



PHOTOGRAPH BY Barry Thorn

Leftover Salmon's Andy Thorn serenades the local wildlife.

# FOX LIKES CLAWHAMMER

**Musician Andy Thorn's  
unlikely canine fan**

BY MIKE BUCHMAN

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# Acoustic music fans

on Instagram have no doubt seen the clips: A hearty mountain man plays his banjo in the idyllic hills above Boulder, Colorado. A shaft of the rising sun casts a golden glow on the player and his lone audience member: a fox, calmly sitting and listening, or strolling quietly back and forth.

As if Andy Thorn's role as banjo player for jamgrass legends Leftover Salmon isn't enough exposure, the videos of him playing banjo koans to Foxy and her family has cast a bright light on this 5-string wizard. The videos Andy has posted have racked up hundreds of thousands of hits, hearts and forwards. They've earned him local and national media coverage, from the *Kelly Clarkson Show* to the *New York Times*, whose writer called it "a moment plucked from Aesop." Thorn's notoriety has lasted well beyond his allotted 15 minutes of fame. I mean, what's cuter than playing banjo to a fox?

But look closely at a lot of those videos and you'll get a glimpse of another aspect of this story that has yet to be told. See the fox inlay on the head of the open-back banjo Thorn favors playing? Now, that's a story for *The Fretboard Journal*, which we dug into in a Zoom conversation with Andy Thorn, joined by Steve Gerritsen of Stone Banjo Company.

## BACK TO THE HILLS

Thorn grew up in Durham, North Carolina with parents who were bluegrass fans. Like lots of kids, he took piano and guitar lessons. But when 12-year-old

Andy Thorn's fox logo, a tribute to his muse, is inlaid on the headstock of the Stone Banjo.



PHOTOGRAPH BY Steve Gerritsen



Gerritsen uses local Appalachian woods, in this case cherry accented by walnut.

Thorn bought an old Harmony banjo at a neighbor's yard sale, a lifelong journey began.

"I got a little older, (and) we started going to more of the jam bluegrass stuff that was just sort of developing at the time. And I got really into that stuff, being a young hippie kid," Thorn says.

Through high school and college at UNC Chapel Hill, Thorn studied mostly jazz guitar. "It was really, really fun. You learned how to read charts, learned a lot about chords, reading music, improv," he remembers.

After graduating college, Thorn moved to Colorado and immersed himself in the verdant bluegrass and jamgrass scene, including stints playing three-finger, or Scruggs style, banjo with The Broke Mountain Bluegrass Band featuring members of Greensky Bluegrass and The Infamous Stringdusters, and the Emmitt-Nershi Band. In 2011, he joined Leftover Salmon, which kept up a regular touring schedule until being forced off the road in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thorn retreated to his home in the hills above Boulder, where he began a practice of early morning picking in the woods outside his home.

"It wasn't until the pandemic that I got into social media and posting videos because all of a sudden as a musician all of our work was gone. We were stuck at home. We were sort of trying to stay relevant somehow or keep advancing your career in some way while just doing nothing at home," he says.

"So, these videos became really cool for me, and I had something that a lot of people didn't have, which was this beautiful natural landscape. And as I started sharing it, I realized it really connected with people."

But the brash sound of bluegrass three-finger banjo did not exactly fit the early morning ambiance.

"I always wanted to learn clawhammer, but I never really got the right hand to click," Thorn says. "I never really focused on it much until I started doing these videos in my yard because three-finger banjo didn't really fit the peaceful scene of a sunrise or playing for nature. And you notice by the reaction you get from people out in the world watching these videos. That's what's cool about social media. You can sort of try stuff out and see what people think about it. And when I did clawhammer stuff it just sort of fit with the scenery of the videos, and it's really relaxing, too."

When the fox started coming over, it got even cooler.

"We'd always seen a lot of foxes. There's a lot of wildlife in general, you know, tons of deer, turkeys, mountain lions, foxes. But, yeah, during the pandemic, when we were just home all the time, you started to recognize the foxes. And we knew that this one fox had a limp, and that was the mom and there was the partner that we could recognize just by his personality. He was so curious and friendly, and that's who was the fox that ended up being in a lot of our videos."

Andy quickly got the sense that the fox, who his family named Foxy, preferred clawhammer.

“The volume of three-finger picking, I think that sort of scared a fox away. Like, they’re not gonna come be curious at that. But I think the resonance of the clawhammer and the double C tuning that I mostly leave it in all the time, you know, it just echoes through nature, and the foxes feel it too.” Thorn says. “They’re just very curious animals about anything going on. So, if it’s music, they’re gonna come check it out.”

## DELIVERANCE TO BANJO-BUILDING

Steve Gerritsen also found banjo as a 12- or 13-year-old growing up in western Pennsylvania, captivated by the playing of Eric Weissberg on the soundtrack of the movie *Deliverance*.

“I was always interested in pursuing an instrument, and then I saw that movie. That was, really, I think, the drive that I said, you know, I don’t wanna go the usual route of the guitar. And at that time bluegrass was rolling, there were some bluegrass festivals in the area.”

Gerritsen learned from local teachers and the totemic book *Earl Scruggs and the 5-String Banjo*, which included a lot of information about how a banjo was constructed.

Gerritsen’s father managed a Georgia Pacific plant and was a hobbyist woodworker. Using the Scruggs book, Gerritsen’s dad built him his first banjo.

Steve went to college and his attention turned toward studies, followed by family and a career as a geologist. Banjo took a back seat until he neared retirement.

“I started to consider, you know, what am I gonna do in retirement? So, I was looking around for different things. I bought a banjo kit. It was actually a Gold Tone kit. And I built that out because I was wanting to get back into banjo more. And then from there, I looked at the components and I had this wild idea,” Gerritsen says.

“I just dove in headfirst. I was still working full time, and, jeez, I’ll tell you, I was working 40, 50, 60 hours on the side each week just learning how to build all the different components, doing the research to figure it out.

“But, you know, that just sets the framework, and then you have to really get your hands dirty. How do you build rims? You build, like, 50 of them. How do you build fretboards? You build 50 of them. You go through the process, and through that iterative process, you begin to recognize where the quirks are and where the need for detail goes in. So that it all comes together into an instrument.”

In addition to turning rims and building necks, Gerritsen constructs his own tension hoops and tone rings, offering both wood and metal.

He found Thorn and Foxy like many of us did.

“I was always Googling banjo, and it seems like that translates into your other searches and Instagram, and things pop up. I started to see Andy’s videos, and then I saw the fox and, you know, you sort of double take it at first, and then you see more and more. And then I was, like everybody else out there—you see it and you smile,” Gerritsen says.

“And I think you noticed that I did not have a good open-back at the time!” Thorn says.

“Yeah, you know, I did see that, Andy,” Gerritsen replies with a chuckle. “I sent him an email and said, ‘Andy, I see your rig out there. You need to be playing a small-shop custom banjo.’ I was trying to get my banjo into a professional’s hands because that’s a difficult thing as, you know, as a new builder, and it seemed just like a perfect organic mix.”

With about 150 builds under his belt at the time (over 225 as of this writing), Gerritsen knew that Thorn’s clawhammer playing would benefit from a custom-built instrument with a 12-inch pot to accentuate the low end.

Thorn picks up the story: “I was doing a lot of clawhammer on resonator banjos, which I do really love. I think that sounds awesome. Ralph Stanley, you know, his sound of clawhammer is so cool. And he was playing on a cheap short-scale, no-name instrument.

“It was like having a capo on the fifth fret with the rest of the neck cut off,” Thorn says. “I did not have a good open back, especially with a bigger pot. And just the bigger pot, like, the depth of tone, it’s a fatter,

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warmer tone, that’s really the most different thing...This one really brought the clawhammer to life for me!”

Gerritsen offered to customize the banjo to Thorn’s specs, which resulted in a nut width of 1.3 inches, which Steve calls a “tweener” between typical bluegrass (smaller) and clawhammer (wider) player preferences.

“This wider spacing and the scoop in the neck really freed me up,” says Thorn.

“I play a lot of banjo, and I have for, what, 30 years. But I don’t know as much about banjos as you would think somebody like me knows. You know?” says Thorn. “I’m not as much of a tinkerer as I am a player. So, I had a few choices that I thought would be cool, and then I just said, ‘Oh, do what you do because you’re the one who knows what you’re doing.’”

Gerritsen builds rims and necks from Appalachian hardwoods sourced locally. (Full disclosure: I grew up in Western Pennsylvania. Enamored of the idea of playing a banjo from hometown woods, I bought a Stone Banjo.) Gerritsen uses more exotic timbers for fretboards and headstocks to broaden his palette of



Gerritsen pictured in his shop.

color and grain. Thorn's banjo is made of cherry with walnut accents and rosewood fingerboard and headstock overlay. While many of Gerritsen's builds feature a wooden tone ring, Thorn's Stone Banjo adds a rolled brass tone ring for "a little extra punch."

"I think I put together a very solid banjo," Gerritsen says. "Glue lines are all minimal. You know, it's all wood on wood. And that translates into wave propagation through the wood, and it translates into good tone and consistent tone."

The final touch that brings the banjo back to the story of Foxy is the elaborate inlay of Thorn's fox logo on the headstock.

When the fox videos took off, Thorn realized he could leverage the attention. "It's hard to find viral fame as a banjo player," he explains. "And when it happened, I was like, 'Heck. Okay. Let's go.'"

He contacted his friend, Mike Tallman, to design a logo. Tallman's Add Noise Studios has produced graphic art for dozens of performers, ranging from Paul McCartney to Billy Strings, Thievery Corporation to Phish.

"I just thought it was so cool. It has the fox head,

there's a banjo and a sunrise, but...you have to look at it closely to sort of make it all come together," says Thorn. Gerritsen contracted DePaule Supply to render the design as a stunning inlay.

And if Foxy was a catalyst for Thorn to play more clawhammer, playing more clawhammer has led to a new creative outlet.

"What I really like about it is that when you're playing it by yourself, you're sort of doing lead and rhythm at the same time. So, like, it's much easier to sing and play clawhammer than doing the three-finger picking," Thorn says. "I just recorded a whole new album of clawhammer stuff (*Banjo Dreams*, out now), and I'm playing the Stone banjo on all of it. And it sounds great," Thorn says. "You can also do melody lines. You can do creative chord voicings. It's just you can't really do a lot of that stuff when you're playing with picks on a banjo. So, if somebody wants to sit around and sing songs and play by themselves, I would definitely recommend clawhammer. If you're looking to get in a hot bluegrass band, you know, you might need to play three-finger." **FJ**