

## Hot Finds



### It takes pluck By Kristen Paulson

#### Musician invents hybrid stringed instrument


THE MYTHICAL CENTAUR BALANCES THE UPPER TORSO OF A MAN WITH THE NETHER REGIONS OF AN EQUINE. SCIENTISTS HAVE COMBINED BROCCOLI AND CAULIFLOWER TO MAKE THE HYBRID VEG-ETABLE BROCCOFLOWER. WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU COMBINE A GUITAR AND A BANJO? ACCORD-ING TO ITS INVENTOR, MUSICIAN MICHAEL NIX, THE RESULT IS A SEVEN-STRING CLASSICAL BANJO HE CALLS A BANJAR. COMBINING ELEMENTS OF THE CLASSICAL FIVE-STRING BANJO AND THE CLASSI-CAL GUITAR, THE BANJAR SOUNDS LIKE A CROSS BETWEEN A BANJO AND A LUTE OR HARPSICHORD.

Nix created it with no special training but a performance degree in guitar; he has also stud-ied playwriting. He took lessons at a young age and read music, and after attending Keene State College, he took lessons in New York City, and then returned to teach at Keene. He pur-sued his masters in music composition at the University of Massachusetts, and has taken credits towards a doctorate.

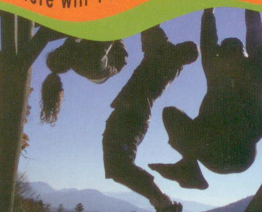
Pre-banjar, "I was making good money in the 70's on the folk circuit," said Nix. "When I had hair."

Hair or no hair, Nix has had no trouble getting banjar gigs. On November 29, he performed at the Brookline Arts Center's 32nd Annual Crafts Showcase Preview Reception. Nix has had his music broadcast on NPR's *Weekend Edition* and on WGBH's *Morning Pro Musica*. He has record-ed two albums, *East & West*, with Charlie Moser on mandolin, and a solo recording, *Preludes, Airs and Dances*, both of which feature his gui-tar playing. He is currently working on a third solo album that will feature his banjar.

The banjar was born several years ago,

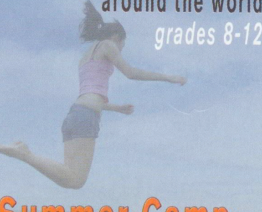


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when Nix was researching the classical banjo. The instrument was developed around 1865, during reconstruction at the end of the Civil War. With the war's end came the rise of the industrial economy. The increasingly wealthy middle class spent their disposable income fill-



SHAKESPEARE & CO. PHOTO BY TRACEY PHYSIOC BROCKETT.

ing their parlors with banjos and pianos made by banjo makers in New York and Boston.

Influenced by European culture, people

began to look at the classical guitar and its mechanics, switching from an Afro centric style of playing, to a finger style that resembled that of the classical guitar. As people experimented with strings and styles of playing, the banjo and classical banjo resulted.

"Americans settled on the five-string banjo. Seven strings weren't popular in the States. In the UK at about the same time, the banjo gained great popularity. They developed and embraced multi-string instruments," said Nix.

Tony Creamer, proprietor of the Fretted Instrument Workshop in Amherst, MA, among others, lent Nix historical instruments strung with both nylon and gut string. He researched repertoires, composing and playing for a year.

"After that year I decided that historical instruments didn't stand up to modern standards. They weren't loud enough and there wasn't enough punch in the gut string. I

*What do you get when you combine a guitar and a banjo? According to its inventor, musician Michael Nix, the result is a seven-string classical banjo he calls a banjar. Combining elements of the classical five-string banjo and the classical guitar, the banjar sounds like a cross between a banjo and a lute or harpsichord.*

couldn't control the tonal characteristics like I could with the classical guitar," said Nix. (In classical guitar one changes the timbre of music with one's fingertips and nails.)

He began to wonder how he could get the tonal shades of a classical guitar while main-

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taining an integral baseline that would support harmony. "How can I design a banjo using modern materials that would fill these requirements?" mused Nix.

First, he sketched out design ideas and took them to Creamer. Next he found a maker who could make an instrument to his specs. He chose the high-tension nylon strings of a classical guitar, selecting timpani head material (plastic) for the instrument's head. Historically, the head would be made of calfskin or goatskin, but, "Goatskin gets flabby in the rain," said Nix, who, during one concert, had to stop and use a hairdryer to tighten an instrument's head.

The instrument's bridge was a further innovation. Ivon Schmukler, director of Leeds Guitarmakers' School in Northampton, MA, helped Nix design a maple and rosewood bridge he could play contrapuntal music on; cutouts under the strings release higher overtones that shape the sound.

"The reception to the banjar has been really positive," said Nix. "There has been lots of curiosity."

Since its creation, Nix has composed for the banjar, performed on it, modified its bridge, and recorded two CDs of material, one of them solo. His chamber music ensemble, Pioneer Consort, ([www.pioneerconsort.com](http://www.pioneerconsort.com)) plays world chamber music, and consists of Nix on the banjar and his partners playing the violin, mandolin and cello.

Nix is looking into registering the banjar to protect his invention. He would like to approach a commercial banjo maker to reproduce his creation. Mostly, however, Nix just wants to keep composing and making music on his banjar.

So what's next? The pianar? The glute? Actually, Nix has been thinking about extended range instruments. "I've played an instrument called an arch guitar a friend designed



THE PIONEER CONSORT. PHOTO BY KATHY ROBERTS-SNEDEKER

that comes from the 30-40 string Renaissance lute," said Nix. He's also thinking about building an open backed banjo with a resonating chamber. "I like to invent little things around the studio." ▲

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