

pharis & jason romero



SFW 40246

tell 'em you were gold



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2. Cold Creek Shout 3:00 •
3. Rolling Mills 3:58 °
4. Sour Queen 3:35 *
5. Pale Morning 2:33 •
6. Train on the Island 2:34 °
7. Lady on the Green 3:01 °
8. Cannot Change It All 4:27 *
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16. Old Bill's Tune 3:05 *

* PHARIS & JASON ROMERO / PASSING GLIMPSE SONGS, SOCAN

• JASON ROMERO / PASSING GLIMPSE SONGS, SOCAN

° ARR. BY PHARIS & JASON ROMERO / PASSING GLIMPSE SONGS, SOCAN

Pharis and Jason spent the summer of 2021 happily occupied—loving the kids, building banjos, gardening, hiking and canoeing, fishing, tending bees and chickens, playing music, and working up their first all-banjo record. They hadn't been on the road since early 2020. They were still playing and writing music, but the rest of life was filling in the space that touring left. It felt like a good time to jump into a new project. The pair has released seven records together since they met in 2007; banjos were the reason they met, and a record featuring Jason playing banjo was something they'd always wanted to make. In October 2021, in a 60-year-old barn resting on the dirt beside the Little Horsefly River in Horsefly, BC, they gathered some friends and made that record. You'll hear the occasional noise from the wood stove, feet tapping on the wooden floor, and some light rain on the roof. You'll also hear the sound of the room, and the energy of friends playing music together. The songs were learned and recorded live over six days.

Horsefly is a small town in central British Columbia. There are somewhere around 700 residents, a small school, gas station, café, grocery store, and two hairdressers. It's in the foothills of the Cariboo Mountains, right next to interior temperate rainforest, with lakes and rivers a-plenty. Pharis grew up here, following a long line of her family living in the area. Jason was raised in Colusa, CA; he moved to BC shortly after he met Pharis at an old-time fiddle jam in 2007. When they moved to Horsefly in 2010, they landed on a piece of property that hadn't been lived on for years and was wearing its dilapidation on its sleeve. Structures were scattered across the property. They gutted and did their temporary best with the house, focusing on converting the carport into a warm and dry banjo workshop. This would be the fifth J. Romero Banjos workshop, and they planned it to be the last. Over the years they built a house, a sixth banjo shop (when the fifth burned to the ground), cabins, a greenhouse, and a lot of covered space. Occasionally their project-plan minds wandered down to the barn—a large timber structure beside the river bordering their place—but it was a huge project, not something to casually jump into, and over the years it received just quick bits of attention. The walls—built of 2 x 12 fir and spruce milled on the property in the '60s—were insulated with sawdust, the original roofing was tin printing plates from the regional newspaper, and the floorboards were thick fir scoured by years of animal traffic. From the first day they moved to Horsefly, Pharis and Jason pictured that barn as one day being a dance hall and recording studio, kids sleeping in the corner under a pile of blankets and music being made until the sun came up. With a banjo record coming up, and going back and forth between all the possibilities of where and when to make a record, the barn felt like a dream of a place to play

and record music in. From snowmelt to snowfall in 2021 they salvaged what they could from the original building, though leaks in the roof had rotted through some parts and other parts were casualties of time. They gutted old stalls, walls, and floor, put new posts and beams in (milled from some spruce on site), stuffed up the gaps in the walls and the ceilings, and put in windows and doors. Some insulated panels on the walls, rugs on the floor, and lights hanging from the beams, and it became an acoustically and aesthetically uplifting space that just felt good to make music in. The music made on this record was made in the spirit of that working transformation and in the spirit of the history that old barn contains.

Jason discovered banjo when he was 19. He walked into a bar in Chico, CA, and saw a five-string banjo player with an Irish band. He shortly became fixated with the instrument. Moving to Arcata, CA, in his late 20s, he started working for Wildwood Instruments and Wildwood Banjos while going to fine woodworking school. Earlier jobs, unrelated to anything musical but that paid the bills, had driven him to look for some kind of craftsmanship work. He'd always been good with his hands; he recalls excelling in ninth-grade woodworking class. In 2002 he started his own line of banjos while still working for Wildwood Instruments, and he quit his day job when he had six months' worth of orders. From day one every banjo was different, each one designed around a customer's thoughts or Jason's own ideas. He was looking for longevity in building and creativity. His sense of personal aesthetics was apparent even in his earliest builds, though those first banjos were heavily inspired by the other modern open-backs available at the time, mostly Wildwood and Ome Banjos. The more he built and spent time staring at old banjos and old furniture, the more he applied the ideas of early builders to his own instruments. The Fred van Epps style of making a tension hoop with notches in the sides, decorative metal works in scoops and pegheads, delicate carves at the fifth string: these all contributed to forming his idea of what a modern open-back banjo could feel and look like.

It was a small community of open-back banjo builders in the early 2000s. Most instruments had nickel- or chrome-plated hardware, and most parts came from builder supply companies. A good friend and contemporary builder, Brooks Masten, was having his own parts cast from bronze. He shared his process with Jason, who started sending one carved version of a rim fastener or tailpiece to a specialty caster who would return the unique hardware cast in bronze. About a year into building Jason also rejigged his approach to the coordinator rod; this part attaches

the rim to the neck of banjo, and the ways to approach it are varied. It's typically done with a couple of lag bolts and metal rods or a wooden stick going all the way through the instrument's body. Jason took these ideas and created his own way to attach the neck and the rim of the banjo with a single lag bolt, a hand-carved wooden dowel, and some custom hardware. The hand-cast hardware and coordinator rod innovation were some of the earliest factors setting J. Romero Banjos apart, and they both continue to be essential in every banjo Jason builds.

Pharis grew up in a musical and crafty family with a childhood mostly spent outside in the creek. Her family had a folk-country band; her dad wrote woodsy songs from his years of logging and being in the bush, and the three little girls—and later the youngest boy—dressed in matching outfits and sang back-up vocals. They all took formal music lessons from a young age. She started writing in her teens, and over the years she dove heavily into sounds and songwriters across the musical landscape. Learning and listening avidly to songs of '60s folk and rock and earlier old-time and bluegrass was a central part of her life when she and Jason met in 2007.

The two had one of those meetings out of a novel. Jason saw Pharis in a banjo customer's band photo and asked their mutual friend Ivan Rosenberg about her. A year later, on his way to go fly-fishing in BC, he showed up at an old-time jam in Victoria, BC, that he knew Pharis would be at. They sent early recordings back and forth between BC and California, bonding over a mutual wonder at Hoyt Ming and His Pep Steppers, laughing at how incredible Rozelle Ming's sense of foot-tapping rhythm was. They married three months later. Their partnership grew quickly as Pharis began doing banjo inlays and running the daily business workings, and Jason started writing tunes and collaborating on Pharis' songs. The older musical influences have remained a bedrock in the music they listen to at home and in the songs she and Jason write.

In 2022 Pharis and Jason celebrate 20 years of building J. Romero Banjos. Jason continues to build unique instruments for clients and for himself, often using the building process to try out new ideas. They have a long-standing joke that Jason is always thinking about banjos (it's 99% true), but that focus on longevity in building and creativity has remained a tenet and a joy of their work.





As with many musicians, the instruments Jason plays have informed and sometimes created much of his playing style. On this record he uses three different playing approaches: three-finger with no picks, three-finger with picks, and clawhammer. After first playing bluegrass-style banjo and then going into the rabbit hole of clawhammer and older styles, the three-finger style with no picks has become his main love. Some of that is the direct connection of fingers and strings in his right hand to draw out the tone, and some is the way that old-time tunes seem to lay themselves out on the fingerboard when playing without picks.

Alongside the connection of fingers to strings, the tone of a banjo depends on a great many things. This includes the rim size, wood, tonering, head tightness, bridge thickness, string gauges and types, and how hot or cold the wood stove is. Hand in hand with the tones are the tunings. Inherent in banjos are the hundreds of different tunings the player can use, creating their own as the need or desire arises. From the earliest recordings to modern players, banjo players use tunings to complement the song, the singer, the fiddlers, even the natural sounds around them. Any key has numerous different tunings to go with it, which leaves the player to ask themselves a lot of questions: does the song want a sound that is mournful or bright, chordal or open, with an accenting or droning fifth string? Once the player has sorted out or made up a tuning, they learn where the notes and chords sit on the strings. Just like exploring different tones on the same instrument, experimenting with different tunings on the same song is a key part of creating the finished piece. The creation of the songs and the creation of the instruments meet in this key spot: hearing the possibilities in tone and tuning while creating a song and knowing what to do with the instrument to explore those possibilities. In the end, deciding on which tuning and tone is subjective and can vary from day to day. This makes a recorded version truly a moment in time.

On this record Jason plays seven different banjos, and Pharis plays one gourd banjo guitar. Each banjo on this record started with an idea of a sound, a feeling, or an aesthetic, and each one makes Jason play and feel a different way. The instruments are: Papillon, Big Blue, Clara, Birdie, Mother, Bella, Gourdo, and The Beast.

PAPILLON

*Torrefied maple neck and 11" rim
26 1/4" scale*

*Torrefied maple flangeless resonator
Torrefied maple fingerboard, peghead, heel and rim trim
Romero tonering
Papillon bronze rim fasteners
Natural skin head
Steel strings*

BANJO #21490 (BUILT IN 2021)

Papillon was finished just before we made this record. It's the first banjo with our new butterfly-style L-shoes; it has one of our tonerings with an experimental suspended mounting system. Papillon was built for versatility and strong note clarity.

Played on "Sour Queen" and "Been All Around This World"





BIG BLUE

Torrefied maple neck and 13" rim

26 1/4" scale

Texas ebony fingerboard, peghead, heel and rim trim

Texas ebony wooden tonering

Blue heron bronze rim fasteners

Natural skin head

Nylon strings

BANJO #20475 (BUILT IN 2020)

This banjo references some of our favorite details from 19th-century banjos including the large rim size, wooden tailpiece, and classic wooden dowelstick. We wanted to explore the idea of a single L-shoe holding two hooks, and brought it all together in a banjo that was built to play in lower tunings.

Played on "Souvenir," "Black Guard Mary," and "Five Miles From Town"





CLARA

Claro walnut (fire-salvaged) neck and 12" rim

Extra deep 3 1/4" rim

25 7/8" scale

Claro walnut flangeless resonator

Texas ebony fingerboard, beel and rim trim

Brass peghead plate

Bella Rose tonering

Deco bronze rim fasteners

Natural skin head

Steel strings

BANJO #17400 (BUILT IN 2017)

This banjo is the first banjo Jason built for himself after our 2016 shop fire; it is made completely from wood salvaged from the burn. The art nouveau designs on the peghead and scoop explore the possibilities of acid-etching designs on decorative metal works.

Played on "Pale Morning" and "Cannot Change It All"





BIRDIE

*Birdseye maple neck and 11" rim
26 1/4" scale*

*Birdseye maple resonator with solid brass flange
Ebony fingerboard, heel and rim trim*

Brass peghead plate

Fire-salvaged Yates flathead tonering

Natural skin head

Heavy gauge steel strings

BANJO #18430 (BUILT IN 2018)

This banjo has a custom cast brass flange, many years and many sources in the making. Built mostly for bluegrass-style playing, it has a heavy bronze flathead tonering that we dug out of the ashes of our shop fire.

Played on "Cold Creek Shout" and "Old Bill's Tune"





MOTHER

Figured maple neck and 12" rim

25 1/2" scale

Brazilian rosewood ebony fingerboard, peghead, heel and rim trim

Honduran rosewood tonering

Rounded J-shoe bronze rim fasteners

Natural skin head

Steel strings

BANJO #10250 (BUILT IN 2010)

Ten years ago we were given just enough Brazilian rosewood for a single banjo's trim wood. This banjo has that rosewood, and was one of the first banjos to have our then freshly designed cast bronze wrap-around rim fasteners. Mother is the 250th banjo we've built, and was the only banjo to survive our shop fire.

Played on "Going to Town" and "Going Across the Sea"





BELLA

Claro walnut neck and 11" rim

25 7/8" scale

Claro walnut resonator with solid brass flange

Texas ebony fingerboard, heel and rim trim

Brass peghead plate

Bella rose tonering

Natural skin head

Nylon strings

BANJO #18420 (BUILT IN 2018)

Bella was built as an all-purpose touring banjo, one that could be played both fingerpicked and clawhammer. When we're on the road—with two kids and multiple instruments—a single banjo that could work for everything is important. Bella is also our first banjo to mix mother-of-pearl and acid-etched designs on the peghead and scoop.

Played on "Train on the Island" and "The Dose"





GOURDO

Douglas fir neck

12" gourd

24 ¾" scale

Ebony fingerboard and peghead trim

Natural skin head

Nylon strings

BUILT IN 2019

The dark, grumbly tone and the way it feels in your hands mean that of all the instruments, the gourd banjo is the one Jason reaches for most often at home.

Played on "Rolling Mills," "Lady on the Green," and "SS Radiant"





THE BEAST

Torrefied butternut neck

13" gourd

24 ¾" scale

Texas ebony fingerboard and peghead trim

Natural skin head

Nylon strings

BUILT IN 2021

An experimental concept of what could happen when we joined
a gourd with a guitar neck.

Played on "Sour Queen"







song notes

1. Souvenir

banjo : BIG BLUE • tuning : eAEF#A

Some old lyrics of Pharis' and a banjo tuning that sounded right.

*You are my souvenir of time well spent, well spent
And when they ask you how you live you can tell 'em you were good, tell 'em you were good*

*You are a heavy rock in this pocket, well loved, well loved
And when they ask you how you shone you can tell 'em you were gold, tell 'em you were gold*

*You are a setting sun on my landscape, turning gold
And when they ask you if you'll return you can tell 'em you'll come round, tell 'em you'll come round*

*You are my souvenir of time well spent, well spent
You are my souvenir of time well spent, well spent
And when they ask you how you live you can tell 'em you were gold, tell 'em you were gold*

2. Cold Creek Shout

banjo : BIRDIE • tuning : eCEGC

Two of our favorite banjo tunes are “Coal Creek March” (from Tom Sauber and Pete Steele) and “Baptist Shout” (from Kurt Sutphin and Frank Jenkins).

This is Jason's homage to the joy they've brought us over the years.

We also give a cold creek shout when we jump in the river in January after a sauna.

3. Rolling Mills

banjo : GOURDO • tuning : F#BEAB

Originally from the singing of George Landers.

4. Sour Queen

banjos : PAPILLON & THE BEAST • tuning : eCGCD & standard

Exploring a bluesy banjo tune with lyrics from some notes scrawled down over the years.

*All alone in the pouring rain, all night long, all alone
Thinking of my sour queen, oh my lovely lonely one*

*We're always older than yesterday but I don't change and you won't stay
Troubles come and then they go, only waiting to get you home*

*You won't be my pocket now holding all my worn-out tales
And the chance you'll hear is small but I'll keep asking, yes I will*

5. Pale Morning

banjo : CLARA • tuning : fDGB^bD

When Jason finishes a banjo, he often puts it into whatever tuning the strings are closest to.
This song came out of a new tuning on a freshly strung-up banjo.

6. Train on the Island

banjo : BELLA • tuning : F^bB^bC

Learned especially from Tom Sauber and Mark Graham,
and also from Matokie Slaughter, Tommy Jarrell, Bruce Molsky, and J.P. Nestor.

7. Lady on the Green

banjo : GOURDO • tuning : eAEAB

First heard from Rafe Stefanini, and originally from the fiddling of Bob Walters.

8. Cannot Change It All

banjo : CLARA • tuning : e^bBG^bA^bB

This song started with the banjo tuning and grew with the lyrics.
Pharis wrote the words after camping in the Chilcotin Mountains, thinking of all the incredible people working to make the world a more thoughtful place.

*Man is best when he does not know the riches at his feet
Then he cannot change it all to what he doesn't need*

*I went up on the mountainside and looked down on the land
A stranger to my own dear home, for years I've been abroad
Where I've gone I won't say for you will hear it wrong
And think too poorly of this girl*

*Some may say I travel with my feet too apart
Trying to cover acres for every bleeding heart
If I stop and look at all the heaviness that's come
Where on earth will I find love?*

9. The Dose

banjo : BELLA • tuning : fCFCD

Written after a day on the river using a great fishing fly called the Black Dose.

10. SS Radiant

banjo : GOURDO • tuning : eBEBc⁹

For our son Sy.

11. Been All Around This World

banjo : PAPILLON • tuning : cC⁹F⁹BC⁹

We each sang this song before we met, and it has morphed as we have morphed too.

12. Black Guard Mary

banjo : BIG BLUE • tuning : fB^bFAC

The banjo is in a classic banjo tuning that makes Jason want to play a certain way. Pharis was reading about the massive entourage that followed royalty in old Britain and wrote the words to suit his playing.

Black guard Mary is one that we all know, Black guard Mary holds a corner of her own

Black guard Mary walking down the road

She knows she's a mean old girl and she don't mind it so

Trouble with the sailors, trouble with the job, trouble with her family who don't know where she's gone

Seems to follow her and hold on like a dog

You know she's a mean old girl and she don't mind it so

It's a long road to travel when you grow up cold and hard, a long road to travel, you don't know who you are

It's a long road to travel walking all along

She knows she's a mean old girl and she don't mind it so

Black guard Mary goes behind the crowd, Black guard Mary goes without a sound

Black guard Mary, she knows where she's going

You know she's a mean old girl and she don't mind it so

13. **Going to Town**

banjo : MOTHER • tuning : gDGBD

From the fiddling of Arthur Smith.

14. **Going Across the Sea**

banjo : MOTHER • tuning : fDGB^bD

Jason really enjoys taking a well-known song and working it up in different banjo tunings. We love pretty much every version we've ever heard of this lost-love song, especially the ones from Uncle Dave Macon, Bill Monroe, and Foghorn Stringband.

15. **Five Miles From Town**

banjo : BIG BLUE • tuning : dB^bFB^bC

Jason first heard this Clyde Davenport tune from Tom Sauber, Brad Leftwich, and Alice Gerrard. He took his liberties with the tuning and playing style.

16. **Old Bill's Tune**

banjo : BIRDIE • tuning : fCFAC

We wrote a song called "Ballad of Old Bill," and the melody felt like a fiddle tune.

Originally we worked this up with Josh Rabie on fiddle and John Hurd on bass; on this recording Grace Forrest takes the helm on fiddle with Patrick Metzger on bass.

musicians

Jason Romero : banjo, vocals

Pharis Romero : guitar, guitar banjo, vocals

with guests

Grace Forrest : fiddle (“Going to Town,” “Lady on the Green,” and “Old Bill’s Tune”)

Trent Freeman : fiddle (“Sour Queen”)

Marc Jenkins : pedal steel

Patrick Metzger : bass

John Reischman : mandolin

music credits

Produced by Pharis and Jason Romero

Associate production : Marc Jenkins

Engineering : John Raham in Horsefly, BC

Pedal steel recording : Marc Jenkins in Victoria, BC

Mixing : John Raham at Afterlife Studios in Vancouver, BC

Mastering : D. James Goodwin at The Isokon



production credits

Cover and artist photos : Patrick King
Recording and barn photos : Eva Anandi Brownstein and Trent Freeman
Banjo and workshop photos : Rick Magnell
Executive producers : Daniel E. Sheehy and John Smith
Production manager : Mary Monseur
Production assistant : Kate Harrington
Editorial assistance : Carla Borden
Liner notes : Pharis & Jason Romero
Art direction, design, and layout : Pharis & Jason Romero

special thanks

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Max Heineman, Anandi Brownstein, Frank Hoorn, Hans Brede, and Courtney Patenaude.

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For more on Pharis & Jason and J. Romero Banjos:
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Pharis and Jason Romero are pure craftspeople. A renowned banjo builder, Jason spent years developing his own personal designs, and on *Tell 'Em You Were Gold*, his handmade instruments take center stage. Over a half dozen uniquely crafted banjos are played by the duo over the course of the album. There's conviction and delicacy in this music, which ranges from duets that showcase the pair's deep psychic and artistic connection to solo banjo meditations and full band romps. Recorded over six days in an old barn in Horsefly, British Columbia, the album displays the multiple Juno Award-winning duo playing music honest, direct, and reflective of life's beauty and knottiness.

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