

'King of the Banjo' instrument collection has new home at National Music Museum

By Travis Gulbrandson
travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

George Peabody had been looking for a place to donate a collection of instruments belonging to his father – Eddie Peabody, "King of the Banjo" – for some time.

The eight items, which illustrate the evolution of the banjo, to the mandocello, to the acoustic Banjo, to the electric Banjo, had been at the New Orleans Jazz Museum for some time.

"I had always been looking for a home for them," Peabody said. "They're very near and dear to my heart."

Then someone told Peabody to visit the Web site of the National Music Museum in Vermillion.

"I did. Then I had to look at a map," he said.

Last week, Peabody and his wife Carol came to Vermillion to bring the collection to its new home.

"Honestly, I couldn't be more pleased," he said. "The people that I've met, with no exceptions, they care. That's really important. Very important. We have a home for them, and I'm very pleased that they're pleased. You don't know what a wonderful feeling that is. I think this is the right home for them."

Museum officials are happy to help.

"For somebody like me, who's a generalist, it would be fair to say that this collection is to its category the equivalent of getting Elvis's or John Lennon's personal instruments here," said Ted Muenster of the museum's development office.

Arian Sheats, curator of stringed instruments, agreed. "When you're talking about the great vaudeville and jazz era musicians, absolutely. If that generation were still alive, they would know who he was if they at all listened to the radio. It's just a matter that his generation is no longer with us."

"That's part of what we do as a museum," she said. "We save that intellectual trust for rediscovery, because it's a very hard time in the career of an artist when they're no longer around to be heard, and then the last people who really grew up with that music pass away. It's kind of a danger zone of when things can be lost and forgotten."

Born in 1902, Eddie Peabody came to national prominence following the conclusion of World War I through his performances on the vaudeville stage and his recordings with Columbia Records.

His playing style – still available for viewing through clips on YouTube – features an intricate method of cross-picking that simulates the sound of two banjos playing simultaneously.

After World War II, Peabody continued his career recording for Dot Records and through many television appearances. He continued to perform until his death in 1970.

"There were very few people of his generation who kept their careers going," Sheats said.

"A lot of them faded away. His willingness to try electric things, to move from the vaudeville era to modify his style and modify the instruments he was playing to change with the times to some extent but not alienate his original fan-base was really quite remarkable."

"There are fewer people who know who is now than there were in the past, but those who do know who he is every bit as much as he was revered in the '20s through the '60s," she said.

The collection acquired by the museum illustrates Peabody's involvement in developing the Banjo, which has six strings arranged in four courses and has a scale length similar to that of a plectrum banjo.

George Peabody said his father's involvement in the development began with the mandocello, which puts a violin mute on the bridge of the banjo and softens its sound.

"He had started to work with the Vega Company with banjo manufacture, and one of the things he needed was a little longer neck, because he found a different way to tune the thing," he said. "He needed a full resonator, and he needed an acoustical instrument that sounded like that banjo with the violin mute."

Two instruments from the Vega Company are included in the collection.

"It's very much like a plectrum

banjo neck, but sound-wise, it is as close as they could come to the banjo with a violin mute," Peabody said.

Further, electric incarnations of the instrument were made by Fender and Rickenbacker, respectively. Examples of both now are in possession of the museum.

Sheats said the collection is important for a variety of reasons.

"First and foremost, it's the personal instrument collection of one of the absolute greatest American stringed instrument players. He was really the rock star of his generation, so to speak. We're talking worldwide fame and a career that spanned ... at least half a century."

It's also a great assemblage of the work of some major musical instrument manufacturers, she said.

"We didn't previously have a postwar Rickenbacker electric," Sheats said. "This is our first

golden period Fender instrument. And Vega of course is one of the better manufacturers of fretted instruments throughout the 20th century, and also very, very fine examples of high-end plectrum banjos.

"In terms of the quality of the instruments we're talking top-notch quality instruments. Besides that, we're looking at the evolution of how these instruments developed," she said.

Peabody said he doesn't have a favorite instrument or recording made by his father. Instead, he prefers the memories of actually playing music with him, often sitting on top of a boathouse in Wisconsin.

"It's dark, and you could see the lights of one fishing boat," he said. "About two or three tunes later, there would be two, maybe three lights in the bay. ... By the time we were finished, there would be at least six, seven, eight lights out

there and you could hear (clapping)."

Peabody said they had a "musical connection."

"If you've ever had a musical connection with an individual or a group of individuals ... it happens such that you're playing a song, or you're just jamming, but you know what this person is going to play next. You just know," he said. "That is the most incredible feeling. It's impossible to describe to someone else. It's a bond that you have with these people."

"That bond my father and I had playing – and I basically just accompanied him – he had all the melodies, and he was gracious enough to pick songs where the chord changes were easy," he said. "I had some incredible experiences as a child that I didn't realize until later in life."

The Peabody collection could be on display by September.



George Peabody and Arian Sheats, curator of stringed instruments at the National Music Museum, look at one of the eight pieces belonging to Peabody's father – Eddie Peabody, "King of the Banjo" – which recently were donated to the museum. (Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)



Congratulations

TO OUR AWARD WINNING TEAM!



Broadcaster Press

Best Automotive Ad ~ Black only

1st place



Vermillion Ford

Judges Comment:

"Effective layout for a small space black and white ad."

Best Holiday Promotion

Promotions appearing as run of paper



2nd place

July 4th Weekend Celebration

Best Single Ad ~ Black and White

2 column x 2 inch or Smaller Ads



3rd place

Gentry Finance



Best Banner/Masthead

3rd Place

Best Single Ad ~ Black and White

3rd place



6th Annual Home Show

Best Single Ad

Black plus three colors or process color



Honorable Mention

Vermillion Public School District

Best Single Ad

Black plus three colors or process color



Honorable Mention

Herren Schempp Building Supply

MISSOURI VALLEY SHOPPER

Best Single Ad ~ Black only

1st place



2 column x 2 inch or Smaller Ads ~ JoDeans

Judges Comment: "Simply said 'Best Chicken in Town'. Simple layout, simple message."

Best Grocery Ad ~ Black only



1st place

Regular Run of Press ~ Hy-Vee

Judges Comment: Great theme and use of the theme throughout the ad.

Best Single Ad

Black only



2nd Place

JoDeans

The Broadcaster Press and Missouri Valley Shopper have been recognized by the Midwest Free Community Papers Association for the 2011 Advertising Contest. The Midwest Free Community Papers Association consists of member publications from Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin.