

Fretboard Journal

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Suited Up

Robert Armstrong's old-time (but timeless) music universe

BY CHRIS HARVEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM WHITE

At an oak table in the dining room of an old frame house in Winters, California, Robert Armstrong sits with a carpenter's saw between his knees, a bass bow poised at the ready. A sunbeam comes through the window and lands on the keyboard of an upright piano. Old tin toy robots of all shapes and sizes line shelves on the wall, and an antique clock ticks quietly. Vintage guitars, banjos and mandolins are in stands and cases all around us. I've come to Bob's house to visit on a warm May morning, and he has been demonstrating his talents on the musical saw for me. Suddenly, he flips the saw over so the teeth are facing outwards. "You know you can play these on the teeth side, don't you?" he grins a little impishly. I tell him I'm not sure I believe that. "Nobody ever believes me when I tell them that," he laughs. "Old vaudeville trick!" Sure enough, he carefully places the bow against the teeth and starts drawing down, and the room is filled with the otherworldly wail that only a musical saw can make. It sounds somehow scratchier with the teeth side sounding, and he does a series of looping scales and a short melody. "Of course you don't want to do that

Armstrong is a virtuoso on many instruments, but is perhaps the most widely known as a musical saw player ever—that's his specialty. He bought the saw in 1969, and 50 years later, he's still playing it.

too long, unless you want to rehair your bow!" he says as the music stops.

Robert Armstrong was born and raised in Pasadena, California. His was not a musical household, but Bob says that from a very early age, he felt the draw of music, particularly live music. "Hearing live music growing up, even if it was just a marching band in the Rose Parade, it really pushed my buttons." The sound and feel of the organ at his family church was particularly powerful, and Bob says he began to make it clear to his parents that he wanted to play the organ. "When I was 7 years old, my parents surprised me for my birthday. This guy shows up at the door with this suitcase and pulls out a little junior accordion and straps it onto me. My folks said, 'Well, if you get good at the belly organ, we'll get you a real organ!' So from 7 to 9, I took accordion lessons."

As Bob got older, he began to grow out of his accordion-playing. "After 9 years old, even I realized that the accordion was kind of lame, so I started to learn plectrum banjo." Bob's love affair with the banjo also led to his meeting Al Dodge, which began a lifelong friendship and musical collaboration. "Al Dodge lived just up the street from me, he was a few years older than me, and we took banjo lessons from the same guy. We became friends and have been friends ever since. He was one of the founding members of the Cheap Suit Serenaders with me."

As he heard new types of music, Bob began expanding his banjo horizons, moving from old-time and Tin Pan Alley music into folk and bluegrass. "I heard the Kingston Trio and the Limelites when I was 12 or 13, and I just loved the sound of the banjo," he says. "There was a Southern California radio DJ named Les Claypool who had a late-night folk music show and one night he played nothing but bluegrass, Stanley Brothers, Flatt and Scruggs and the like," Bob remembers. "I had this epiphany, and I ran out to the record store and bought bluegrass records. I was gone, I fell in love with bluegrass. Luckily, we had some in Southern California, with the Kentucky Colonels, and a TV show hosted by Cal Worthington named *Cal's Corral*. They would always have a bluegrass band, either the Kentucky Colonels or Don Parmely's Golden State Boys, and we'd watch this on Sundays. And we would go out to the Ash Grove in Hollywood to see the Kentucky Colonels, and here's Clarence White doing these things on an acoustic guitar I didn't know were possible!"

Then in another musical epiphany, Al Dodge introduced Bob to jug band music. "I was hanging out with him in 1963 or 1964 and he says to me,

'Have you ever heard of jug band music?' He had this issue of *Sing Out* folk music magazine, which was a whole issue about jug bands, and it had a picture of Gus Cannon and His Jug Stompers on the cover. It was about the same time that Jim Kweskin and Dave Van Ronk had their jug bands. So Al and I got involved with jug band music." Bob says he and Al immediately began searching for old 78s, trying to find original jug band songs. "I went down to this record store that had a listening booth in the back and found a copy of Smithsonian Folkways' *The Jug Bands*, a collection of old 78s from the '20s. It had the Dixieland Jug Blowers and King David's Jug Band and all these great old guys. I remember putting it on and it was just life-changing, it just grabbed me."

Russ Miller's Music Company was an infamous music store located in a trailer park in El Monte, California. Armstrong says that for many years, he and other Southern California musicians would make the trek there to buy old or unusual instruments. "It was in the center of this trailer park, and there was this tiny sign that you couldn't even see. He and his wife, Pearl, lived in one trailer, and then there was this other double-wide trailer that was full of old instruments. He would pull stuff out of the back room, saying, 'I bet you've never seen one of these!' I remember him pulling out a Gibson J-35 from the early '40s and it was like 75 bucks. Back then you could get an old Martin for a hundred and fifty bucks." Armstrong says Miller was buying up old instruments in the '50s and '60s that no one else cared about. "The initiated people in the know went to Russ Miller's place, the LA bluegrass people went there. The Kentucky Colonels went there to buy instruments, in fact Roger Bush, the bass player, taught music lessons there. David Lindley bought instruments there, so everyone just sort of knew that was the place to go."

Bob bought a green 1932 Polychrome National Triolian in the '60s for \$35, a guitar he still plays to this day. As we talk, Bob holds the guitar in his lap, turning it this way and that. "That beat-up wear is from me, I wore all of the paint off of it. I took it hitchhiking around Europe with me, and you know I was dragging it through the sand on the beach. I thought, 'It's metal, it's sturdy!' I didn't really know any better, I just knew I wanted it because Blind Boy Fuller played one."

Armstrong started drawing at a very young age. "I was good at it, and I got a lot of praise from teachers and other kids." He was in high school when he started getting into old comic books. "Not *Superman*

Armstrong's eclectic collection of vintage instruments includes this former harp guitar built by Coulter in Portland, Oregon. "When I got it at a flea market years ago, it was missing the bracket on the headstock that would've been for the tuning pegs for the sub bass strings. Coulter is an interesting character who made some odd instruments."





Armstrong's tried-and-true
1929 Gibson L-5.

and Marvel and that stuff, but Donald Duck by Carl Barks and early *Mad Magazine* with Harvey Kurtzman and Wally Wood.” The Disney studios were in nearby Burbank, and Bob says he was well aware of their stuff. “I thought maybe I would get into animation. I liked all kinds of artwork, I loved old historical illustrations. I was ready to go in any direction the wind blew me, whether it was music or art.” Bob says that after he got out of high school and into Pasadena City College, he was still really influenced by comics and cartoons. His college instructors didn’t approve. “My teachers were trying to talk me out of it, trying to get me to go in the fine art direction. Later on, meeting more underground cartoonists, we all had similar stories to tell. Our art teachers all tried to talk us out of comics and cartooning. But I really learned how to draw by drawing cartoons.”

Bob says he began to get fed up with school, where his teachers liked him but they didn’t know what to do with him. “I ran into one teacher many years later, a painting teacher, and she apologized. ‘You knew what you were doing, you had your own muse and you were doing your own thing.’ I had another art teacher buy a couple of my pieces. It justified things for me nicely!”

In 1972, Robert Armstrong, Robert Crumb and Al Dodge began a friendship and musical collaboration that would last for many years and eventually led to the formation of the seminal old-time band the Cheap Suit Serenaders. It began with what by all accounts was an epic road trip. “I came up to Berkeley to visit my old pal Al Dodge” says Armstrong, “and then met Robert Crumb through him. Crumb was living in San Francisco with his wife and his young son Jesse at the time. We decided to head east.” The three friends crammed instruments, sleeping bags and clothes into a driveaway car and set off on their adventure.

Reached at his home in France, Crumb offered some reflections on his connection with Bob. “I hit it off with Armstrong right away, and I thought he was a guy loaded with talent. He could draw really well and made funny cartoons and comics, and was also a really excellent guitar and banjo player.” The trio headed towards Aspen, Colorado, stopping in junk stores and record shops along the way and searching for old instruments and 78 records. Al Dodge remembers that they were expanding their repertoire as they went. “We were on this trip and we were playing as we went,” says Dodge, “and just putting together a bunch of songs that sounded good.” Crumb says he found his niche once the trio began playing together. “Both Al and Bob were way

more advanced than me musically, but I was content to strum chords on my little ol’ banjo uke and let them play the melody.”

In Aspen, the three crashed on a friend’s floor while looking for gigs. Bob says that they stuck out like sore thumbs in the fancy resort town. “At the time, Crumb was working on one of his comics, and I was working on a *Mickey Rat* comic, and we were really the weirdos in town. Aspen in 1972 was just the most glamorous people.”

Crumb describes the amazing scene that ensued when the trio finally landed their first paying gig. “It was the end-of-season bash of the Aspen Ski Patrol. I don’t remember who got us this job, but whoever it was made a big mistake. It turned out that these ski patrol guys were a bunch of hard-partying mesomorphs. They and their girlfriends were swilling alcohol and wanted some git-down, shit-kicking boogie music. They were rather disappointed in our tinkly little string trio with me on my banjo uke, practically a toy instrument, Armstrong on his National guitar and Al on mandolin.”

The scene grew increasingly tense as the evening went on. “One of the ski patrol guys came up to us and begged us to play some boogie and offered to give us more money,” Crumb continues. “It was traumatic for me, my debut performance as a professional musician. We were dying up there. Al got an idea. He called up a local piano bar musician named Dave Paquette and pleaded with him to come down and help us out, and he did.” Fortunately, there was a piano at the bar, and Paquette took over. “He pounded away on that piano, playing all kinds of kick-ass boogie for the ski patrol people so they could dance their athletic asses off,” says Crumb. “Al, Armstrong and me played along as best we could. Al found some way to hook up his mandolin to a speaker and started wailing on it like it was an electric guitar. He went into a satiric imitation of your typical exaggerated, emotive rock star moves and gestures. Soon he was lying on the floor as he noodled psychedelic riffs on his mandolin at top volume. The crowd gathered around. They ate it up. I learned about show business that night. It was a humbling experience.”

The threesome eventually landed in Denver and stayed with friends of Crumb. “In Denver we opened up the paper, and from a classified ad got a gold convertible 1955 Cadillac El Dorado for \$350,” says Armstrong. “From there, we went on this amazing cross-country trip with this car—it was like living this Jack Kerouac novel.” They stopped in Milwaukee and stayed with underground cartoonist Denis

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“I learned about show business that night. It was a humbling experience.”

Kitchen, who convinced them to record two songs and put out their first 78 rpm record under the name of “R. Crumb and His Keep-on-Truckin’ Orchestra.” From there they went to Chicago and stayed with underground cartoonist Jay Lynch, then on to Cleveland, where they spent time with Harvey Pekar.

After Cleveland, the trio moved on to New York, where Crumb and Armstrong immersed themselves further in the world of underground comics. While in New York, Bob became a published cartoonist for the first time, with his first *Mickey Rat* issue coming out in *L.A. Comics*’ #1. After staying in New York for a while, the three friends headed back to California. “Crumb stayed in Chicago, and we had to ditch the Cadillac in Cleveland after the front end went out,” says Bob. Al Dodge said he and Bob ended up hitchhiking much of the way home, carrying boxes of old 78 records and other junk from the trip.

In late 1973, by Armstrong’s recollection, the Cheap Suit Serenaders became an actual, official band. Bob and Al Dodge were living in a house in Dixon, California, while Crumb had been living up near Ukiah. “Nick Perls from Blue Goose records out in New York heard the Keep-on-Truckin’ Orchestra 78 and asked us to put out a whole record for him.” For a fuller sound, the group got Bay Area jazz stalwart Dick Oxtot to play bass and tuba. “Half the first record was recorded at Sierra Sound Studio in Berkeley, and the other half was recorded in [Arhoolie Records founder] Chris Strachwitz’s living room,” says Bob. “He had this old portable Nagra recorder that he’d used for field recordings, recording guys like Mance Lipscomb and Big Joe Williams, and he just set it up in the front room. I remember him watching us and being like, ‘What’s with you guys?’ He couldn’t figure us out. We weren’t bluegrass, we weren’t old-timey. He eventually became a fan, though.”

After recording, the Suits needed a full-time bass player, and asked their friend Terry Zwigoff to join.

“We needed a bass player, and enlisted Terry to get himself a cello and learn to just go ‘zoom zoom zoom’ on it as a rhythmic bass backup,” says Crumb. The band really coalesced at that point. “Our thing was that we had a wider vision of material than string bands,” says Al Dodge. “So we did play some old-time music, but we also played pop tunes. We were also using instruments that were from a little broader spectrum, like Hawaiian guitars and various instruments from the mandolin family. I think we were just a little too far ahead of our time to be that popular!” he says with a laugh.

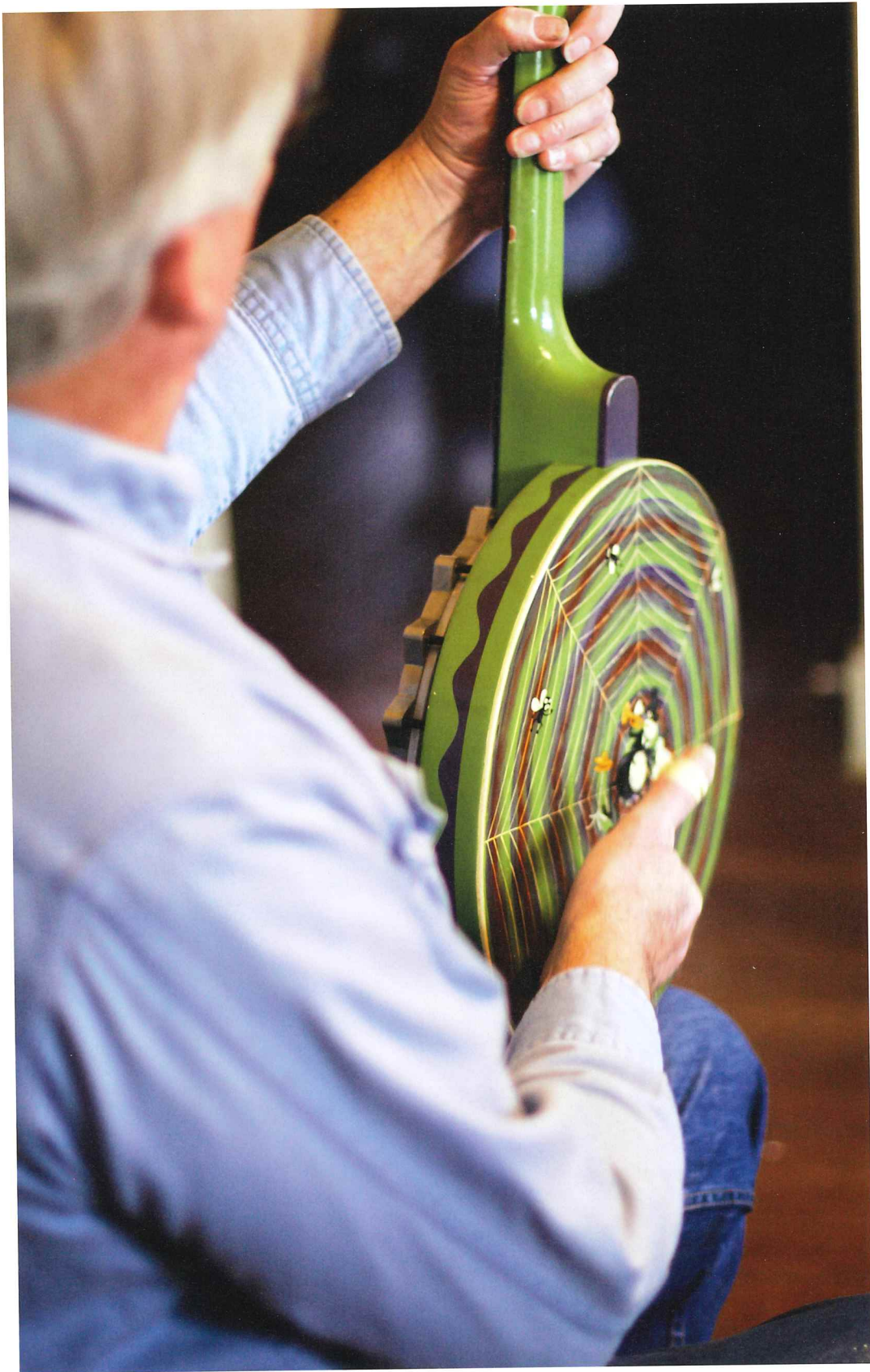
Crumb describes the mindset that the friends had. “What Armstrong, Dodge, Zwigoff and I shared in common was a cultural sensibility. We were all into the same stuff: old-time music on 78 rpm records of the 1920s and ’30s, old comics, old toys and old musical instruments. It’s hard to define exactly what that sensibility is, but I think ‘Suits Crybaby Blues’ on our third LP kind of sums it up.”

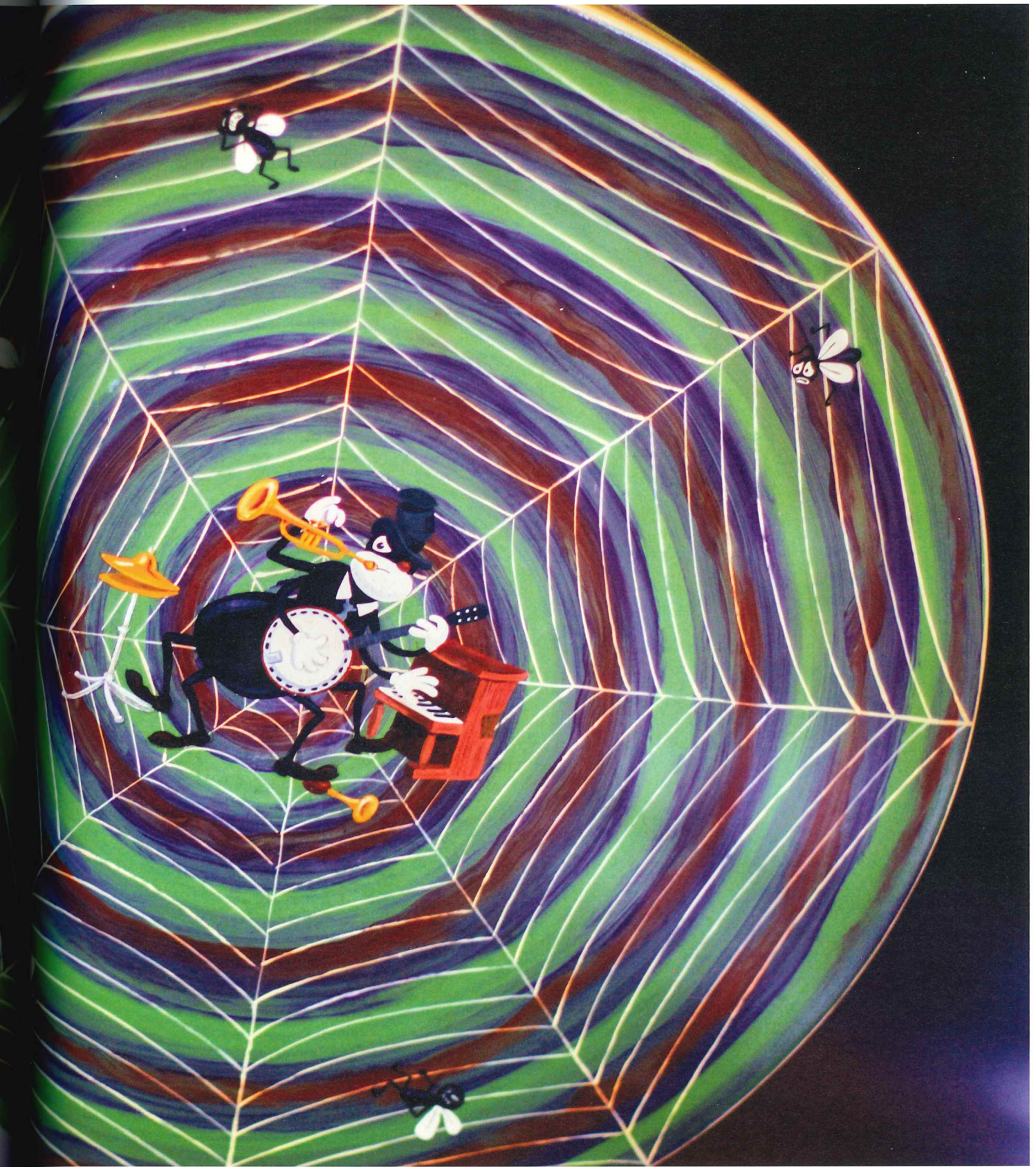
Crumb also felt that Bob Armstrong was really the integral heart of the band. “Later on, when Bob Brozman joined the Cheap Suit Serenaders, he kind of upstaged Armstrong on Hawaiian guitar and other guitar-led tunes with his hyper, pyrotechnic, crowd-pleasing style, but I always liked Armstrong’s approach better. He had a more natural, relaxed, easy-going way of rendering any tune that I found immediately appealing from the very start. It was Armstrong’s lead playing that kind of made it all work, that made us sound like something in the beginning, before Tom Marion and Brozman joined us.”

The artistic accomplishment that has arguably exposed Bob Armstrong to the largest number of people around the world is also the one for which he is likely the least known: He played the musical saw on the soundtrack to the Oscar-winning film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. It is Bob’s haunting saw notes that both open and close the movie.

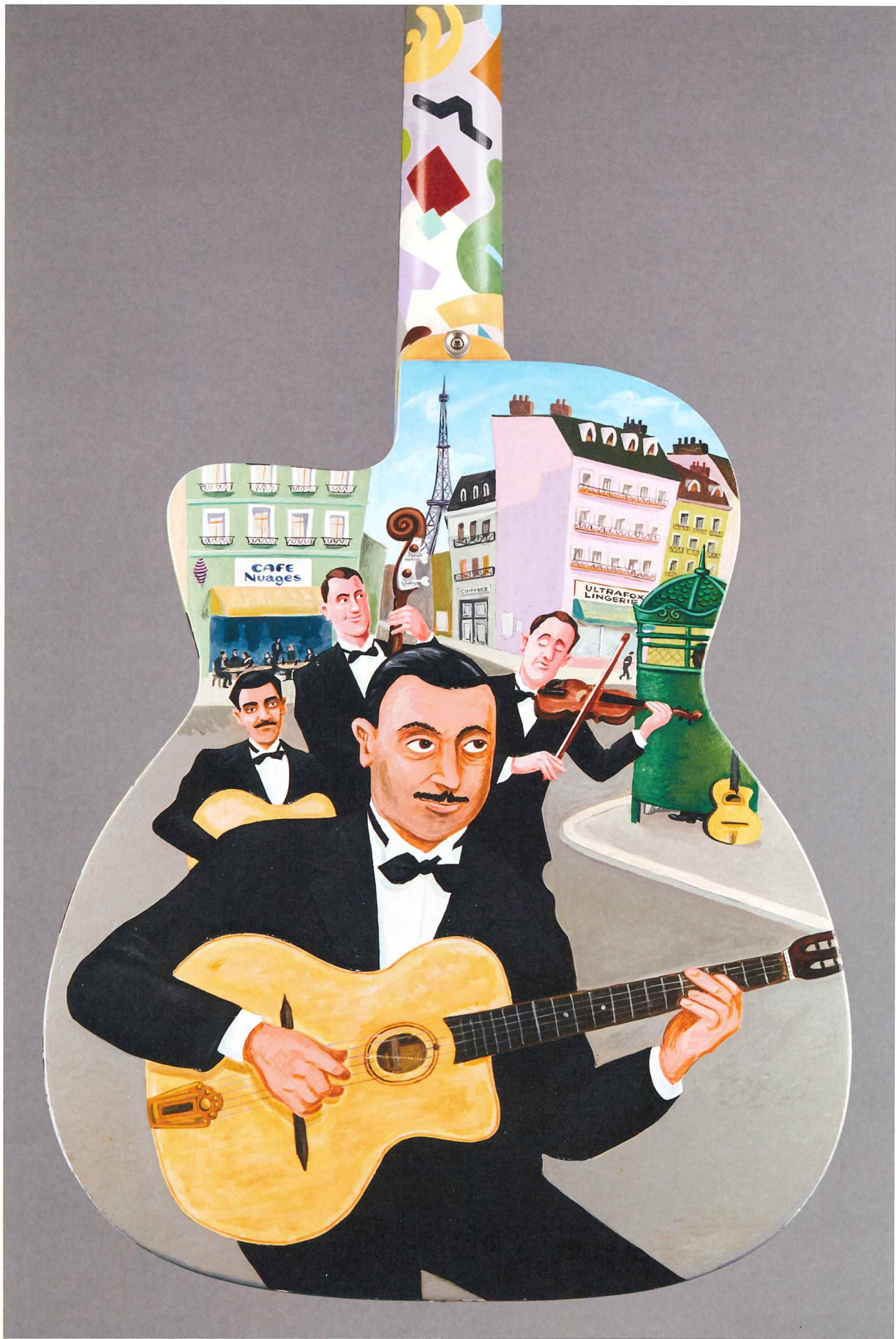


Armstrong began seeking out vintage instruments long before they became collectible. Here he holds a 1932 National Triolian, that he bought in 1965 for a mere \$35 from Russ Miller's music store in El Monte, California.





Armstrong's art graces the back of this resonator banjo, cobbled together by nearby luthier Keith Cary. The pot is a German-made Framus, the flange is from John Morton and the neck was originally from an electric guitar. Armstrong has tentatively dubbed it the Green Arachnid Banjo.





Armstrong has put his artistic touches on existing, non-collectible instruments, celebrating pivotal figures like Tiny Tim and Django Reinhardt. He's also come up with completely original designs and shapes, like the wild, fanned-fret electric guitar at the bottom of this page.



Armstrong's Hugo Ernst guitar, made sometime in the 1920s. "It's a loud guitar with pretty good tone," he says. "I used to play it a lot for years because it's a fine workhorse guitar."

Bob describes the unlikely way he was hired. "I was living in Dixon at an old farmhouse and I get this phone call, and the guy says, 'Well, we got your name, we're looking for a saw player for a soundtrack for a movie.' They told me to be in at this studio in Berkeley at 10 a.m. They didn't tell me much else, except that it was for the movie adaptation of *Cuckoo's Nest*. So I get there and the studio is jam-packed with all of these accomplished professional studio musicians. They were recording the whole soundtrack that day. Finally, about 9 o'clock that night, there was a call. 'Okay, where's the saw player?' and they hand me this sheet music and I'm thinking, 'Well, I don't really read music for the saw.' I mean I could if I had plenty of time to work it out,

but it would be a slow process. So I'm starting to get worried, but then the producer, Jack Nitzsche, comes out and starts playing the lines on a piano. I remember it was in A flat minor. So he's singing it and whistling it and playing it to give me the melody, but there were no other instruments. The orchestra was added later, and Nitzsche had recorded a glass harmonica. So all I was hearing was this tom-tom drum and this track of this glass harmonica, and I had headphones on, and I had to harmonize with the glass harmonica recording. This studio marimba player comes out and helps me with this one note that I kept getting wrong. It was great, they just kind of helped me through it. I'm this 24-year-old kid and had no experience with this sort of thing. This went on for an hour or so and we just got through it. Finally, at about 10 p.m., Nitzsche walked me out to the car and reassured me that I had done well. At this point he says, 'Well, I think you're going to



Armstrong's collection of 1920s metal toys includes this wind-up Marx Merry Makers band, created by Louis Marx & Co. In subsequent decades, the toy company would go on to make Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots and the Big Wheel tricycle. Though this toy resembles Armstrong's Mickey Rat character, he's quick to point out that he was already drawing Mickey by the time he discovered this toy in the late '60s.

like it, you just recorded the opening and closing themes to the movie?' My first thought was, 'Wow! I'm sure glad you didn't tell me that before we started, I don't think I could have gotten through it.' I never heard the theme music until the movie came out. I remember seeing it for the first time in Sacramento, and thinking, 'Gosh! That's me up there!' and I really enjoyed it. I think the movie is great, I remember reading that Ken Kesey had hated the treatment and refused to see the movie, but I never saw it that way."

These days, Bob Armstrong splits his time pretty equally between making art and playing music. As a young man in his early 20s, Bob resisted choosing one career path over the other, hoping to be able to

do both. As it turns out, he has gotten his wish. Although he still does illustration and cartooning work, Bob also has gotten increasingly immersed in fine art painting. The Cheap Suit Serenaders still play an annual show in Berkeley, and Bob stays busy playing with a number of different acts throughout the rest of the year.

Rick Crowder, known by the stage name Sour-dough Slim, has been collaborating musically with Bob for the last 15 years or so. The two can often be found performing together at cowboy poetry and Western music events. Slim was a big fan of Bob's playing before they even met, and he sums up Bob's approach nicely: "He is immersed in the music of the '20s and '30s, and he's a virtuoso on so many different string instruments. So many musicians can play the notes, but he has a feel for it that really makes a difference. He knows how to do it, and it's in his blood." **FJ**