

FAUX RESO: IN THE SHADOWS OF ORGANOLOGY

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As regards *faux resos*, by which we mean false resonator guitars, tenor guitars, and mandolins, so far we have been missing evidence from witnesses, as well as printed records, not to mention the lack of any academic or otherwise professional discourse.

Available information has emerged only through internet discussions in the past few years, thus there is a prevalence of questions as well as false steps when it comes to reliable answers. We may say that this category of musical instruments presents an evident gap in organological awareness.



A rare printed comment appeared ten years ago, and it related an experience that occurred in approximately 1968. It came from the mouth of Jerry Douglass, who is considered one of the most significant Dobro players of the present day. “I remember getting that second guitar, sitting in the car, playing it,” he recollects. “And in my mind [I’m] saying, *This is the last Dobro I’ll ever need. This is it. This is the sound.* The next day, I looked under [the] cover plate, and there was nothing. It was just wood. So it wasn’t a real Dobro; it was a fake Hawaiian guitar..” (Conrad 2008)

When asked what kind of instrument it was, Douglas replied, that it was “*a pre-war faux-bro. I guess it could be Stella or one of the guitars in the Kay/Stella style*”.¹

As concerns iconographic sources, we may only guess that some period photographs and illustrations in the catalogues of musical instrument stores also capture instruments of this type, because the absence of a resonator is evident only in a close up view.

I.

The beginnings of resonator musical instruments go back to the mid-1920s,² when the *National* company first produced guitars with three metal disc resonators and a “biscuit” type bridge. Then a *Dobro* labelled model was introduced, where a wooden bridge was placed on a single cast aluminum spider. In 1932, the two companies joined into one company, but the period was marked by an emergence of the electrification of Hawaiian guitar. For approximately next thirty years, development of resonator instruments became a dead-end street – in fact, they were considered a thing of the past already in 1935 (*Acoustic Guitars* 2008: 5). Nevertheless, their production was interrupted in 1941 due to the U.S. entry into World War II: aluminum and other metals were needed as strategic resources. It was only in the late 1950s, when wooden Dobros were made popular thanks to bluegrass music, and slightly later metal Nationals were pursued by blues revivalists. Little by little, resonator instruments became more and more sought-after articles both by musicians and collectors.

It is interesting to note that only in recent years, when collectors have raised the issue of *faux resos* or *faux-bros*: musical instruments which do not have a metal disc resonator under their metal cover plate, but only a wooden resonator desk.³ A silver coat of paint

1. E-mail message from Jerry Douglas to the author, June 16, 2018.

2. The history of the Dobro see Příbylová 2012.

3. It is important to recognize the 1930s *Hollywood* resonator guitars, whose production was stopped after a law-suit with the *National/Dobro* companies. The label was owned by the Schireson Brothers from Los Angeles. Their extremely rare musical instruments

under the metal cover plate of some instruments suggests that its purpose was to deceive some less informed customers or help less well-off customers in case they wanted to show off (literally, because the chrome of the plate was very shiny), and to provide a substitute for a real resonator instrument. This kind of construction seems to have predetermined the marginal role of these instruments, which ended in the hands of ordinary rural or urban musicians.

II.

Considering a “false” instruments brings an unusual ethic aspect into an otherwise dryly organological discourse. It is evident that the producers wanted to create a disguise: their instruments were distributed exclusively under various *house brands*, despite the fact that they perhaps were produced by some respected makers.⁴

Some specialists, among them George Gruhn, assume that these firms could perhaps include the Regal company, whose products were sold under labels like *Alhambra*, *Broman*, *Bruno*, *Gretsch*, *Magno-tone*, *More Harmony*, *NIOMA*, *Norwood Chimes*, *Old Kraftisman* or *Orpheum*. Nevertheless, the name of the Regal company has been used way too much in connection with this ambiguity. Some preserved instruments bear an evidence of the following labels: *Charleston*, *Del Oro*, *Harmony*, *Musketeer*, *Melofonic*, and more. There is no use to try to distinguish various makers from their designs of metal cover plates. Because of the shortage of instrument parts, the makers used anything available at the moment.⁵

were made from high quality material and with series numbers. Their resonators were fastened in a special way to the instrument's bridge (patent no. 1927575 from 19.9. 1933), or they had an incorporated wooden circular desk with ten holes and ribs (patent no. 1887861 from 15.11. 1932).

4. It is generally known that the *Dobro* company used plywood bodies from the *Kay* and *Harmony* companies; Gibson guitars were sold under brands like *Kalamazoo*, *Recording King*, *Cromwell*, *Fascinator*, and *Kel Kroyden* (Fred 2003).
5. “Regal mixed and matched hardware freely on all its *Dobro* guitars, apparently using whatever tailpieces or cover plates were handy at the time.” (Gray 1999)

False resonator instruments were made with no production numbers. Perhaps we will never see any reliable information about their production, as well as about their use by regular musicians. So in the end it is perhaps feasible to analyse and gather information about surviving instruments. At least here we can expect to come to some general conclusions.

III.

Further discussion could be focused on the relatively widespread musical instruments labelled *Melofonic*. The logo that labels them comes in two forms. Surprisingly, it is in the 1927 catalogue of a radio technology supplier where we can find a more modern look of a logo. Another catalogue shows a *Melofonic* logo (perhaps from the 1950s) on a pack of a set of electrical guitar strings.⁶



6. *Melofonic* allegedly could be a label of K&K Musical Instrument Company from New York, in 1927 known as Progressive Musical Instruments Corporation (319 6th Avenue, New York). See “Melofonic stringed instruments and speakers New York.” *Jedi Star* [online] [accessed July 15, 2018]. Available from: <<http://jedistar.com/melofonic/>>. Using the term “HI-FI” in the set of strings refers to the 1950s. In 1965, a Melphonic label produced the Valco electric guitars with plastic body (see Bacon – Day 1995: 49). Melaphonic today is the name of electric guitars produced in Le Mans, France (see <http://www.melophonics.fr>).

There is a wooden board under the metal cover plate of these Melofonic-labelled instruments, with a visible couple of holes (in the shape of apostrophe), and a hidden quartet of smaller circular holes under the cover plate (on the picture marked in red).



It is interesting to note that the material of the metal cover plate is more robust than the material which is used in actual resonator instruments.

The slightly convex cover plate is fastened by eight tiny screws along its perimeter, not touching the wooden bridge.



The body is made perhaps of birch, with the top, back and sides of solid wood. The back of the discussed instrument shows an S shaped crack which reveals false (painted) tiger-stripe pattern, as well as the use of material which didn't have ideal figuration.



The white ‘pearl’ inlaid purfling running around the edge of the top is also painted on (the maker didn’t even go to the trouble to correct its blurred paint).

IV.

Despite these imperfections, musical instruments of this type have been more and more popular. To prove this, let us quote one of the ardent contributors to the pages of the Mandolin Café: *“It’s a vintage instrument, in its own right. Very cool and interesting, IMHO. Nobody was saying it was a 30’s National or anything like that. I should add that I am a fan of faux resonators and what most people miss is that they sound great. For some reason, almost defying logic and science, they actually sound very metallic and cool. Not as sophisticated as National, but still cool.”* (Mando 2014)

It is necessary to mention contemporary practices when resonators are incorporated into original instrument bodies: this can perhaps be accepted only if the top is broken. Thanks to the solid wood (even if it is low-cost material) and the heavy metal cover, these instruments have a surprising personality, combining the warmth of wood with the metallic flavor of the cover plate resonance. It is quite possible that this sound color has provided an unexpected value in spite of the original, somewhat unethical, intentions of the producers.

Instruments observed and found so far
(as of November 3, 2018):

Instrument labelled as:	Notes on specific signs	Location
Melofonic (coloured logo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • top without silver paint • sunburst/ false (painted) pattern • sides and two-part bottom, false purfling • 4 x 29 cover plate holes • rusty cover plate 	Private collection
Melofonic (coloured logo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • bright (silver painted) top • sunburst/ false (painted) pattern and purfling • 4 x 29 cover plate holes 	https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/vintage-melofonic-resonator-mandolin-172441401
Melofonic (logo in white inscription)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • silver painted top, sunburst/ false (painted) pattern of bottom and sides, false purfling • 4 x 29 cover plate holes • tail piece cover missing • black tuning pegs 	http://jedistar.com/melofonic/
Melofonic (logo in white inscription)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • silver painted top, sunburst/ false (painted) pattern of the body with a single part back, and purfling • sound hole at the end of fingerboard extended into a heart shaped hole • cover and bridge missing 	https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/vintage-1930-40-melofonic-mandolin-187793260
[Melofonic]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • purfling perhaps false • 4 x 29 cover plate holes 	https://www.mandolincafe.com/forum/threads/96855-Melofonic-Resanator-Mandolin
[Melofonic]/Gibson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophe shaped sound holes • top said to be originally silver painted, when removed – visible painted pattern • 4x29 cover plate holes • neck replaced with Gibson mandolin banjo neck 	https://www.mandolincafe.com/forum/threads/75913-My-Franken-mandolin-faux-resonator-with-a-Gibson-neck

Harmony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • f-shaped sound holes • silver painted top • sunburst/painted pattern and body • purfling perhaps false • 5 x 6 cover plate holes • top under bridge sunken 	https://reverb.com/uk/item/3266319-rare-vintage-30s-harmony-faux-resonator-mandolin-great-conversion-potential
Harmony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • f-shaped sound holes • finish not original • 5x6 cover plate holes 	https://reverb.com/item/6261199-harmony-resonator-mandolin-resonator
Charleston	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • f-shaped sound holes • originally silver painted top • 5 x 6 cover plate holes • rebuilt into resonator instrument, new cover plate without tailpiece 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJkEYSVQsMc
Regal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no sound holes (oval hole under cover plate?) • purfling perhaps false • 12 moon and star shaped holes in cover plate • no bridge cover, visible residues of side screws 	https://www.mandolincafe.com/forum/threads/110191-Regal-Resonator-Mando-on-eBay
Blue Bird	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no sound holes (oval hole under cover plate?) • purfling perhaps false • adjusting hole in the cover of bridge • 12 moon and star shaped holes in cover plate 	https://www.mandolincafe.com/forum/threads/112583-I-think-this-is-a-Mandolin!

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Summary

For so-called *faux resos* – false resonator guitars, tenor guitars or mandolin – we lack any oral or printed evidence, not to mention coverage in the professional literature. All information circulates only in online debates, where questions and mistakes predominate over reliable answers. So it can be said that this category of musical instruments represents a weak memory of organology. As far as the iconographic sources are concerned, some of the period photographs or pictures might capture instruments of this type but the presence of a resonator is obvious only from a very close look. The first actual resonator instruments were manufactured in the mid-1920s. In collectors circles during recent years emerged the issue of so-called *faux resos* or *faux-bros* – products of the same era, but with a metal cover on a top but without a resonator inside. Silver paint under the cover of some of them suggests that the intention maybe was to deceive poor and/or less informed customers. It brings into a purely organologic discussion an unusual ethical aspect. These instruments were distributed exclusively under different house brands (for example Charleston, Del Oro, Harmony, Musketeeer, Melofonic), although they were also produced by renowned manufacturers like Regal or Dobro. False resonator instruments were manufactured, of course, without any serial numbers and it is quite possible that we will get no serious information about their production and about their use; the most promising seems to be gathering and evaluation of the data on preserved instruments. Nevertheless, instruments of this type obviously found their fans. Thanks to the solid wood and the heavy metal cover, these instruments have a surprising personality, combining the warmth of wood with the metallic flavor of the cover plate resonance. It is quite possible that this sound color has provided an unexpected value in spite of the original, somewhat unethical, intentions of the producers.

Key words: Resonator musical instruments; fake instruments; mandolins; collecting; music in U.S.A.