

American Banjo Museum – Directory – 2019.

At the age of 10 he had first tried the violin, but it was in 1966 that the Belgian Gérard De Smaele discovered the guitar-banjo. The folk revival was in full swing and after finding some Elektra records sold there under the Vogue label (The Dillard's, Homer & The Barnstomers, The Even Dozen Jug Band), but also the singers Hughes Aufray and Greame Allright, he finally realized that for to play this music he needed a five-string banjo. His first discovery was a German-made long-neck Marma. Abandoned to himself, another part of the mystery was later unravelled, with the revelation of *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*, Pete Seeger's memorable method that contained essential references. This book was then the gateway to the Folkways records catalogue: Pete Seeger and the New Lost City Ramblers, as well as so many other wonderful albums distributed in France by Le Chant-du-Monde. The arrival of Earl Scruggs' method was another important step in his initial self-taught journey. However, banjos and records were so rare and expensive in Belgium, that on the advice of Derroll Adams - a famous American banjoist residing in Antwerp - he decided to go to London to Clifford Essex and Collet's records shop, as well as later to John Alvey Turner.

In 1976, after completing a master degree in physical education at the University of Louvain (UCL), he left for New York to study with Banjoist Roger Sprung. This first trip of several months made him discover the five-string in its true context, notably at the Philadelphia festival and the Union Grove Festival in Virginia. On his way from New York to Philadelphia, then to Washington and Nashville, he met Saul Broudy before passing through Tracy Schwarz's farm (NLCR) and meeting many musicians, such as Pete Seeger, the New Lost City Ramblers, Frank Wakefield, the Highwood String Band, the Delaware Water Gap, Tex Logan, George Pegram, Kyle Creed... and to complete the loop, the Dillard's in an electrified version backstage at the Birchmere in Arlington (Va).

He left in 1983 for a second great journey, which began in Washington at the American Folklife Festival, this time to meet other personalities such as Ralph Rinzler (Smithsonian), Alan Jabbour (Library of Congress), Jimmy Arnold, Hub Nitchie (Banjo Newsletter), Reed Martin, collectors James Bollman and Mike Holmes, Paul Morrissey (Liberty Banjo Co.), Winnie Winston, Stephen Wade, Frank Proffitt Jr., Del McCoury...

The return to the country in 1976 had been the beginning of a professional musical activity that would last about ten years. From 1988, after having been present on the Belgian scene with the duo "Les Frères De Smaele", the next 25 years will be more discreet, as a paper restorer in the Prints Room of the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR). There, artists like Pieter Dürer, Pierre Brueghel, Hieronimus Cock and others Wierix, Felicien Rops, James Ensor, Dirk Baksteen, Leon Spilliaert... constituted a completely different universe. His workshop was located in Brussels, just in front of the new Musical Instrument Museum (MIM). Following the publication by the Instruments Museum, in 1983, of his first book on the five-string banjo, the MIM will ask him to build a thematic exhibition (2003-2004), during which the Haitian banza was fortuitously discovered at the Musée de la Cité de la Musique in Paris. Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, Bob Carlin, Daniel Jatta and later Clarke Buehling were the guests of honour. The documentary *A Banjo Frolic* was produced to accompany the exhibition, and subsequently published by Frémeaux & Associés (Paris, 2008).

Meanwhile, Gerard had remained an active musician and continued his research, publishing several books and articles on the five-string banjo, travelling regularly to the USA to see friends at the Merlefest (2001) or participate at the Maryland Banjo Academy (1998, 2000), the American Banjo Fraternity rally (2017), the Banjo Gathering (2005, 2016, 2018) or visit major banjo exhibitions (Lexington, Baltimore, New York). While going, he will also continue to be a guest on some RTBF radio broadcasts (George Pradez, Anne Magermans, Didier Mélon, Laurent Dehossay, or Paul Ranz on the VRT program).

In October 2019, he visited the American Banjo Museum in Oklahoma City (OK) and the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago.

Follow him on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo>
or on his website: <http://www.desmaele5str.be>

A Five-String banjo Sourcebook is the title of his latest monograph (L'Harmattan, 2019):

It is an understatement to say that the banjo still occupies a large part of his life. For amateurs, the subject is inexhaustible!