

Interview with Bruce Weber

by Joe Mendel

Bruce Weber moved to Bozeman Montana in the early 1980's for the beauty of the mountains and the outdoor activities offered there. While looking for strings for his mandolin he was directed to the Flatiron Mandolin Co., little did he know how that trip would change his life. Once inside the Flatiron facility, he knew he had to work there. He worked his way up to become the manager of Flatiron, which by then was owned by the Gibson Corporation. In 1996, just before Christmas, Gibson announced it was moving the division to Nashville, Tenn. Bruce and a few other employees went to help set up the operation in Nashville, but decided it wasn't for them and moved back to Montana without jobs. Bruce and his wife, Mary, set up Sound to Earth to produce Weber Mandolins. When they went to the bank to for financing they already had orders in hand. Bruce's reputation and the fact that several former Flatiron employees were on board was enough to lure buyers for their instruments. I spoke with Bruce in February of 2006 for this interview.

Joe Mendel: Bruce, I've always wondered what kind of mandolin you were buying strings for the day you first walked into The Flatiron Mandolin Co.?

Bruce Weber: It was an old Flatiron Flat 2MC that I bought at Fred's in Kalispell, Montana a couple of years before we moved to the Bozeman area.

JM: What style of music do you play and do you get to play much anymore?

BW: Building is a great passion for me so I get very little time to play these days. When I do, I enjoy Celtic and hope to do a lot more classical. I might be considered as a mandolin trader by some, but I've started doing a little claw hammer.

JM: What drew you to the mandolin in the first place?

BW: I love the sound and the look. You can't listen to a lively tune played on a mandolin without smiling, bouncing or at least wiggling your toes a little. Generally all the mando players I've ever been around seem to be pretty happy people, at least when their picking.

The mandolin epitomizes the beauty of an acoustic instrument with all its flowing lines and curves. Instruments in the mandolin family can be dressed up with custom inlay and purfling or stripped down to clean simplicity and still show what luthery is all about.

JM: Weber Mandolins look traditional, but you've made several innovations, would you tell us about some of those and how they've improved your instruments?

BW: When Gibson moved its mandolin luthery from Montana to Nashville it was a blow to many of us who were dedicated to the art and the instrument.

The upside of starting from scratch is being able to take time to reevaluate every process, specification, and rut you get into over the years and then weigh it against tradition and history, art and function, and all that goes along with that.

Almost half of our innovations began with random conversations with players. The original Brekke Bridge design was the result of a conversation with Sam Bush when he said he was unhappy with the angle his thumb wheels were pushing up against the bottom of the saddle on his mando. Sam was convinced he was sacrificing tone and volume because of that angle which is magnified by the inevitable sag that occurs in most traditional saddles unless they are pretty heavy. In Vern's (Brekke) uniquely tenacious way he chewed on the solution for quite awhile before patenting the "Brekke Bridge". The bridge uses two wedges that ride on two ramps between the base and saddle which can be adjusted under full string tension with a small allen wrench. The wedges maintain a good contact from string to sound board eliminating that weird angle on thumb wheels.

Even though the Original Brekke worked so well, some players still wanted the traditional look so with a few design changes to the old two piece bridge we introduced the Traditional Brekke. The Traditional Brekke uses a brass bar inlaid into the bottom of the saddle integrated with the posts. The thumb wheels push down against the base instead of all the force being concentrated on the outside ends of the saddle, totally eliminating saddle sag and making the instrument smoother to play and with the slightly heavier bridge, enhancing that throaty sound.

Our one piece cast tailpiece was designed to eliminate the buzz or rattle you can get from the old two piece design and with the strings running under the tailpiece you won't rip up your arm or shirt. I also feel that the heavier tailpiece enhances the bass response considerably. From there it was a small step to create a combo armrest / tailpiece that is really comfortable to play and protects the edge of your instrument from constant wear. The arm rest also helps diminish the dampening effect your arm has on the sound board.

The Nymph was designed after talking to a few studio players who were looking for a way to eliminate the string noise between the bridge and tailpiece. We use an ebony piece with felt pads and rubber grommets that secure to the G and E strings. It's a classy add on with function.

Those are a few of the external innovations. Some of the internal improvements are a new rock solid neck joint, we still and always will hand graduate every top and back, the bracing is hand fit and tuned, and sound hole size, shape and placement are tailored to the individual player, plus a lot of little changes that enhance the whole instrument.

JM: Would you, briefly, walk us through the process of building a Weber Mandolin from milled wood to the finished instrument?

BW: That's a long walk, but I'll try to hit the high spots. If you were to order an instrument today we would deliver it to you within eight to twelve weeks depending on customization. We rough carve a lot of parts ahead of time so any warping or checking can be detected before the building starts. During week #1. The sound board is graduated and braced, and the rim is bent, blocked and kerfed. The fingerboard and peg head veneer are bound or purfled. Week #2. The top is glued to the rim structure and purfling is attached, then a little more graduation. The neck, fingerboard, and veneer are glued together and inlaid. Week #3. The fingerboard extension is attached to the top and the neck is fit to the body. The back is graduated and attached and then bound. Again a little more graduating and the neck is attached and hand shaped. Week #4. The Fingerboard is leveled and fretted. Week #5. The instrument is hand detailed. Week #6. Color, lacquer and dry time. Week #7. More dry time. Week #8. Wet sanding and buffing. Then final assembly and out to a very restless dealer or player.

This is simplifying the process incredibly and doesn't mention the hundred or so little details we put into every instrument.

JM: How much planning is done and how many prototypes are typically built before a new model is ready for production?

BW: We hash out the details pretty thoroughly before we start to build anything, but when the building starts it moves right along with a little tweaking on the way. It's rarely necessary to build more than one prototype.

JM: In a small production shop like Weber, you can react more quickly than very large corporation. If someone has a new idea or method for performing an operation, how do you evaluate and decide whether or not to implement the change?

BW: We're continually move towards improving our instruments, more so than cost cutting. Any ideas for changing a process are weighed against the effect on tone, volume and integrity. If the idea seems reasonable, we'll try the change on one stock instrument, if it proves to be beneficial we'll do another. All together it can take up to sixteen weeks or as fast as a couple of hours depending on where the change occurs in the process.

JM: What is your favorite part of building mandolins? What is best thing about your job?

BW: I love to sit at my bench and build or do custom work. I have incredible people to run the office so I can spend at least 80% of my time building. Talking with a player and designing their dream instrument together is a blast.

JM: How does the mandolin market differ from the guitar market?

BW: Mandolins are still a pretty small niche but growing every year. Guitars probably sell in the hundreds to one mando.

JM: What do you see for the future of the mandolin market and Weber Mandolins in particular?

BW: In the past I've been a little depressed about the market with all the imports being dumped into the mix. At least once every NAMM show and sometimes up to six times for the really persistent importers, they will bring some generic instrument up to me, point at the peg head and say "your name here, two hundred dollar". Unfortunately, I hear of more and more luthiers or maybe I should say business owners, some large and well known, some about the size of Weber, expecting the company's name and past reputation created here by American luthiers, to carry them while they succumb to the make a quick buck idea at the cost of sending more jobs overseas. Or, keep a very small portion of their building here in the U.S. and do just enough work on imported parts to allow them to advertise "made in USA" implying that the quality is just as good. Or, build a few domestic instruments and import the rest so people still have that brand name at a really great price. I'll step down from the soap box now.

Lord willing and as long as Mary and I have breath enough to live, "Weber" will remain an American made line of fine acoustic instruments anyone would be proud to own and play. Ok, I was still up there on the box.

The up side is, imports do allow people to get into a mandolin at a fairly low cost which has helped the mandolin market grow somewhat. When players are ready to upgrade to a domestically built instrument, Weber and other domestic builders will be here to help.

JM: How much contact and sharing of information takes place among mandolin builders?

BW: With very few exceptions I have found most luthiers to be very willing to share info on vendors, dealers, players and processes. When you work at something you love so much its fun to share with others that have a common passion.

JM: It seems that most mandolin players love the traditional "A" & "F" model mandolins, what percentage of players are open to new or different variations of the mandolin?

BW: About 90% of the instruments we build are based on the traditional body shapes with 90% of those being customized in some way. I love to try new things and if the variation doesn't compromise integrity, I'm all for it. We have noticed that a lot of younger players are open to things that are a little different, such as our Bighorn Model. It's a little fancier than an "A" model with a slightly larger body cavity. It has a little more "oomph" than an "A", but is not as fancy as "F" models.

JM: Are you currently working on any new models?

BW: In addition to building the full mandolin family, we've started to diversify into some other instruments that have been on my list for a long time. Our 15" carved top and back guitars have been in the market for the past year. A 16" and maybe even a 17" are on the way. At the January NAMM show we introduced our first square neck resonophonic with plans to have a new and innovated round neck at the Austin NAMM. I finally gave in to building a 5 string electric mando that we'll offer in a 4 and 8 string as well. Also at the January NAMM we had an octave mandolin tuning on a 23.5" scale built on our 15" carved guitar body, it's way cool. Other plans include a shallow carved top and back parlor guitar, a tenor guitar and yes even a dreadnaught. Mary and I would like to make Weber a one stop shop for bluegrass even if it means building banjos ;).

JM: Weber is known for their high quality instruments with great attention to detail and flawless finishes, but you're almost as well known for your excellent customer service and business philosophy. Could you tell us about those things that make your company different than the rest?

BW: Thank you. Mary and I are Christians and we gave the business over to His control right away. We strive to treat our players, dealers, and co-workers with care and respect. When a person calls Weber, we want them to know they've been heard and we'll do our best to have them come away from the call feeling good about their choice to deal with Weber. We don't inflate our prices based on what the market will bear. We want our instruments and our craft to be enjoyed by everyone who would like to. We offer our instruments, our time and service, and ourselves at the best possible cost to the players. If we can't get a WOW reaction when a player opens the case for the first time we haven't excelled at our job. We still make mistakes but Lord willing we will continue to learn and make improvements on our selves and the whole luthery process. We're not just representing Weber we're also trying to reflect Christ.

Sound to Earth and Weber Mandolins have recently moved into a schoolhouse in Logan Montana that was built in 1925, and Bruce and Mary now make their home in the same building. At 8000 square feet the new facility is about twice the size of the last one, and they now can look out at deer and antelope instead of traffic going by. Bruce and company have built a great reputation for fine quality and excellent service. As Bruce stated above, they are now making guitars as well as mandolins and they are as impressive as any instruments Weber has made to date, check them out if you have the chance. Bruce and Mary can be contacted by phone at: 888-886-7598, or through their website at: <http://www.soundtoearth.com>