

# Putting My Mastertone On A Diet

By Joe Timko

I don't have to tell the banjo pickers who read this publication just how heavy a resonated bluegrass banjo with a tone ring can be. As the protests of my middle-aged back increased during sessions of hefting around a flathead Gibson Mastertone banjo, I realized the need to find a diet plan for my friend. I figured with some ingenuity and experimentation I could narrow down the abundance of choices in ring, rim, and pot design types to come up with a satisfactory solution. Without breaking the bank I first went a more conventional route and had several conversion banjos built using the pots from Gibson banjos without tone rings or even tone hoops, including: a late 1930's Style 00 with just a wood bead atop the rim; a mid-1930's Style 1 with the thick rim and the original tone hoop; and a late-1920's Style 1 with the shoe bracket/flat flange type rim. All were good banjos that satisfied the lighter weight requirement I was seeking but they lacked the punch and volume I wanted in a bluegrass banjo.

Then one day I was watching a DVD of the Andy Griffith show featuring the Darlings. I spotted Doug Dillard picking a Gibson archtop banjo. Now maybe the banjo heard on the soundtrack wasn't the one Doug was picking in the scene, but something clicked. Archtop banjos are traditionally known to provide a sharper sound than a flathead banjo. The "light-bulb above the head" went on when I realized here was the punch I needed. I quickly got to sketching out a concept based on what I already knew about modern rim technology utilizing submerged timber wood, and this little bit of inspiration. What I thought was, "What if the flathead tone ring was removed, and in its place an archtop was installed like those old Gibsons? And what if the harshness of an archtop tone ring was eliminat-

ed by not making the tone ring of metal at all, but of the submerged timber that is so popular now among many of the current banjo builders?"

The concept took into account that my RB-250 with its mahogany neck has a warmer sound that could stand to be sharpened up a bit. I also knew that the submerged timber wood being used for the rims and necks in many new banjos was incredibly loud—steroid wood really. In particular, one of the rim makers was using a block rim design for his speciality wood rims which would add brightness to the package.

I sent my concept sketch along with the rim/flange/tone ring from my banjo for sizing to Tony Pass (contact Tony at [www.tonypassbanjorims.com](http://www.tonypassbanjorims.com)), and a week later I had the first "Archtop Woody" Thin-Skirt® installed in my banjo.



I was really knocked over when I got it all put back together and setup. My back gratefully accepted the savings of 3 pounds due to the lack of a tone ring right away. The block rim design provided more than enough brightness not to miss that 3 pounds of metal. In fact, I was most impressed at how the banjo rang up the

neck, holding notes as well as when it still had the tone ring in it. Because the rim was made of Lost Timbre® birch wood, there was virtually no drop in volume. The Pass ThinSkirt® design maintained the bass too. Tony's work on the archtop profile at the top of the rim was nothing short of incredible. He matched the shape of a real archtop tone ring by adding a fourth layer of block pieces to the top of a regular ThinSkirt® rim, then lathe-cut the shape into the top resulting in two circular beads around the diameter at the pressure points for the head to rest on. It was then stained to match the neck. The smaller air chamber did exactly what I thought it would by sharpening up the notes while not causing any sacrifice in the quality of the tone. Perhaps the best result was that the harshness of a metal tone ring banjo was gone, and in its place was a pleasing bluegrass banjo tone, with terrific balance across the strings.

I should add in summing up that I am

in no way affiliated with Tony Pass, his rims, or the old wood that is taking over the banjo world. I'm just a picker who stays up too late watching old TV shows with bluegrass references in them, always remaining open to an idea should it come along, even if it means helping a friend lose some weight.