

Falling into the banjo business

By Tim Doran / *The Bulletin*

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SUNRIVER —

From his garage-sized shop across the Deschutes River from Crosswater golf course, Mark Platin worked on a half dozen or so banjos last week.

He builds fewer now than his company, Wildwood Banjo Co., produced in its heyday.

In the 1970s and '80s, Wildwood turned out 30 to 35 banjos a month, and in the '90s, the company's nine employees cranked out 500 to 600 electric guitar bodies a month from a 7,000-square-foot factory in Arcata, Calif.

High-volume production may have been good for business, but not for Platin. It drained him, he said.

So a few years ago, Platin, 62, sold the guitar-making business to concentrate on banjos, and in 2008, he and his wife, Cathy, moved to the Sunriver area, where the family spent summer and winter vacations for years and where, in 2001, they bought a second home.

"We decided to really make the quality of our life (our priority)," he said. "We'd been in Arcata for 30 years. We wanted to try something new.

"(I decided) to downsize the banjo business and go back to how I started, making really good instruments at an affordable price."

Wildwood appears to be the only banjo maker in Central Oregon — although Breedlove Guitar Co. makes guitars, ukuleles and mandolins in Bend — and it might be the only one in the state.

None of the 14 musical instrument manufacturers listed by the state Employment Department appears to make banjos, although for several, it's hard to tell what they



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Mark Platin, owner of Wildwood Banjo Co., plays a banjo Thursday in his shop near Sunriver.



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make. The 2007 Economic Census lists 18 in the category, but it does not break them down by instrument.

Wildwood banjos generate rave reviews on some Web-based discussion forums, such as those on banjohangout.org, and Rick Havern, a tenor banjo player from Bend, said he knows a person who won't play anything else. "I have played some of his banjos, and every one I have played I liked," Havern said.

Many call the five-string banjo America's instrument, according to a National Park Service educational lesson plan, but its origins reach back to Senegal, Mali and other locations in Africa.

In his "Notes on the State of Virginia," Thomas Jefferson described the slaves at Monticello playing "the banjar, which they brought ... from Africa," according to the lesson plan, which features the Appomattox Court House National Historical Park.

The park, located in Virginia, contains the birthplace of Joel Sweeney, the first documented white banjo player, and the man called, "in essence, the Elvis Presley of the 1840s," by author Bob Carlin in his 2007 book, "The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy."

Sweeney "introduced mainstream America to a music (and musical instrument) which had its roots in the transplanted black culture of the southern slave," according to a description of the book.

Over the years, the popularity of the banjo has fluctuated along with popular culture. Platin has survived through several business cycles in his nearly 38 years of banjo making.

When the song "Dueling Banjos," from the 1972 movie "Deliverance," became popular, Platin said, it emptied every store of every banjo.

"Banjos enjoyed this huge, huge surge," he said.

The more bluegrass music caught on, the more banjos sold, and when Platin gets a call from customers seeking a long-neck banjo, the type developed for Pete Seeger, he can usually guess their age range.

Platin works on a banjo rim Thursday in his shop. In the foreground a clamp holds a banjo neck.



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Mark Platin, owner of Wildwood Banjo Co., works on a banjo rim Thursday in his shop near Sunriver. In the foreground, a clamp holds a banjo neck.



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Mark Platin, owner of Wildwood Banjo Co., works on a banjo rim Thursday in his shop near Sunriver.

"All these baby boomers cut their teeth on this early folk music (from artists like) Pete Seeger, The Weavers and the Kingston Trio," he said. "These guys were all playing long-neck, open-back banjos."

On the Web

For more information, visit www.wildwoodbanjos.com

Platin, too, enjoys playing an open-back, or traditional, banjo, one of two main types, the other being the bluegrass banjo, which has a resonator covering the back. The resonator reflects the sound to the front of the instrument, toward the audience, giving it more sound.

Bluegrass banjos are "meant to compete with five other instruments playing in a bluegrass band," Platin said, where an open back, which can be played alone or accompanied by a guitar, produces a warmer, mellower sound.

It was a search for a quality open-back banjo that led Platin into making them.

He became interested in the music while taking an American ethnomusicology course at California State University, Northridge. His search for a banjo led to an informal apprenticeship with famed guitar maker Ren Ferguson, he said, and a job at the Dobro Guitar Co. in Long Beach, Calif.

But Platin still didn't consider instrument making as a career. He traveled north to Arcata to attend graduate school at Humboldt State University and took a job with an instrument repair company to earn some money.

Recording artists Art Rosenbaum and John Burke bought Platin-made banjos when they traveled through town on their way to a recording session in Berkeley. They played them on the recording and appeared with them on the album cover.

"All of a sudden, I'm in business," Platin said. "It was never anything I thought about or wanted to do. "It was one of those tipping points that happen."

As the business developed, he carved out his niche, he said, by recreating a tuba-phone tone ring, the metal piece on the body of the banjo, originally developed by banjo makers at The Vega Co.

Today, Wildwood makes five open-back models and three bluegrass, priced online between around \$1,400 to more than \$3,500 depending on the model and design.

Platin, who also takes custom orders, builds the banjos out of hard maple or American black walnut and black ebony and fills the inlays with pearl and abalone.

Platin is Wildwood's only employee, although a contractor in California he's worked with for 20 years finishes the instruments.

Wildwood Banjos may be made in a one-man shop, but Platin uses modern manufacturing machines, such as a computerized mill, and retained some production-line features, such as separate work stations for making the rims.

Downsizing has given him time to experiment, allowing him to create what he calls the Exotic Wood series, made from African woods, wenge and bubinga. They give the banjos' sound a different quality. None of the wood is endangered, he said.

To make them all wood, Platin replaced the ivoroid plastic edging he uses in his other banjos with wood.

"I'm at a point in my life, finally ... that I can afford to play with this stuff and have some fun with it," he said.

Platin and his wife — their children no longer live at home — have settled into life in Central Oregon. A skier and snowboarder, Platin enjoys the mountains and recreation, and he said the music community in the area is great.

“This place is incredible,” he said, “and it's beautiful, and it's not California.

“I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be.”

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