

LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Prucha's Elban, and playing electric banjo

Pete Wernick

Ryan Durkin of the band Quercus Montana writes:

After doing much research, your site comes up whenever I do my Elban search. I'm in a bluegrass/rock band and I play banjo. I've tried everything (tons of pickups including Stelling and Fishman, all the acoustic amps, mics, tape, pickup combinations, feedback eliminators, and a Goldtone electric banjo). So I pretty much decided to stay with the Fender Acoustasonic amps, but as far as the banjo itself I'm lost. The Goldtone isn't going to work. I'm debating between the Deering Crossfire, the Nechville tone module (try to retrofit it into a banjo),

and the Prucha Elban. I can't find too much information about the Elban. Since you have one, I was wondering if you could write up a recommendation or a review for me.

Ryan,

Glad to help. My Elban sounds like a "real banjo," which it is (full 11" head, some cavity created by the resonator, though not fully as big a cavity as on a regular resonator banjo). Not the greatest banjo I've ever played, but a convincing sound if not up to my Granada. Through my Centaur amp, it sounds like the banjo itself sounds, unamplified. Quite remarkable that way. I only use one of the pickups; the one by the bridge, which I've never seen, as the resonator is held on by many many bolts, and it looks scary to try to take apart.

The 1st and 5th strings sound really good and "banjo-y". When I hit them right, when plugged in, people often say, "that sounds good!" Second and third pretty



good too. The only "fake" sounding string is the 4th, which I can only describe as sounding fake the way plugged in "acoustic" guitars tend to sound fake, as though you're hearing the sound from your ear on the instrument, instead of through the air.

The Elban looks nice, is well made, but two problems: The neck is so thin, it has needed tension-rod adjustment a number of times. Back and forth, sometimes bowed too much, sometimes too flat. Also, the tuning pegs that came on it weren't too great, and one failed completely and needed replacing. Probably current models use better ones, but that's worth asking about. The company has done fine by me, sending different tuning pegs, acting concerned with my satisfaction (well, I *am* an endorser, but that's still worth mentioning).

Is the Elban more feedback-resistant than a Fishman pickup in an acoustic

banjo?

Don't know. It's not all that feedback resistant, but that would require deadening the head, which is exactly *not* what I want to do. I want "real banjo" sound! When you deaden the head, there it goes.

As an alternative, I try to watch my positioning next to whatever monitor I'm using, and be ready to reach fast for the volume control if it starts to "feed", maybe randomly between songs. Or just keep one hand on the strings, deadening them.

My band is not too enthused about the electric banjo in ear monitors, and I want something that I can turn up a little bit to get a louder feel. The Goldtone definitely gets loud, but doesn't have the sound I want. I play my heart out and it sounds mellow due to the lack of crunch.

From what I've tried, The Elban is the best. I remember hearing Railroad Earth last summer, and Andy Goessling who plays banjo seemed to be getting good sound. I asked one of the other band members what he was using, and I remember it was a setup including an Avanti preamp. So that might be an avenue I plan to check out.

I'm scared the Crossfire won't have the punch I need.

Totally not a real banjo. Looks sort of like one, sounds like an electric guitar. You need a real cavity behind the head, it would seem.

May as well throw this in: I find when playing/listening to plugged in banjo, it can sound good when it's being played in context, better than it might sound when you're trying it out, listening to individual strings and such.

This is a bit mysterious, but I think there are two factors at work:

1. When your technique and touch are smooth and clear and strong, it tends to help the music sound good regardless of the tonal voice of the instrument itself. The greatness of Scruggs style, the staccato attack, the quick decay of the notes, and smoothness of a banjo roll are pretty appealing, and none of those depends on the tonal voice to satisfy. So be aware, the tonal voice is not the only thing you're offering, "sound quality" wise.

2. In a band, a lot of sound gets masked. Especially a kick drum and loud bass just tend to swallow the lower part of the banjo tone whole. So it's really only important to get the mids and highs the way you like them. That's what people will hear, unless you play unaccompanied. Note I'm not saying to **emphasize** the mids and highs, just make sure they sound the way you like them. With the bass and kick going, if that part of your banjo sound is good, you'll do fine.

I'm hoping you might find these last points especially useful in sorting things out.

If you'd like to hear my band: www.myspace.com/quer-cusmontana

Interesting music, Ryan. Good singing and good banjo picking!

Check out Pete's site at www.drbanjo.com