

# Van Eps Fretboard Slotting Jig

By Jim DeCava

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The call came from Paul Morrissey, sole owner of Liberty Banjo Company in 1984. Would I like to buy some parts? I had no idea Paul was selling out. When I got there 90% of everything was gone, sold to a company out West.

I had been managing the repair department of an electronics firm that made digital nurse-call systems in 1975, and doing some banjo inlay work on the side. Bob Flesher asked if I'd like to work for Liberty full time when they opened a shop in nearby Bridgeport, Connecticut. Two weeks later, I was making banjos and have not stopped yet. I left to start my own business in 1983.

Interestingly, my first thought when I got Paul's call was about the fret-slotting jig. Was it available? Thankfully it was, and I bought it on the spot along with some other equipment that was still unsold. But I had to say goodbye to the many routing jigs and specialty tools that I had made during my ten years at Liberty, and to a little pantograph machine I thought I couldn't do without. I guess I figured they'd always be there for me.

I remember the fret-slotting jig always being in use, as anytime a fingerboard needed to be slotted it would come out. Eventually I made some guides to be used with our radial arm saw, and along with a specially-ground blade started to slot four fingerboards at a time with a 26 <sup>1/4</sup>" scale or a 23" scale. After that, the jig was used primarily for specialty instruments, and as we became more focused on the bluegrass line of instruments the specialty items eventually disappeared. The jig was relegated to the back room where it stayed until I purchased it. Although it is old enough to qualify as an antique – and surely it does

have an antiquated look – it has only been out of service for a relatively short part of its lifetime, apparently from the late 50's through the 60's.

According to Bob Flesher, “I acquired that jig from Art Gariepy when Gariepy Banjos went out of business in 1974. Art said that he acquired the tool from among all the pieces that he bought from the Van Eps estate. It was supposed to be one of the original jigs that one of the Dobson brothers used when they were making banjos in the middle to late 1800's. I think it is probably 100 – 140 years old. I don't know how much Gariepy modified it.”

When I found out about the Dobson connection, even more of a sense of history was added. To think that this fretboard miter box was once used on George or Henry Dobson's banjos is intriguing, although the fact that it belonged to Fred Van Eps was enough for me.

As a kid in the late '60s a friend and I took a drive to Needham Heights, Massachusetts to visit the Vega Company. We were given a twenty cent tour of the facilities, and one of the tools that stood out in my mind was the gang saw used for slotting fingerboards. That was certainly a far cry from what van Eps and the Dobsons used apparently used for their instruments, and it's obvious that this tool that I had was not designed for a high-production shop. So it seems that Van Eps' shop must have been similar to the small shops like my own, not bent on high production. As far as it being used by the manufacturer who made the Dobson banjos, that's doubtful. If anything it was probably used by one of the Dobson brothers early on.

According to Mike Holmes of Mugwumps fame, Fred Van Eps was a “well known banjo player in the years before the turn of the century to the Depression. He experimented with banjo designed from about 1904 until issued a patent in 1921 for his 'recording Banjo' which was made at the Van Eps-Burr factory in Plainfield, New Jersey, and distributed by Lyon & Healey until circa 1929. Van Eps continued to make banjos on special order until his death in 1960. The Dobsons were a noted New York family of musicians, at least six of whom gained fame as banjo performers, teachers, composers and makers. Their fame was so great and the number of instruments bearing the Dobson name so large that

today, banjoists and collectors refer to the instruments of that period, with no brand or markings on them as 'Dobson style.' Common characteristics of these banjos are thin, metal-wrapped rims and short, thick necks. Some of the Dobsons may have actually made a few banjos early in their careers, but the instruments bearing their various brand names were made by Buckbee in New York. Brand names used by the Dobsons include Victor, Matchless, Silver Bell and Echo."

Essentially, this tool is a modified miter box with the ability to alternate between three different scales, which can be changed for other scales as the need arises. This is possible because each scale is represented by a strip of brass notched for a spring-loaded guide. Actually, seven scales came with the tool going from 22<sup>5/8</sup>" up to the 28<sup>1/2</sup>". Originally the apparatus was made for semi-completed banjo necks to be fastened inside with an unslotted fingerboard already glued on. In fact, when I bought it, it had a Gariepy neck screwed into place. What we did and what I still do now, is to leave that neck bolted in and simply use a couple of small C clamps to hold an unslotted fingerboard onto the neck itself. Once this is done and the guide is set for the nut slot, the rest is mindlessly simple. I probably could have made some alterations to facilitate guitar necks or made things more professional, but after all these years, I've never really seen the need. I use it for everything from my ukulele fingerboards up to my 10-string classical. For slotting something that I don't have the scale for, I will transfer the proper scale from a template I've made and mark the positions on the fingerboard with a center punch. I can then line up my saw blade with the punch marks. It's simple and it works well.

The saw itself seems to have been made especially for this jig. It's a heavy, machined implement that actually clamps a saw blade in place allowing for a change of depth and blade width.

