

# Lifestyle

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Prince Albert of Monaco, Prince Jacques and Princess Gabriella of Monaco pose for photographs during the 20th anniversary of "Bob l'eponge" as part of the 59th Monte-Carlo Television Festival on June 16, 2019 in Monaco. — AFP

## CZECH BANJOS, MANDOLINS WIN OVER US BLUEGRASS STARS



Czech craftsman and banjos and mandolins maker, Rosta Capek poses at his workshop in his house in the Czech village of Chouzava, 40km far from Prague. — AFP photos



Rosta Capek works on a mandolin at his workshop in his house in the Czech village of Chouzava.



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Star banjo player Ned Luberecki sits back in an armchair at a Prague music hall, contemplates the instrument he's holding, then gently begins strumming. "I'm still waiting on a name for it. I've just decided she's a 'she'. But it should be a Czech name," the American musician says of his six-month-old handmade banjo, crafted in a tiny village tucked away on a Czech mountain range. Luberecki, who was named the 2018 Banjo Player of the Year by the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), is one of several renowned artists of the country and western style music to play banjos and mandolins made by Rosta Capek.

The Czech craftsman supplies instruments to the likes of 15-time Grammy winner Ricky Skaggs and Grammy nominee Doyle Lawson, both American bluegrass stalwarts. Chasing away Flatt and Scruggs, his dog and cat named after the famous bluegrass duo formed in its early days in the 1940s, the 51-year-old Capek says he is living his dream. "When Ricky Skaggs, a star of stars and an absolutely fabulous musician for many people, buys an instrument from you, it's fantastic," Capek told AFP, at his workshop in Chouzava, a village about 30 kilometers (19 miles) south of Prague.

### American and illicit

Bluegrass was everywhere as Capek was growing up in a small flat in Prague—he would listen on tape to the sounds and songs of Bill Monroe, the originator of the musical style. His father founded and managed ex-Czechoslovakia's first and only women's bluegrass group, in which Capek's mother played banjo. "I was sure I wouldn't be a professional musician. I saw my parents rarely, they had 260 concerts a year. "But my love for musical instruments led me to study at a violin making school," he said.

Capek made his first banjo in 1985 when the country was still under communist rule. He copied his mother's Gibson, one of only two five-string banjos in the country, where all things American were strictly banned. "Mum got the Gibson from a factory where she played a show with her band," Capek said. "Someone brought it there as a sample from the States but they thought it was lousy and that they could make a better one themselves," Capek added with a chuckle.

### Czech, please!

Communist rule played a major role in the development of the local bluegrass scene and the music's popularity. Over time, Czechoslovak bluegrass evolved from the country's "tramp" movement that saw hundreds pack up and leave cities to roam the countryside at weekends between the two world wars. Live music became the obvious pastime for long evenings by the campfire.

The slightly more liberal 1960s gave rise to full-blown bluegrass bands with names such as the Greenhorns or Rangers. "The communists wouldn't allow them to sing in English so they wrote Czech lyrics for bluegrass and country standards," said Petr Brandejs, head of the Czech Bluegrass Association. Sung in Czech, songs like "Jesse James", "Orange Blossom Special" or "Folsom Prison Blues" soon found their way into the improvised and spontaneous jam sessions still beloved of many Czechs.

After the 1968 crackdown on the Prague Spring move-

ment by Soviet-led armies, authorities forced bands with English names to change them to Czech ones if they wanted to perform. They did and the music lived on. "People went to the woods to be free even during communism. And when they played this American music there, they were even more free and they also showed opposition to the regime," Brandejs told AFP.



Rosta Capek poses at his workshop in his house in the Czech village of Chouzava.

### Bluegrass wedding

Capek sold his first mandolin in the United States in 1995. "The first one paid my air ticket so I was happy, but I still had a long way to go," said the man, who now makes about a dozen mandolins and up to 50 banjos a year. He cites patience, accuracy and a willingness to study other makers' instruments as key to his craft. "When we go to America now, we're confident. We know we have top-quality instruments that the stars like to play," he said.

Last year was special for Capek: he married his long-time assistant at a "bluegrass wedding," his best man being the dobro player Rob Ickes, a 15-time IBMA Award winner. Then in September, Luberecki—who has two custom-made Capek banjos—won his award. "He won it with my banjo. It's the biggest reward I ever got," said Capek, who also organizes bluegrass concerts in Prague. — AFP

## Sudanese wrestlers embrace afresh after protest crackdown

Dramatic cheers and boos echoed through a spartan arena in Sudan's capital where hulking wrestlers went head-to-head once more, after a brief hiatus. Captivating a sea of spectators, two of the wrestlers bowed forward before pouncing into one another, trading blows and tumbling to the sandy floor at the Haj Youssef stadium on the edge of Khartoum. Originating in the Nuba mountains, the sport has become wildly popular country-wide in recent years. "People have put football aside and come here to watch Sudanese wrestling because it is about peace, love and fraternity," said Noor Mohammed, who heads the Sudanese wrestling club.

"All the people present here come from all the [different] tribes of Sudan and they love wrestling," he added. The sport was briefly put on hold after the violent dispersal of a sit-in outside army headquarters on June 3 by men in military fatigues, according to protesters. But "over the past few days spectators started flowing back to the arena to watch wrestling matches again," said Altaib Deifallah, a wrestler who has in the game since 1993. Protesters have been demanding Sudan's ruling generals hand over power to civilians after deposing autocrat Omar al-Bashir in early April.



In this file photo from 2013, Japanese diplomat Yasuhiro Murotatsu, aka "Muro" (right) competes against Saleh Omar Bol Tia Kafi aka "Al-Mudiriya" in a Nuba wrestling match in Khartoum. — AFP

Wrestling attracts hundreds of spectators to stadiums—some sat in chairs, others on the ground. It is believed to be the most watched sport, after soccer. In 2010, the Sudanese government brought the sport to the capital by building Haj Youssef stadium, which has hosted several matches starring international wrestlers. Professionals from Japan faced off with their Sudanese counterparts in Khartoum in 2014. A year earlier, a Japanese diplomat also joined a thrilling contest before losing the final bout. "We have also participated in international tournaments including in South Korea, Japan, Niger, Egypt and Turkey," said Harba, a wrestler since 1997. "Wrestling has long kept Sudanese people united—it brings thousands to watch weekly and I am sure it will continue to bring more than any other sport," he said. — AFP