

Some banjos can be very bright and brittle, but this one is very warm and the front edge of the note feels round. It's also incredibly even, all the way through. Every note is clear and bell-like, and there's a nice dynamic range, so I can play really close to the bridge and get a good amount of twang and brightness if I want to. But it can also be really deep and resonant, which works for the way I like to play. It does it all."

Part of what makes the pre-war Gibsons so special, in Stone's view, is that the decades of playing has allowed the multitude of components that make up the banjo – the hundreds of screws, hooks, rings and rims – to fuse. "I think that banjos, more than other instruments, take longer to become seasoned," he says. "Resonating for many decades does something to the instrument. I have no doubt that the great banjos being made today will sound really good in 80 years." ♦

+ ALBUM *Folklife* will be released in April 2017

