

Special series

Meet the Masters: Andrew Mowry

By James Kent

Andrew Mowry, age 37, is a Vermonter transplanted to Oregon, and has been building mandolins off and on since high school; he turned full-time in 2005. Trained in geology and geography, he brings to his work both a scientist's exactitude and curiosity about new techniques and materials. There are no Opry stars picking a Mowry (that we could find) but his instruments have a deeply loyal following in the U.S. and have been shipped to Israel, Ireland and Italy. —Jim Kent

Let's start with some of the stats: your production volume, backlog, etc.

I make about 12 instruments a year that range from \$4,200 for the basic A-model to \$6,800 for the F-model. In 2013, I'll make instrument number 100. That total comprises about 40 F5 models, 20 A5; 20 guitar-shaped octave mandolins, 10 two-points, five guitars and some oddball instruments. I generally build in batches of four to six. If I have more than six going at a time, I find myself hurrying too much. Today my backlog is about a year; before the recession it was up to two and half years.

Every luthier has visions of gaining popularity and being able to charge more. I have enough money to keep enjoying what I'm doing. I don't have employees or try to build more; I'd rather get better at doing what I'm doing than increase volume. I like working alone and the flexibility it affords, especially to spend time with my kids (Will, age six and Zoe, three and a half). People often ask about apprenticeships, but I don't think I could make it work because of space

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limitations. My shop is small and I like working alone.

What was the music of your childhood?

I grew up in Grafton, Vermont, where there is a vital live music and contra dance scene, but our house was not especially musical. We had maybe 20 LPs and the radio. We had a fair collection of folk music, some Clancy brothers, which I always liked and still like Celtic music. I have three older brothers, so mostly what we had around the house was 1980s pop music.

When I got old enough, I started playing tin whistle, then a fiddle inherited from my grandfather. He played fiddle and a little harmonica which made an impression on me. I had drum lessons in high school. I think my problem has been trying to play too many instruments and none too well. These days, when I finish a batch of instruments I keep them a week, tweak the set-up, and play them around the house. But I play pretty much the same tunes over and over. That helps me compare instrument to instrument, but doesn't make me much of a player.

How did you start out building?

When I was 9 or 10 my grandfather gave me a pocketknife and I whittled very simple folk instruments. The first instrument I played was violin. Then, in high school, using one of Roger Siminoff's books, I made my first mandolin up in the attic. In 2003, my wife and I moved to Missoula, Montana for her graduate school, and I worked as a software tester and trainer. In Missoula I finally had enough space to set up a shop and I built a few mandolins. Greg Boyd's shop was there, and I brought



Mowry in his shop. Courtesy: A. Mowry

them to him and he sold the first few. Greg has a great eye for detail, and he gave me advice on everything from shaping necks, binding, and finish work to sales and marketing. When we moved to Bend, Oregon in 2005, I had enough orders to open a business on my own.

What is your idea of the perfect instrument?

It makes you smile, you want to keep playing it and it encourages you to be adventurous; it is comfortable to hold, easy to play, and aesthetically pleasing. A lot of great instruments are notable for their broad response curve, and resonance that you can feel. The G and E are both warm and rich; the E is clear and bright. Playability is also hugely important, and goes hand in hand with resonance. In terms of aesthetics, I'm drawn toward instruments with a clean appearance, because I know how much thought and labor go into producing it.

I think there is a mythology about lutherie, that it is an ancient and mystical craft. In reality, most luthiers use a mix of new and old technologies. It's particularly true of those of us who use 20th-century "factory" instruments, like Gibsons, as our starting point. I use a CNC* machine to rough carve tops and backs, then adjust the final thickness by hand [CNC: Computer Numerically Controlled. A computer moves a router in the X, Y, and Z axes, allowing unaided carving and cutting of complex parts]. Most top mandolin builders are using CNC equipment because machines and software have become so accessible these days, and they're perfectly suited for archtop instruments. This is one area where the computer modeling skills from my geology and geography background are really helpful. I can carve tops to within 1mm of the ideal thickness with CNC, but there's still a ton of handwork. CNC is not taking the handwork out of building; I see it as taking out the grunt work and making it safer for me, leaving more time for the detail work that really counts.

This kind of automation is not entirely new. In the 1920s, Gibson used pantograph routers, which were an early, mechanical predecessor of CNC. Some factories today produce super-clean instruments with high-end CNC machining and very little handwork, but I prefer a combination approach, which leaves me with plenty of control over the sound and appearance of the instrument.

Other than your fingerprints, what makes a Mowry a Mowry? What is "the Mowry sound?"

I strive for a complex and warm sound. I've become known for clean workmanship and I think it plays a role in contributing to the sound. I think if an instrument is put together

well, it tends to sound better because the parts interact with each other more freely and as intended. I also spend a lot of time on setup, maximizing playability and getting the intonation right.

When you're a one-person operation, everything rests on your reputation as an individual. Sometimes customers are hesitant to go with a custom builder rather than a large company because they are worried about customer service. I've tried to dissuade that concern by giving a highly personalized experience that builders with high production quotas can't match.

What mandolin frontier interests you?

I'm interested in the family of larger mandolin-type instruments, which are booming in popularity. I love the mandola and its great tonal range, and I've been delighted to see and play a part in the rapid evolution of the octave mandolin.

As for innovation, I have put carbon-fiber neck reinforcement rods in 50 or 60 mandolins without a single complaint or any coming back for repair, which is better performance than in instruments with an adjustable truss rod. I use a solid, rectangular carbon-fiber rod that runs from the neck joint to the peg head. It is stiffer than a conventional adjustable rod and much lighter, so it reduces instrument weight. Single-action truss rods, in fact, weaken the neck. In general, a mandolin neck is so short you don't often need adjustability. Yet, it is hard to break the F5 tradition of having a truss rod. I offer customers either option at the same cost. I use several other features, like reversed-kerf lining, and slightly different F5 headstock geometry to reduce the chance of scroll breakage, that aren't immediately noticeable yet give some structural or acoustic advantage. [In

reversed-kerf lining, the slots about the side rather than face the interior of the instrument. This is a stiffer arrangement, and strengthens the whole rim assembly.]

Speaking of frontiers, how do you decide on the kind of finish to use?

After a lot of experimenting, I have settled on oil varnish over the last three years. I used to use a French polish (just shellac with a few additives, on bare wood). It was beautiful but not durable. At higher temperatures it gets so soft it can be imprinted by the instrument case, and in cold it can crackle. The ideal finish is easy to apply, thin, flexible, resistant to chipping, cracking and scratches, is easy to repair and ages well. Many finishes fail on one or more of those criteria. The oil varnish I'm using now is a little more difficult to apply, but is more durable, and looks quite nice. I don't think any builder is completely happy with any finish, but this is probably the best I've used.

As a builder, where does your inspiration come from?

Nature for design aesthetics and wood itself.

Existing great instruments are also a huge source of inspiration, and music itself. Hearing a great player pick up one of my instruments and do things with it that I didn't know were possible is probably my single greatest source of professional satisfaction.

When customers don't know what they want, how do you coach them?

I have a hard time describing sounds, so I understand how difficult this can be for some people. When customers can't put into words the kind of sound they are after, we talk about what they listen to, music and musicians they admire, what they play. I love interactions with customers. My

work has evolved more rapidly in quality and diversity because customers participate in developing design ideas.

What is the most important advice you give customers?

Keep it simple. Try to limit over-the-top ornamentation and accessories.

What is the quality you most admire in a customer?

Creativity and an eye for design. I admire the ability to be patient—that people can order an instrument they won't touch for a year or more.

What is the best advice you ever received?

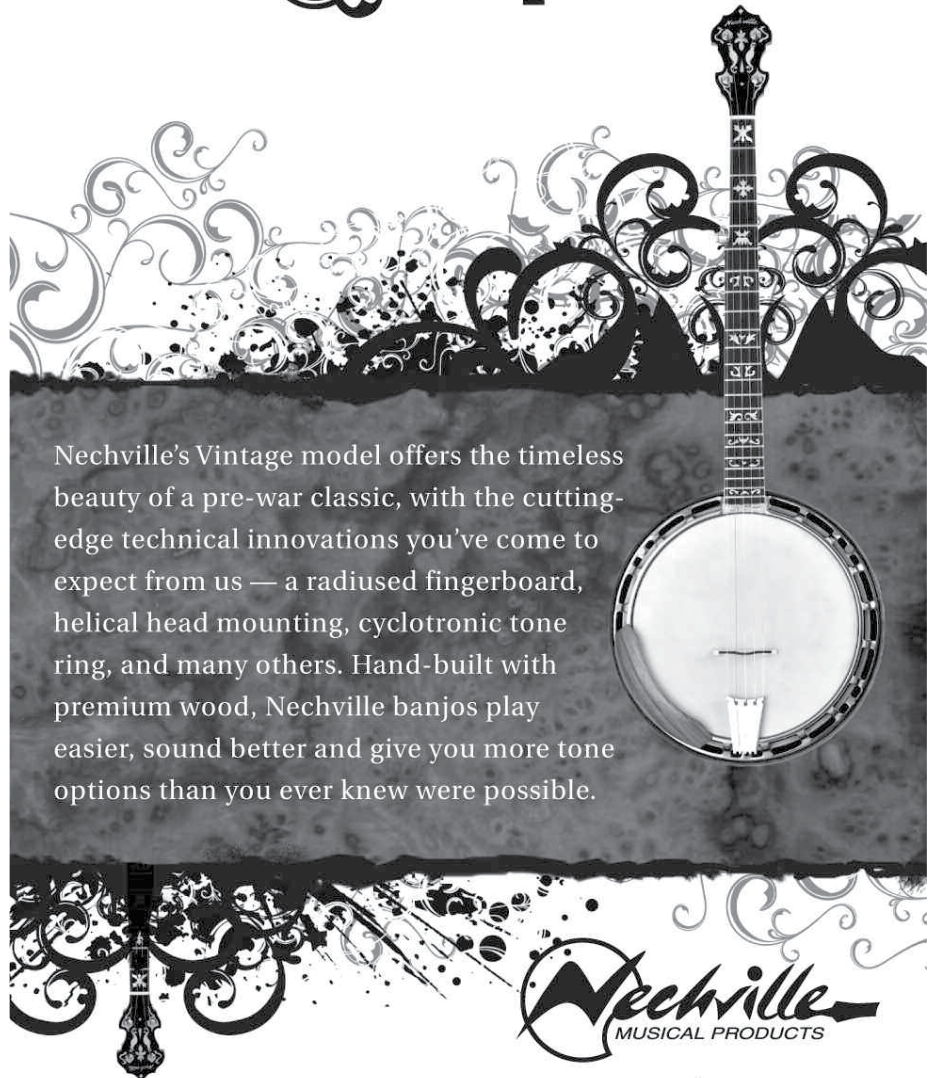
Stephen Owsley Smith is a mandolin builder then in New Mexico (now in Hawaii) and during college, I was on a trip through Taos and brought him one of my first mandolins, and asked what he thought. His advice was to keep my day job. It drove home the fact that it takes a long time to get good at this, and how far I had to go. You have to keep working on it. Instruments are complex and unpredictable; there's enough to learn to fill a lifetime.

What is your motto?

I have a list more than a single motto. I try not to let work become too stressful, and having a family has gone a long way towards putting work into perspective, enabling me to integrate it more successfully into our overall life. I try not to take myself too seriously and to remember how much I have to learn.

—James Kent is a recovering journalist and lover of mandolins and mandolin music. This is his second contribution to the Meet the Masters series.

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