

DESIGNING

Maine Soundings

KENTUCKY-BORN JIMMY COX IS DOWN EAST BUILDING BLUEGRASS BANJOS.

BY STACEY CHASE

Photographs by SCOTT DORRANCE



Maine is vacationland, not bluegrass country – right? But for the last 42 years, Kentucky-born banjo maker and bluegrass picker Jimmy Cox has holed up in his Five String Music Studio in Topsham, a town in Maine’s mid-coast region. There, he handcrafts his high-end instruments with drumlike bodies and long fretted necks using parts he manufactures himself.

“This banjo is made in America, not with imported parts,” says the 74-year-old Cox, who runs through about 20 cups of coffee and several packs of cigarettes a day. “I had to make the parts before I made the banjos.”

So, in addition to banjos, Cox sells banjo parts, most notably rock-maple rims and resonators, to other premier banjo manufacturers worldwide. Bluegrass legends Ralph Stanley and Roland “Sonny” Osborne play banjos built with Cox components.

A coal miner’s son, Cox was one of 12 children – “I was the eight ball,” he jokes – who learned to play the banjo from his self-taught father at age 6.

An inductee into the Maine Country Music Hall of Fame, Cox, who can play just about any stringed instrument, gigged for decades on local radio and television shows and in country-western and bluegrass bands. He built his first banjo, the signature Kentucky-5, in 1964 when, he says, he couldn’t find one that “suited my sound.”

Cox works with his two non-banjo-playing grandsons, 30-year-old Adam and 28-year-old Jeremy, in the barnlike

studio next to his modest ranch-style house. They machine nearly all the banjo hardware – from tone rings, to tension hoops, to tailpieces – on the premises. (Cox doesn’t produce the tuning pegs, plastic drumheads, or steel strings.) His wife of 52 years, Yvette, keeps the books.

Banjo rims, resonators, and necks are typically made of lacquered curly maple, burl walnut, or mahogany; fret boards are cut from ebony or rosewood.

“This is country stuff here, down to earth,” says Cox, a former Air Force jet-engine specialist stationed in Maine during the Korean War. “You have to use your head. You got to know how to measure to the *thousandths* [of an inch].”

Ultimately, building a better banjo means being attuned to what a fine banjo ought to sound like. “It’s about the fit of the tone ring; how it fits on the rim,” Cox explains. “It’s got to be just right, or we’ll run it through the band saw.”

His acoustic banjos (three standard and four limited-edition models) sell for \$2,500 to \$4,000. Famed banjo picker Raymond Fairchild has designed and lent his name to several Cox banjos, including the Fairchild 50th Anniversary model, which commemorates his half-century of making music and was released this year.

“All I can say about Jimmy is, he is a genius,” says Fairchild, 68. “He’s the only banjo builder that I know of that builds them out and out, every piece of them.”

Fans and former students regularly drop by to jam or listen to Cox strum tunes over the din of grinding machinery. “If a man was down South, they’d be in your shop all the time, aggravating you, and you’d never get nothing done,” Cox says, only half-jokingly, of the drop-ins. “I am misplaced, but I want to be that way,” he says. “I’m hiding up here in Maine.”

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PICKY PICKER Jimmy Cox (top) started making banjos when he couldn’t find an instrument that met his sound standards. Fret boards and peg heads (middle) are being embellished with the Cox logo and decorative mother-of-pearl inlay, signature features of Cox banjos. Resonators made of rock maple (above) are stacked in the Five String Music Studio in Topsham, Maine. A finished Cox banjo (facing page) is both a visual and musical work of art.

COX BANJOS
Topsham, Maine,
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coxbanjos.com

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