

## REVIEW

**Recording King RK-R50** prototype, \$999 suggested list price. [www.recordingking.com](http://www.recordingking.com)

*Review by Mike Kropp*

### *Background*

The re-launch of the Recording King banjo line has been heralded in these pages by Dave Schenkman's excellent review in *BNL* Dec. 06. Dave describes the rich history of Recording King banjos from the 1930's when these Gibson manufactured banjos were available through Montgomery Ward.

Steve Patrino and Greg Rich of Recording King made a generous donation of the prototype RK-R50 banjo for the auction to benefit the Scholarship Fund of Banjo Camp North 2007. While I had this banjo in my possession for a few weeks before the auction at camp, I was able to examine and play this new banjo. This instrument is most impressive and, considering the price, a very affordable banjo for advancing beginners as well as the seasoned pro.

The R-50 is a resonated full one-piece flange banjo without the traditional heavy flathead tone ring. This lighter weight banjo doesn't have any tone ring. The banjo head rests directly on the bearing edge of the wood rim and

allows for a flat head profile. These days, several well-known bluegrass and old-time players are gravitating to this type of banjo because of the lighter weight and the woody tone. Early in his career, Earl Scruggs played an RB-11—a resonated model without the cast tone ring. Wade Ward is a prime example of an old time player who preferred this style as well—his RB-11 banjo resides in the Smithsonian collection. Old-time and bluegrass players can now rejoice in this new found resonated banjo solidarity!

While some of the prewar non-cast tone ring Gibson and Kel Kroyden banjos did have the rolled brass tube sitting as the bearing edge on the wood rim (the RB-11 had this arrangement), the folks at Recording King opted for simpler wood bearing edge. Travis Atz at

Recording King tells me that for this RK-R50 banjo the preference was for the wood bearing edge because it had "such a strong bark." Greg Rich further clarified this choice by pointing out that the original non-tone ring Recording Kings did have this wood bearing edge feature. Also, the Gibson RB-1 and RB-2 banjos from this period do occasionally turn up in this same non-tone ring style.

The banjo arrived with a good set up, but like every other banjo tinkerer on the planet, I just had to tweek the banjo so that it rocked my boat. The set up procedure of head tightness, string gauge, fingerboard relief, height of action, tailpiece pressure, etc is so very subjective and varies from player to player. So, I loosened the head a bit, raised the action a smidgen, and installed medium gauge strings. I found all the key adjustment elements working perfectly; the truss rod and coordinator rods performed to spec and had a good range of adjustability.

When I began to play the RK 50, I immediately noticed the strength of the clear and punchy sound. The volume this banjo was putting out was



impressive. Being so used to the heavier flathead style cast tone ring bluegrass banjos, I was struck with the fact that this banjo was fundamentally similar to these in many respects, and yet a bit different in other aspects of tone and timbre. The tone was clear and woody with good balance of bass to treble without a prominent spike on either end of the tone spectrum. All the strings were fairly equal in amplitude. The pronounced mid range comes through loud and clear. I found that I could easily get the thick bass sound from the 4th string, albeit with less low overtones than on my cast tone ring flathead, but still rich and sweet. Up the neck the RK 50 really cranked out the higher register notes with a nice round percussive pop.

The fretwork was generally good but a few of the fret ends could have used a bit of touchup filing. The finish of the mahogany neck was thick but still quite lustrous, and the mahogany laminate on the resonator was very strikingly beautiful with good grain. All the bindings were well-executed. The one-piece flange on the Recording Kings is heavy like the old ones from the 30's—these folks got it right. The nickel plating on the metal parts was all fairly good. The Grover style Presto tailpiece worked well and the planetary tuners were very smooth. Noteworthy is the one-piece mahogany neck-no stacked laminate heel or scarf joint at the peg head. This is the first affordable import I have seen that has this solid neck feature usually found in much higher priced instruments. The neck contour was full but not excessive and was very comfortable to play.

Here are the published specs from the folks at Recording King:

*3-ply maple rim*  
*One piece solid mahogany neck*  
*Mahogany resonator*  
*Mastertone-style one-piece flange*  
*Dual coordinator rods*  
*“Fan” style fretboard and headstock inlay*  
*Presto tailpiece*  
*Notched brass tension hoop*  
*24 ASE threaded hooks and nuts*  
*REMO head*

I asked Travis Atz at Recording King if the rim thickness was the same for the tone ring and non-tone ring models—his reply:

“...with the flange diameter being the same, the rim thickness is nearly identical between the tone ring models and the non-tone ring models. The non-tone ring model, however, does have a rim thickness that is 3.0mm thicker. This makes up for the thickness of the routed area for the tone ring itself. This is only in the area where the tone ring would lie, though; the thickness on the resonator side, for instance, is the same.”

This prototype R 50 had dot inlays on the fingerboard and a fleur-de-lis peghead inlay, whereas the production model will have the fan inlays as featured on the prewar originals.

Mike Holmes, Director of Banjo Camp North had his original five-string Recording King banjo at camp—a great playing and good-looking banjo! This one has the fan inlays. It was interesting to see these two instruments side by side. Excepting for the inlays and the extra deep resonator on the prewar, they were very similar- even the neck contour.

If you want an affordable banjo with big sound, quality components and a great look, check out this new banjo. At the affordable retail list price of \$999, you can have a great banjo suitable for any style of music.

