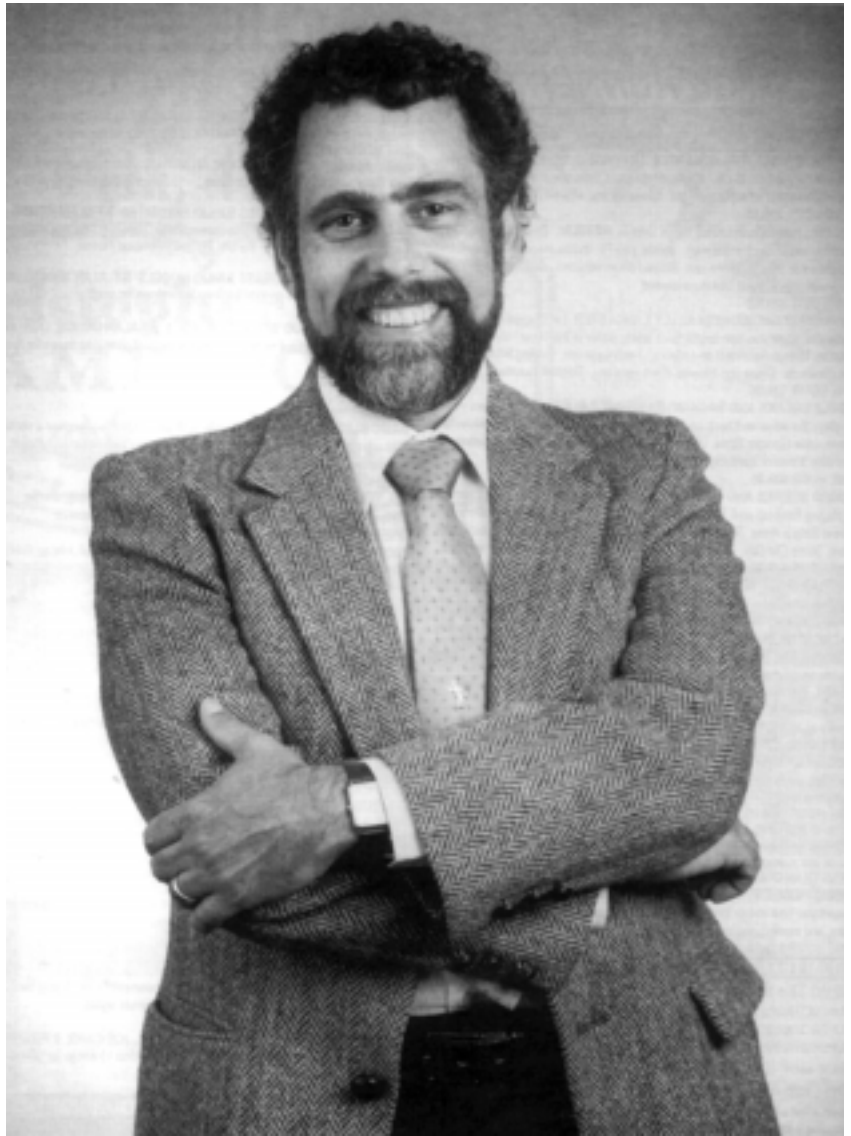


THE WORLD BEFORE SCRUGGS

"Try to imagine the world before Earl Scruggs -- it's unbelievable!" This exclamation by Rick was how our May, 1985 talks began, and it offers a keynote for his music and his thinking. To hear this makes you realize there's a lot more to Rick Shubb than "the guy who makes those capos."

Still, one little invention has made Rick's name a musical household word: the ingenious and beautiful guitar (and banjo) capo known, simply, as the Shubb capo. Actually, Rick's other products include the innovative Shubb banjo fifth-string sliding capo, the Shubb compensated banjo bridge, the Shubb-Pearse steel (a distinctive bar for Dobro and steel guitar), a pickup and amplifier designed specifically for the banjo (no longer on the market). Most recently, his aptitude for computer database development has led him to produce a line of computer software for musicians. The first in this line is *SongMaster*, which will keep track of your songs, followed by *GigMaster*, a booking tool for musicians. Both are easy and affordable, and now available. But the guitar capo in particular has really put his name on the map.



A Profile of Rick Shubb

By Sandy Rothman

Yet, Rick's part in the history of bluegrass music in California and the Bay Area long preceded his emergence as a businessman and inventor.

When I first met Rick in 1959 he was already accomplished on the guitar and five-string banjo. This may seem late to people in the eastern part of the country who had firsthand access to Scruggs and bluegrass from the beginning, but in California it wasn't until the late '50s when the music, via recordings, began to surface

in college towns like Berkeley, riding the crest of the folk revival. With the formation of the Redwood Canyon Ramblers, a core of three Berkeley High graduates (Mayne Smith, Scott Hambly, and Neil Rosenberg) who helped import the bluegrass sound to the Bay Area, listeners were able to experience the music live for the first time in this unlikely setting. I think Rick was the first of the second generation of bluegrass banjo players in the area. Born and raised in Oakland, he gravitated to the folk scene in Berkeley

and became aware of the Ramblers, eventually taking one banjo lesson from Neil Rosenberg. But Rick's musical development really began in his own family, with his brother Bill. The folk revival was in full swing, and Bill, seven years older than Rick, was getting with it.

"He got a Martin 000-18 and was learning to play finger-style, and he taught me a few chords so I could accompany him. I got my first guitar from a pawn shop. It was a Mexican guitar which had been

made for nylon strings but was strung with steel, so it sounded nice and bright, and was about to explode at a moment's notice."

As so often happens with younger siblings, Rick caught the drift of music through his brother's interest, hearing names without knowing too much about the people. Bill got interested in Merle Travis and begin trying to learn the style; Rick says that "he had a pretty good sound for somebody who wasn't any further into music than he ever got to be. His only ambition in music was to play just like Merle Travis, and that sound caught my fancy, too. I had bought him a record, 'Merle Travis Back Home,' as a Christmas present. I can still clearly remember that Christmas morning, hearing that record for the first time. It really turned me on, and I spent the next year getting a bit more serious about the guitar, trying to get a Travis lick of some kind.

"One year later to the day, I discovered Earl Scruggs -- by exactly the same means. My brother, once again, had heard about a sound -- Scruggs-style banjo picking -- built it was a mystery to him. I had heard him mention Scruggs, but didn't know the sound. The record I bought him for Christmas that year was 'Foggy Mountain Jamboree,' and one shot of that did it for me."

Rick's brother got an old open-back banjo, and even though he never wanted Rick playing any of his instruments, Rick would sneak into his room in the evenings, when he was out studying, and try to play the banjo: "I was eventually discovered by pick marks on the head; he didn't use picks on the banjo." The year was 1959; Rick was 14 and Bill was 21. Whether due to the familiar reverse-psychology syndrome where an elder family member withholds access to an instrument, or to Bill's innate good sense in pursuing a law career while Rick was more artistically and musically inclined, Rick pushed into the lead with banjo picking while anything beyond Pete Seeger's "basic strum" seemed to elude his brother. "I had always been in his footsteps in some way or another, and the fact that I was able to come up with some sort of a Scruggs lick gave me such a lift that it

was probably what kept me going for a long time." That, and the fact that Rick's parents, Ben and Bernice, were never anything less than supportive of their son's banjo playing ("I never heard anyone play one any better," Ben told me in 1985).

The first banjo Rick owned was an old S.S. Stewart that had been fitted with a resonator by the mythical repairman Campbell Coe. Eventually, he became the only person I knew to get one of the early '60s Mastertone, with bow-tie inlays, and a brown Gibson case with pink plush lining. ("Campbell got it for me. Brand new. I mean, the smell of that banjo was something I still remember. I later traded the bow-tie for a Paramount banjo, a very ornate style F, with all the gold engraved plating and everything, which got stolen. But I had already bought a Mastertone Studio King plectrum from Jon Lundberg, which I sent to Robbie Robinson for a hearts and flowers neck. That's the banjo I've had every since.") Before that, he would occasionally borrow my old Gibson RB-100, which replaced my own open-back Stewart. "You were the first person I met," Rick told me recently, "besides my brother and his friend Dave Foster, who played any bluegrass. We'd hang out together constantly, playing and fantasizing about finding other musicians. It seems like we packed a lot into that short period of time."

Today there is an abundance of pickers and singers in the San Francisco Bay Area, but in 1959 they were scarce. For what seemed like an eternity, there was just the two of us. Finally we got acquainted with a Missouri fiddler, Bill Wood, living in Oakland, and we started playing as a group, the Pine Ridge Ramblers. We got the Pine Ridge from a map of Kentucky, and the Ramblers from our mentors, the Redwood Canyon ones. Rick got his brother Bill to play bass with us (we didn't know you couldn't have two Bills in one group), and we started playing out wherever we could. Later, through serious bluegrass enthusiast Roosevelt Watson, we met Bert Johnson, another teenager, and finally found our mandolin player and tenor singer. Bert knew more about bluegrass than any of us, having been schooled by his fiddling uncle from Arkansas, the late Jim Henley, who used to fiddle with us on occasion.

A year or two later, after the Pine Ridge Ramblers had disbanded, Bert and Rick started playing with a couple of guitar-playing singers from Oklahoma, Jim Young and Oren Edgeman, who sang duets "That was the Clovis County Boys. We played on the Blackjack Wayne Show every Saturday afternoon for about twelve weeks or so, and then we'd go up and play at the Dream Bowl (a country dance hall) every Saturday night, and we never made



Rick with Vern and Ray

a cent. Blackjack Wayne kept promising us that we'd start getting paid soon, but we never saw a bit of it. That was one of my early lessons about the music business. He said that if we were in the musicians' union we would get paid. So we joined the union, and then he said he couldn't afford us. That band really wasn't very good, but nobody seemed to notice. In those days bluegrass was such a novelty around here that you could get by with practically anything, and no one would know the difference. It seems to me now that that band wasn't good enough to be fine playing in public, let alone on TV, but everyone thought we were just fine." I recall a similar situation when Campbell Coe had the Pine Ridge Ramblers play for a country radio station north of the Bay Area several times; we weren't very good, but we were trying to play bluegrass, and we were very young. I'm sure this was the same appeal of the Clovis County Country Boys.

In previous articles looking at the early days of bluegrass in the Bay Area, an interest in art seems to have been thematic among many of the musicians -- perhaps not so surprising in a university-centered community with a lot of cultural and ethnic influences -- and Rick was no exception. He'd had a flair for drawing since the age of two, I'm told, and was sketching prolifically when I first met him. He eventually developed into a cartoonist, sometime painter, and noted poster artist. Rick designed posters for our little bluegrass shows as well as the Berkeley Fiddlers' Contest and later concerts and festivals, and did some early San Francisco rock posters that are now rare collector's items. "For two weeks I was the highest-paid rock poster artist in San Francisco. Wes Wilson and Mouse and Kelley were getting \$100 a poster, and I was getting \$125. And I was controversial, too, because of my style, which some people thought was grotesque. I did three posters for the Carousel Ballroom, all in a period of four weeks: the Steve Miller Band, Thelonious Monk, and the Electric Flag. I did one for Jimi Hendrix, but it was never printed because the Carousel went under. Rick Griffin once told me that my early artwork had been an influence on



him. That really tickled me." With Earl Crabb he drew and authored a fanciful piece entitled "Humbead's Revised Map of the World (with list of Population)," which became an underground hit and has been reprinted in Eric Von Schmidt and Jim Rooney's *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1979), a chronicle of the New England fold music scene of the '60s. On the map, Berkeley is right next to Cambridge, reflecting our sense that the two communities had things about them that were very much the same, musically at least. Rick says he still has a card file made for the "list of Population," a staggering 1,056

names culled from his own awareness of people in the worlds of music and art, and from the heads and address books of numerous friends. One of Rick's efforts was a comic book with a story about the destruction of civilization survived by just one person, "Colonel Henry Waller III," which featured lifelike renderings of our friend, bluegrass musician Butch Waller.

After graduating from Oakland Technical High School in 1962, the native Oaklander enrolled in that city's California College of Arts and Crafts: "I went to CCAC for a year and a half, but I was pretty distracted by music at that point. I was a fine arts

major -- painting and drawing" (I remember the strong Salvador Dali influence, which can be seen in Rick's poster art/comic book style) -- but some classes I hardly ever attended, because I was so much more interested in music then. I was mostly hanging out a lot in Berkeley, trying to listen to music and be around it, meet musicians, and do whatever could be done. I don't know what I was looking for, but I was out there looking for something. In my first semester at CCAC I booked a concert for the Pine Ridge Ramblers. The admission was 25 cents; I can remember the poster I did: 'Two-bit bluegrass concert.' We also played at Coffee and Confusion, a San Francisco coffeehouse; the Cabale, a folk club in Berkeley; and occasionally on KPFA's 'Midnight Special,' a late-night radio broadcast."

When Rick dropped out of art school, he took a job as copy boy for the San Francisco Examiner, longtime employer of his father, and kept that for a few months: "That was the last job I ever had, working for anyone but myself." One thing Rick did at that newspaper desk was to type out the words to all the bluegrass songs he knew; this proved very useful in the years to come, in his role as bluegrass bandleader.

Meanwhile, he'd seen Flatt and Scruggs for the first time on television -- "FolkSound, USA" -- and shortly thereafter they played in Berkeley (1961). Seeing Lester and Earl and the workings of their well-oiled bluegrass machine was a revelation to us all, and we had our picture taken with Earl Scruggs (dressed as much like Lester and Earl as we could, string ties and all). Then, two years later, Bill Monroe came to town and Rick's concept of what could be done on the banjo was expanded considerably. The banjo player didn't play a southern style at all. It was Bill Keith.

"I heard Bill Keith for the first time when he was playing with Monroe at Napredak Hall, a country dance place near San Jose, the night before the Berkeley concern, May of 1963, and that banjo playing made a very strong impression on me." (This was rarely the case for Rick; as a staunch Scruggs follower, he was hard to impress

with any other banjo wizardry thus far.) "After that show I stayed up almost all night playing the banjo. When we saw them the next night in Berkeley, I went up to Keith and showed him what I had worked out on 'Devil's Dream.' He was rather impressed, I guess, and then he showed me some stuff. I saw him just a few times after that." I have a photograph taken by Lonny Feiner of part of the audience at that Berkeley show, and Rick is absolutely transported. There is also a moment on the tape where Bill Keith plays his break on "Raw Hide;" as the crowd audibly gasps, I think I can hear Rick over the hundreds in that large auditorium.

"To tell the truth, I think that as excellent as Keith was, for the following year or so the influence of his style ended up being a more negative than positive one on me. I was so taken with the idea of playing a higher note on a lower string, which is really about what it comes down to, that I tended to lose track of some of the more basic elements of my playing. I wasn't playing with as strong a touch or as driving a rhythm. I really got into fiddle tunes, and a lot of what I spent time on then, I didn't keep. But I suppose that in a greater sense it was listening to a few players like Keith that inspired me to begin exploring more ideas of my own. At that point Keith had developed his own style more noticeably than anyone since Scruggs, and ultimately it was that aspect of his playing that I emulated, more than the licks."

Around 1964 Rick and Butch Waller had been going to Palo Alto on the weekends to visit and play music with David Nelson, Eric Thompson, David Parker, Jerry Garcia, and some other friends, and Rick ended up moving down there for about a year and a half, sharing a house with a bunch of people, including Garcia. "He was always a charismatic character; a fun guy to hang out with. There seemed to be more of a scene happening there at the time than there was in Berkeley." He was able to make a living mostly by teaching banjo during that time, something he has always done a lot of until recent years.

In this same period Rick was scratching around, looking for people to play with,

and he took a notion to call Vern Williams. "I had his number from Roosevelt Watson, because I remembered hearing Vern and Ray and was real impressed. I introduced myself, told him I played the banjo, and asked if he'd be interested in picking. He said, 'OK, come on up.' He and Ray lived in Stockton then, and I drove up there. I really wanted to get something going with them; they were more or less retired, they weren't playing at all. In fact, Vern didn't even know whether Ray would come over or not, and he came dragging in with his guitar and no case . . . it had a broken string, and he was looking for a string at Vern's to put on it. But of course, those guys are always great under almost any circumstance." One of the things that Rick found out about was that Ray, who was as good a bluegrass fiddler as you could hope to find, was never satisfied with any other guitar player to back them up. "What I had in mind was for Ray to play the fiddle all the time, but it never seemed to work out. For a while we had another mandolin player and Vern was going to play guitar, but it never seemed to work out any way except with Ray playing guitar and Vern playing mandolin, as it always has. I had at least three separate stints with Vern and Ray, and they always ended up with some kind of difficulties." Herb Pedersen started playing banjo with them after that.

Then in 1966 he drove to the Fincastle, Virginia, bluegrass festival with Bruce Nemerov, another local banjo player, and met David Grisman there. Later that year Grisman came to California and they formed the Smokey Grass Boys, first with Bert Johnson on guitar and then with Herb Pedersen. "We played at a club in San Francisco called Cedar Alley. We were supposed to get half the door, but sometimes they were so embarrassed by the amount that they'd give us the whole thing, which might come out to something like two or three bucks apiece."

Near that time Rick began playing with Hank Bradley, Eric Thompson, Sue Rosenberg (later Thompson), and sometimes Markie Sanders (later Shubb, then back to Sanders). This band was dubbed the Diesel Ducks. "Hank had met Doc Watson, and got into playing fiddle tunes with him, and then Hank introduced me to

Doc and for awhile, whenever he was on the West Coast, Hank and I would go around and play string band fiddle tunes on the end of his shows. We made a demo tape of some fiddle tunes which he sent to his record company, but they decided it didn't feature him enough, or something like that, and didn't release an album. They were probably right, from their point of view, but I'm sorry it didn't happen."

Before the longest stint with Vern and Ray, he was in the formative stages of High Country, the Bay Area's longest-lived bluegrass band; Rick was essentially the first banjo player in the band. "There was Butch Waller, Rich Wilbur, me, and Markie . . . that was really the nucleus of it. David Nelson played sometimes, and Richard Greene. I wasn't in High Country very long. I think, when I went back with Vern and Ray after that, I was a good enough banjo player to be playing with them. I hadn't really been, earlier. I contributed quite a bit to what they were doing at that point. We went down to L.A. a few times, up to Canada once, and we played some George Jones shows. That's when we made the album, 'Sounds From the Ozarks.'"

For the next few years, Rick organized a series of bands to play at some of the newer venues that were cropping up for bluegrass around San Francisco and the Bay Area. "As far as I know, we sort of opened up the idea of bluegrass bands playing in pizza parlors around here. Ed Dye came to town and virtually took command of the band that was playing at Mooney's Irish Pub in North Beach -- it had originally been Dave Allen's band, the Blue River Band, or Roaring Blue River -- and I somehow ended up playing in that band, which evolved on a weekly basis with people like Suzi McKee, Kim Young, Rich Wilbur, and of course Ed Dye. I don't know how we got the idea to peddle ourselves in a pizza parlor, which was still uncharted territory for bluegrass in those days, but after beating the bushes for work, what we came up with was the Straw Hat Pizza Palace in San Leandro. Ed booked it. We were called Hold The Anchovies.

"That was a four-piece band, scaled down from the original six, which we did for economic reasons. The bands I've spent the most time in have been four-piece bands. I've often opted for four because it's easier to keep it together. Now if you were going to have a long-term, ongoing band, and could get five pieces really tight, then I like that. It's no secret that the old Flatt and Scruggs band has always been my favorite. But if you have two lead players and two on rhythm, the situation can be clear as to who's doing what when, and I like that. Also, I like to have a lot of chances to play. It might not even be that smart an idea, as far as wearing yourself out on an audience, but I just like to. Earl got to play a lot in the Flatt and Scruggs band, and that remains my role model for a banjo player in a bluegrass band. I want to contribute that much to a band, and it's a sound that appeals to me."

Towards the end of this period, after Rick had been working a lot with Rich Wilbur and Markie Sanders under various names, they became known as the Hired Hands, and held down two nights a week at Paul's Saloon for about two years. (This quartet can be heard on "In The City," a memorial CD release for Rich Wilbur on the Sophronie label - P.O. Box 3163, Yuba City, CA 95992.) Regular band members, at various times, included Rich Wilbur, Mike Sanders, Bert Johnson, Paul Shelasky, Brantley Kearns, and of course Rick and Markie. Frequent pickup members included, among others, Pat Enright, Ed Neff, Chris Boutwell, John Cooke, Robbie Macdonald, and Dick Stanley.

Beginning around 1968 and continuing through the Hired Hands period and into the present, Rick began playing music with a guitarist named Bob Wilson, and it's an association that has, obviously, been satisfying for both of them. (One LP, "Shubb, Wilson, and Shubb," was released in 1976 on the Pacifica label.) Bob, a versatile guitarist who plays an original Selmer Macaferri guitar, is well versed in all kinds of vintage swing, jazz, country, and popular standards, and between the two of them they've developed an original style of duet playing. "We were introduced by a mutual friend, Herb Engstrom. Bob

was looking for someone to play acoustic music with, back in '68," Rick recalls. "At first it was more of a sideline; I'd go to visit Bob and we'd play for our own amusement, working out things without regard for performing them -- just to see what we could do. Later we did end up doing some performing, sometimes as a trio with Markie on bass." In the serendipitous spirit that seemed to characterize much of the local music scene of the '60's, at least in retrospect, Rick and Bob were woodshedding these numbers for no other reason than the sheer joy of it. But they worked so long and hard on each arrangement that those early excursions remain among their stronger pieces to this day. When they get together nowadays, their marathon visits are about evenly divided between playing music and enjoying old movies, serials, and vintage radio, another shared passion.

"The music I play with Bob has a life of its own, and ran concurrently with bluegrass bands I was playing in. It seems as though there is a perception of leaving bluegrass, which I never felt like I did, and I wish that it weren't the perception. In terms of musical styles, you never know what might develop. If you come across something worth doing, you do it."

Along with playing standards and novelty tunes with Bob Wilson, Rick had begun writing original tunes as well, but he makes a clear distinction between that and real jazz playing: "I'm still basically a bluegrass player, and the tunes that I write still come out of that feel. Pat Cloud is a jazz player. That's another thing entirely. I can't do anything like that. I've learned to play a few swing tunes on the banjo, but that doesn't make me a jazz musician."

All through the early '70s Rick was *the* on-call banjo player in the San Francisco recording scene, doing countless commercials and movie soundtracks, and he played on a good number of LP records. His banjo work is frequently audible in "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid," "Thunder and Lightning," and "Steelyard Blues" ("you could hear my banjo whenever the cars went fast"). His recording credits include tracks with such diverse artists as songwriter Shel Silverstein, Paul (Ruta-

baga Boogie) Shelasky, Robert Hunter, and others mentioned elsewhere in this article.

One night in 1979, a person named Dave Coontz was taking a banjo lesson from Rick and something happened that changed Rick's life considerably. He told Dave about his idea for improving the fifth-string sliding capo, and a week later Dave had made a prototype. Soon, people started to ask for them, and they got the idea that they could actually go into business manufacturing them, so they bought a milling machine and went into production at Dave's shop in Concord. "The first run was about a hundred or so, and I put them all in a shoebox and headed east. I got a pat on the back and 'Good luck. Write if you sell any.' I hit the festival circuit for about six weeks. The first stop was Knob Noster, Missouri, where I sold one to Jack Hicks, who was playing with Monroe then. (The first one I had sold was to Garcia, before I left, installing it nervously on his fancy gold-plated Weymann.) The next festival I went to, Vic Jordan bought one -- he was with Jim and Jesse then. I can remember at one point a guy had bought one, and he wanted to use it on the set he was about to play. His band was on next, and I was installing it by the light of somebody's headlights, sitting there at night in the wet grass. The band before his was playing the Orange Blossom Special, which meant that they were ending their set ...we were both looking up at the stage as I was madly screwing this thing on. But I got it. I wish I knew who that was."

That summer Rick went to Nashville and stayed with Lonny Feiner, former High Country bass player, and went from there to a festival each weekend, picking ones that had a different lineup of bands in order to reach more banjo players. "Then towards the end of that summer I ran into Buck White, who I had done some picking with at Fincastle in '66, and he remembered me and was looking for a banjo player. So without having heard me in years, he asked me to play some shows with them. It was really great. I played at a festival in North Carolina, and some shows around Nashville, and later, a show back out here in Oakland. Buck and his family were a joy to play with. "

In a way, the combination of playing and manufacturing describes what has been going on for Rick in the years since. With no experience in marketing, Rick was surprised that the sliding capos sold so well, thinking the market would get saturated, but "we've sold thousands of those things, and we just keep on selling them." They also produced Rick's idea for a compensated banjo bridge ("because it really needs to be done"), spending three and a half months making and testing bridges together in Iowa. Eventually, Dave Coontz moved his shop to Iowa, but that didn't keep him and Rick from brainstorming together, and it wasn't long before the guitar and banjo capo was born. "My inspiration for the mechanical action was vise-grip pliers; I like the way they feel when they close, so I wanted something that was like your hand and like a vise-grip." (I hadn't realized Rick was inspired by a Vice-Grip in designing his elegantly machined capo, but I see the connection now.)

While Dave was based in Iowa, Rick had moved to Oregon to try and get back together with his first wife (Markie), who was living there, and his mother kept the business address and did shipping from Oakland. In Oregon Rick found a kind of frontier spirit and quite a lot of bluegrass activity. "The business was still a sideline, and I was mostly teaching and playing to support myself. I played with Dr. Corn's Bluegrass Remedy in Portland. That band was a lot of fun. I made some good friends, and probably worked more than with most bands I played with in California; a lot of college concerts, a steady gig at a good club, and those really wonderful Northwest festivals. I'd been in Oregon for a little over a year when George Relles, who booked the Blitz Bluegrass Festivals, mentioned to me that he was looking for something a little different for variety at the next festival. I told him about the music I had played with Bob Wilson, and George booked us for the 1976 Eugene festival. Bob flew up and we played the show on just a day's practice. It turned out to be one of the best times we ever had. Two of our sets at that festival were released as an album, which still sounds good to me. Later in my Northwest stay I played with the Old Hat Band (and

Snootful's Medicine Show), in Seattle, with Jeff and Ellen Thorn. I almost joined the Sawtooth Mountain Boys at one point, and came close to forming a band with some members of Good and Country, too. I was quite in demand up in the Northwest; it was a good feeling. There were a lot of opportunities, up there at that time. It felt like a frontier, where if you wanted to do something you could just do it. Nobody who was already doing it would step in and do it for you. Like the festival -- George Relles just practically went to the Blitz brewery, got some backing, and built the thing up. If you had tried to do that here, a promoter would have moved in, taken over, and run it. But up there it was a frontier, and you could do things like that. And the music up there had that kind of a feel about it, too. Homemade and personal. I liked it."

Eventually Rick's first marriage broke up for the second and final time, which was when he went to Iowa again and collaborated with Dave on the guitar and banjo capo. "Just before the capo came onto the market, I was back in California again and playing quite a lot with Rob De Witt. He's a good guitar player and really talented singer. I wrote a lot of tunes during this period, many of which I still play. The muse was with me and the tunes came easily, and Rob was at my house every day to learn them as I reeled them off. I was consciously trying to build a musical style. The music featured mostly muted banjo, and was heavily jazz-influenced because I was listening to a lot of jazz then, although you couldn't really call the music jazz. The basic duo was often expanded to three, four or even five pieces, sometimes including Tom Bekeny, Sue Shelasky, Joyce Hennessy, John Reischmann, and Darol Anger. We did some bluegrass too, and we did a pretty good job of that. That band was just about getting ready to go when the capo came out, and it took all of my time and energy. I really knew the capo was a good product and I wanted to give it the attention it deserved. The band got put on the back burner --where it remained-- and the capo moved to the front. The rest is history."

There have been a few musical interludes for Rick since the Shubb capo took off,

including a tour with Laurie Lewis and Grant Street in their early days: "Boy, that was fun. I was already involved in the capo business, but it was like a vacation for me. It was great to be out on the road and know that the only thing I had to do was play the banjo! I didn't have to MC, or sing, or dance or juggle, or anything -- all I had to do was play the banjo." There was also a time when Rick assembled a decent home recording studio and produced demos for local bands including Laurie Lewis, High Country, Don Humphries, and the Good Old Persons. That was while he was still living in Oakland; since that time he has remarried, and he and his wife Linda have a home right on the Pacific coast near Bodega Bay. The Shubb Capo factory and offices are located in nearby Sebastopol, and that's where the industrious inventor can be found most days. "Most of my time these days is spent with the various loose ends of the company, just running the business. It's surprising how at this point with the capo, problems will still arise -- for example, the glue that's used on the pad, or the pad itself. Suppliers will change their own specs on a part, and I have to change something here to go with it; recently I've had to set up to experiment with different glues again. Now, there's another thing that I've learned a lot about. Glue. I know as much as anybody you will ever meet about gluing silicone rubber to nickel-plated or plain brass. I'm a glue-brass boy all the way. That's me.

"Mostly nowadays the business tends to focus on the two NAMM shows each year. Then in the slacker periods, I start to think more about playing music, getting a band together, or writing tunes. I operate on momentum: I tend to get more involved with whatever it is that I'm doing, and that can be playing or it can be aspects of the business. There's a frustration in this, because I can get way out of shape on the banjo and it's hard to regain that particular momentum. Musically, I'd like to press myself towards some limits which I've never explored, and it takes real involvement to do that. I'd like to keep writing my own tunes, but that would just be part of it. Finding the right people is the hardest part; they would be more likely to come from bluegrass than anything else. What

I'd like to be playing would be a lot closer to bluegrass than some people might imagine."

Turning from glue-brass boy to bluegrass boy, one thing for certain is that Rick gained a lot of experience teaching five-string banjo, and at one time accumulated enough written material to write a book on the subject. I thought it might interest readers to hear some of his thoughts on the banjo, in his own words:

"When you look back at what Earl Scruggs did, it's so phenomenal, and that's what I try to impress my students with. It's difficult to do, but imagine the world before Scruggs, and then the world after he introduced his style. It's so phenomenal, and it's so taken for granted that it makes me angry. To hear a kid who's been playing for a year saying "yeah, but that's plain old Scruggs," it makes you want to punch him! When I teach banjo, I try to bring my students along a similar path of evolution that the instrument took beginning with Earl. I try to convince them that it's necessary to come up slowly, spending a lot of time with the old stuff, whether or not it's what they want to stay with. With some people it's like telling them to take their medicine. I don't like to feel that way, but still they do need their medicine, so I make them take it. I think it always makes sense for someone to trace something back as far as they reasonably can, to have a deeper understanding.

"On the other hand, look at Bela Fleck. He's an amazingly good player, and he seems to have moved directly to a personal style. He's the most notable exception to that rule.

"I think there was an advantage in learning to play when we did, because we weren't surrounded by dozens of hot pickers who already had it together. Without comparison, we were more easily pleased with what we could do. There was no pressure to learn quickly, to keep up with somebody who was really hot, so we were allowed to develop more slowly. I think that means learning the fundamentals in a deeper way. I try to give this to my students, but it's somewhat artificial. Look at all the books that are available, and videos, and tablature. I have to try to put

blindness on them to a certain extent, in order to recreate that situation. I think it's desirable, because students shouldn't force themselves in certain directions too quickly. I try to maintain control of their musical development. I'm a strict teacher. It's just as important that they don't do what I tell them not to do as it is for them to do what I tell them to. It's important to keep things in a logical sequence. I don't want them messing with fiddle tunes before they have a solid working knowledge of Scruggs rolls. People don't have a good notion of what a proper order would be to learn things in until you give it to them. We think of "Keith style" as a later development in banjo playing, but that's pretty far back there now, and to a beginner, that sequence is lost to history. It's not obvious."

And even though my interview with Rick was nearly ten years ago, I still think some of his insights on people's perceptions of banjo playing are relevant today:

"This may sound like paranoia, but I think there's a strong anti-banjo sentiment afoot." (Granted, several thousand banjo jokes have appeared since Rick spoke these words.) "I think people have heard banjos in commercials so much -- and sometimes that was me they were hearing -- that they've learned how to listen to a banjo from the way it's presented in the commercials: as a texture, rather than a line or shape. When somebody plays a fiddle or mandolin or guitar break, people follow it in a linear way. With the banjo, they've learned to receive the whole thing as a texture, and the individual notes become like flowers on the wallpaper. The actual content tends to be disregarded. We have to work hard to make the substance of our banjo breaks stand out. Sometimes that means painting with broad strokes which are discernible from a great distance.

"I also think the notion of how a banjo should sound in an audio mix has been altered by the way they're mixed in commercials and sound tracks. As long as it's audible, that's enough. All they want is that little tinkle to brighten things up. Even people who fancy themselves to be knowledgeable -- bluegrass sound people -

- mix the banjo too low for my taste most of the time, and I think they've been influenced by that, whether they realize it or not. It's not just recording levels, it's PA levels as well. I think that the banjo is seldom mixed with the kind of presence it really needs in order to have the kind of appeal it can have. Often, vocal levels get mixed too high, because someone is worried about the vocals being heard, and consequently they overcorrect for that. Of course, it's obvious that everyone wants to be heard; anyone will tell a sound person, 'I like a hot mike.' But beyond that, it seems like the sound person's idea of where the banjo should be, in their own mind, is much further down from where I think it should be.

"It seems like the only thing better than having a banjo in a group is not having one. It's ever so hip. And musically correct these days. I'm sorry about that, but it does seem to be the case."

All this having been said, it should be clear by now that the world's most popular key-changing device for fretted instruments was invented by someone who knows a lot more than the difference between a "capo" and a "capon," which is actually one of the questions in the as-yet-unpublished "Bluegrass Quiz" authored by Shubb and friends about thirty years ago. The fact is that Rick's banjo artistry and the breadth of his knowledge about bluegrass music have never been adequately exposed to interested listeners. The Old Homestead Vern and Ray LP is long out of print, as is the Eric Thompson's LP, "Bluegrass Guitar" on Kicking Mule records. That leaves only the tracks on the recent Rich Wilbur tribute CD, along with a few remaining copies of the Shubb-Wilson-Shubb LP, still available from the Shubb Company.

Try as I might, I wouldn't be able to describe the sound of his banjo playing. I could say that he has great technical proficiency on the instrument, the result of deep immersion in the art and total dedication to a professional and perfectionistic sound. I could say that he has a natural sense of solid rhythm, which in banjo-playing terms results in a kind of separation between the notes that few can claim.

I could say that he understands his own artistic nature so well that he would always follow the muse wherever it led, which first brought him to a thorough knowledge of the Earl Scruggs style, then to a mastery of the melodic or "chromatic" style, then to a fusion that allowed him to forge his own approach. I remember when we were first starting out, Rick and I used to see who could play "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" faster. Not only could he do that, but he also achieved a steady, even rhythm and precise note separation so that he would win hands (or bracing fingers) down.

But in the end, you will just have to hear him play. And until scores of underheard pickers find ways of reaching a bluegrass listening audience that is increasingly offered little beyond the hot picks of the day, I'll have to leave you to figure out how to do that.

Sandy Rothman
1996

Note from Rick Shubb:

Since this article was written, a good example of my banjo playing has become available: "Bodega Sessions," a CD featuring myself on banjo and Bob Wilson on guitar, accompanied by bassist Charlie Warren.

Also, Eric Thompson's guitar album, on which I played on some of the tunes, has been reissued as a CD.

Both are available at:

www.shubb.com/cd

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