

Frank Neat

“The different players, they get different tones from a banjo so you have to figure out what tone they are getting before you can really know what they want, before you know what it takes to get the sound they are wanting.”

Born in Adair County, Kentucky, Frank Neat was a musician before he became an instrument builder. In 1965 he was living in Indiana, working second shift in a factory, and playing a Gibson banjo with a band. An acquaintance, Jim Falkner, told him he could take the banjo and make it sound better, and he did. Frank was so intrigued that he wanted to learn more. He began working part time with Falkner, who introduced him to some of his customers, top banjo players like Earl Scruggs and Ralph Stanley. In 1975, Frank built a banjo for Ralph Stanley. Stanley liked the banjo so much he offered to sell the banjos Frank made, calling them “Stanleytones.” By 1980, Frank’s instrument business was so successful that he moved back to Kentucky and went into banjo making and repair full time. Now he has a shop in Russell Springs, Kentucky, where he and his son, Ricky, create banjos that are prized by professional banjo players. Frank purchases some of the components, like the wood rims and resonators, from other craftsmen, but he likes to create the necks and finger boards himself, using materials like ebony and maple wood that he has personally selected. He often cuts piece for neck blanks and lets them season for a year before using them. He has refined a design for a banjo neck that feels just right in the hands of a player. He and Ricky cut the inlay work for the finger board by hand, which gives it a different look than inlay that is created using a computer. Frank continues to work with professional musicians to create instruments with the unique tones they are seeking. Most of his banjos are marketed by professional musicians selling the banjos that Frank designed for them.