

The Recording King— Bill Sullivan Tribute Banjo

By David Jakubiak

I recently had the opportunity to meet with Jeff and Eric Sullivan of First Quality Musical Supplies and Greg Rich, musical instrument designer of *Musiclink.net* to discuss the production of the new Recording King Tribute Banjo that has been designed to honor Bill Sullivan, founder of First Quality Musical Supplies in Louisville, Kentucky. Jeff and Eric are Bill's sons, and the current owners of First

by side in producing banjos? Was Bill responsible for teaching you how the banjos are made?

Eric Sullivan: Dad worked for General Electric, and he really loved the banjo. He found out the hard way that to build banjos and play banjos are two different things. Playing banjo is difficult and requires significant practice. Dad was a machinist by trade and used his skills to make banjo parts—this allowed him to

King Tribute Banjo project get started?

Jeff Sullivan: Well, everyone knows Greg Rich, and he and my dad go way back. Earlier this year, Greg approached Eric and I and proposed we do something to honor our dad. Greg suggested we produce a tribute banjo in Bill's memory. This banjo has a limited run of one through fifty, and it is based on the idea of the Recording King banjo. Greg did an excellent job with hand engravings, upgraded Scorpion bridges, and First Quality added pearl engraved and numbered truss rod covers that include an exact replica of Bill Sullivan's signature. Eric and I are also signing each banjo.

Greg Rich: When I was just starting to learn about banjos and how to repair and build them, there just weren't many people or companies that dealt with

banjos. Bill had First Quality Banjo, which was dedicated to the banjo-building enthusiast. They carried parts, materials, inlays, neck blanks, and just about everything necessary for the professional or amateur builder. Whenever I needed parts or an answer to a question, Bill went out of his way to help me. Throughout my career his support was always there.

When I heard of his sudden passing, I

thought it would be nice to do something for Bill and his family, so I came up with the idea of building a Bill Sullivan Tribute Recording King Banjo. I contacted Eric and Jeff with my idea.

Because this banjo was being dedicated to one of my mentors, I wanted to add something special to it that gave it a more personal touch, so I decided to hand engrave the tension hoop and armrest for all 50 pieces. It was the least I could do to show my appreciation for a man who dedicated his life to helping me, as well as the rest of the banjo community.

BNL: Greg, tell us a little about yourself. How did you get involved with designing banjos, and do you play a little yourself?

GR: Well, yes, I started playing the banjo



Eric, Bill and Jeff Sullivan

Quality Musical Supplies. Greg Rich is a well-known banjo designer who originally proposed that a banjo be made to honor Bill Sullivan. Sadly, Bill Sullivan suddenly passed away on Sept. 23, 2007. Bill touched many peoples' lives and is fondly remembered by banjo players throughout the world.

The Recording King Bill Sullivan Tribute Model banjo made its debut this past year at the 2008 International Bluegrass Music Association convention in Nashville, Tennessee.

David Jakubiak: Eric, I'm sure you and Jeff miss your dad dearly. Can you tell us a bit about him? How did he get started in the music business? Did he play the banjos he made? Did you work side

participate in bluegrass music. Being able to manufacture parts just came natural to dad, and First Quality Banjo was born. Dad started with just a few of the simple banjo parts, and added more parts and services year after year. As Jeff and I were growing up we were always surrounded by the banjo world, and Dad would show us how he did everything. We were truly blessed to have a father who would take the time to explain how things work. I believe it was the foundation that he laid with us that makes First Quality Music what it is today. I'll never forget the time Dad and I got to spend together in the shop.

BNL: Gentlemen, how did this Recording

when I was 15. Living in Newport Beach, California, and finding someone to do repair work on my banjo, when needed, was impossible. So, in the beginning, it was trial and error working on my personal banjo. I made so many mistakes learning how to set up or repair the instrument. The



Bill's Park

good news was I was able to try things again and again until I figured out exactly the right way to do them. One thing led to another, and I went from basic set-up, to replacing frets, to basic inlay repairs, and so on. In addition, I just happened to live next door to two of the biggest instrument collectors in the country: Randy Snoddy and Mac Yasuda. Seeing all those original banjos from the 1920s



Greg Rich's first banjo

and 1930s really inspired me to try and learn how to engrave, carve and paint in the style of those fancy old banjos. The first complete banjo I built was a Gibson Florentine (seen in the photo).

BNL: When did you first meet Bill Sullivan?

GR: I first met Bill when I was about 19 years old. Instrument collector Randy Snoddy invited me to travel to Tennessee with him for a few weeks. When we arrived, we stopped at First Quality Banjo to meet Bill. At that time his shop was

in his basement. When I talked to him, I couldn't believe the knowledge he had and that he was willing to share it with me. Later, when I was hired by Gibson, I worked with Bill to supply Gibson with the parts we needed to improve the look, sound and quality of their banjos. Bill was just one of those guys who wanted to share his knowledge with anyone willing to listen and learn.

BNL: And how long have you been working with The Music Link?

GR: I started designing for the Music Link in 2005. We're located in Brisbane, California. I design the instrument brands that we produce, including Recording King, The Loar, AXL Guitars and Johnson guitars.

BNL: Can you give us a brief history of the name Recording King?

GR: Recording King was the house brand of musical instruments sold through Montgomery Ward department stores in the late 1920s and 1930s. It was discontinued around 1939. Around 1995, I wanted to start building a few banjos again. I've always liked the way Recording King banjos looked, so I decided to start reproducing a very limited number of Recording Kings in the U.S. However, production and vendor challenges prevented me from committing to full-scale building. In 2005, The Music Link and I agreed to trademark and produce a complete line of banjos, guitars, lap steels and other musical instruments that were

reminiscent of the older more historic models, in addition to developing newer, more contemporary instruments.

BNL: Are Recording King banjos another Gibson Mastertone copy or are they new and original?

GR: The original Recording Kings were built by Gibson in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and they shared the same components and construction techniques as their Mastertone counterparts. Some of the differences between Gibsons and Recording Kings included a unique peghead shape, inlay patterns, peghead and fingerboard binding, as well as different engraved metal patterns on the higher end models. We are reissuing the Recording King banjo line rather than making a copy of a Mastertone-style banjo.

BNL: Where do all the parts for the RK Sullivan Tribute Banjo come from?

GR: We've manufactured every part in our factory, with the exception of the strings, banjo head, tuners, truss rod cover and bridge.

BNL: Tell us about the quality of the parts, and what makes them different than other imports?

GR: When we started the Recording King banjo project in 2005, we decided that in order to make a banjo that would really be accepted by players like Sonny Osborne and Rob McCoury, we would have to start with the right hardware and materials. This meant having a greater amount of input in every aspect of the design and in every step of the building process. Recording King owners Alan Liu and Steve Patrino set up a new factory that would be dedicated to producing RK banjos, using my blueprints, drawings, and photos from the prewar banjos I had collected over the years, as well as gathering up new and prewar components like resonator hardware, tension hoops, tailpieces, coordinator rods and flanges to be used as samples,

Reproducing the metal components as closely as possible to the old Mastertone hardware was a huge challenge in itself. We had to make sure we used American standard thread sizes rather than metric, and fit the tone ring and flange correctly to the rim and keep from over-buffing the metal hardware. We also use a one-piece neck blank, rather than laminating it, and a one-piece veneer on the back of the resonator as opposed to a two-piece veneer. The idea was to build a banjo in our factory but use American quality control and hand assembly techniques to teach the builders how to maintain the quality of the product. People don't always realize that getting the perfect prototype is one thing, but then keeping that quality consistent

on a larger scale is quite difficult. It can only be done with hands-on training and plenty of attention.

With a factory that is just dedicated to manufacturing our own line of instruments, we can concentrate on selecting better materials, control the methods of construction and finishing and ultimately achieve a higher standard of quality control. With these ideas in mind, we send our Director of Product Development, Travis Atz, to the Recording King factory at least once a month to oversee the production and assembly.

BNL: Jeff, in today's economy, can you discuss the challenges you face with countries like China. Are you able to compete with the production of Sullivan banjos and still maintain the high quality that customers demand?

JS: Overseas manufacturing is filling a need, getting beginners into the banjo market who might not otherwise be able to afford starting off on a pro quality banjo. We insist on providing quality import instruments that meet the requirements of the beginning player. We hope that playing banjo will be a life long enjoyment, and as the player develops his skills and wants to advance to a quality instrument, that's where the Sullivan Banjo line fill its niche.

BNL: I understand that for every Sullivan Tribute banjo sold, some of the proceeds will go to a special cause. Jeff, can you let readers know more about this?

JS: All the proceeds will go to what we call Bill's Park. We have a nice little piece of land in back adjacent to our building with some trees in which we've had festivals in the past. We have customers from around the country who love to play the instruments in our store. We have events from time to time, and people are always picking. We came up with the idea of a dedicated picking area for customers. The park will honor Bill. There are a lot of memories of dad, and many banjo pickers over the course of 40 years personally knew him.

The Sullivan Tribute banjo was launched recently at the IBMA Trade Show, in Nashville. We're making #4 through #50 available, and will hold onto the first three banjos in our store for our family. Banjos #4, #25, #30 and #50 have been sold to employees at First Quality. The banjo is offered for \$1,495.

BNL: Eric, you're well known for your technical expertise in designing and producing Sullivan banjos for First Quality. How did you and Greg work together, and could you describe the banjo's technical specifications?

ES: What Greg came up with is a Recording King standard banjo, high quality maple rim with the RK tone ring. The banjo has a hand-engraved tension hoop, with a personalized label inside. Although we make Sullivan banjos at First Quality, this banjo was Greg's idea and he has done an excellent job. It's a very popular banjo, especially with its reasonable selling price and all of the extra time that Greg has put into its design. Working with Greg and Recording King has been a true blessing. Together we have been able to bring a high quality, affordable banjo to market that would make Dad proud.

BNL: Greg, this is a limited edition item.

The Recording King Bill Sullivan Tribute Banjo

- Limited Edition of 50 banjos
- Hoop and Armrest Hand-Engraved by Greg Rich
- Pearl Hand-Engraved and Numbered Truss Rod Cover
- Scorpion Bridge
- One Piece Mahogany Resonator
- One Piece Mahogany Neck
- Mastertone-Style Banjo Flange
- Bound Ebony Fingerboard
- "Style 6" M.O.P. Peghead and Fretboard Inlay
- Dual Coordinator Rods
- Presto Style Tailpiece
- Remo Frosted Head
- Nickel-Plated Hardware
- Mastertone-Style 20 Hole Flathead Tone Ring
- 3-ply Maple Rim
- Includes Deluxe Vintage Hardshell Case
- Limited lifetime warranty to original purchaser

Do you believe the limited number of Sullivan banjos make them good values from a collectible standpoint? And what does this banjo mean to you personally?

GR: I don't think anyone can tell if they will be collectible, but I hope that limiting the production to 50 pieces and

personally hand-engraving each banjo makes them special. Because I knew Bill for over 30 years and valued what he did for me, this is my way to say thanks.

BNL: Where can readers buy the RK Sullivan Tribute banjo?

GR: The banjo was designed and produced exclusively for First Quality, and they are the only folks selling it.

BNL: Anything else you want to let readers know?

ES: We really appreciate all the support that everyone has given our family throughout the years and look forward to servicing you banjo needs for years to come.

David Jakubiak has produced six books on CD for banjo, mandolin and guitar. He has been playing banjo since 1970 and has over 40 years of experience in playing, performing and teaching music. Check out his site at www.Fretmentor.com

Jeff and Eric Sullivan, Owners of First Quality Musical Supplies, www.firstqualitymusic.com

Greg Rich, Recording King Banjo Designer at MusicLink.net



Greg Rich engraving