

# Andy Statman

by Michael J. Keyes, MD

**Question:** What's a devout 56 year old Orthodox Jew doing playing bluegrass mandolin?

**Answer:** He' doing very well, thank you.

Hearing is believing with Andy Statman, he is first and foremost a student of Bill Monroe and he will tell you so: "If you want to learn to play the mandolin, you have to learn to play bluegrass and that means learning Bill Monroe."

I had the pleasure of listening and talking to Andy for three hours a while ago when he gave a workshop at the home of Jim and Nancy Nikora in Madison, Wisconsin. What was unusual about this workshop was that while very few tunes were played, there was a lot of music present. I think I learned more about playing music and played less music than in any other workshop I have been in. Andy has been playing the mandolin all of his adult life, he played the same A2Z Gibson for 35 years until his recent acquisition of a Will Kimble F-5, and he has made an intense study of the instrument and how to play it.

If you go by his latest CD (East Flatbush Blues) or his many works in print, you would never know that Andy is, at heart, a traditionalist when it comes to mandolin music. But he credits all of his knowledge of the instrument to three men: Bill Monroe, Sonny Osborne, and Jesse McReynolds and you cannot get more traditional than that. But that was just a start. Early in his career he immersed himself in bluegrass and he attributes that early experience for his ability to play the multitude of styles that he now enjoys. "You need to know one style very well", he told our class, "If you play a lot of styles and don't know one really well, you will never learn to play the mandolin." Once you learn a style thoroughly, and he makes no bones that for mandolin that style should be bluegrass, you can go on and play other styles. To his mind Bill Monroe set the standard by using the full potential of the mandolin in his music and those innovations carry over to any type of music.

This was an interesting observation from someone who a lot consider to be a jazz mandolinist or at least an iconoclast when it come to "tradition." In fact, our class was quite eclectic with interests ranged from pure classical to blues to bluegrass. Everyone seemed to see something different in Andy's music and each was probably right. What Andy gave back, however, was a broad look at being a musician and focused on the unique demands of playing the mandolin. He considers it to be a unique string instrument that requires a set of techniques and a mindset that is not shared with other instruments. He strongly advocates learning to play the mandolin as a mandolin and not as a pseudo guitar.

Here is a clip of him talking on this subject.

[Video Andy talks about mandolin is not a guitar](#)  
[mp3 of Andy talking about mandolin vs guitar](#)

Andy credits his success to hard work and his delving deeply into learning everything he could about playing the mandolin. In addition he has learned to let the music come out and continues to find new things while playing. "It's like turning on the radio, you never know what is on so you just play and enjoy what is happening." To him playing the mandolin (and the clarinet, he is a master Klezmer clarinetist) is pure joy and he recognizes that this same thing happens across the board in improvisational music from jazz to bluegrass. Technique is just a way to get to this stage in a musicians career. Once you have solid technical skill, the rest is up to you.

Here he talks about letting the music flow from you and not from a set of techniques.

[Video of Andy talking about being a musician](#)  
[mp3 on being a musician](#)

And relaxation:

[video relaxation](#)  
[mp3 relaxation](#)

Andy does stress the importance of good tone which means that players should emphasize the right hand "98 percent" over the left hand. "The left hand means nothing if you don't have good tone. I know

musicians who have phenomenal knowledge of the finger board but they can't get a sound out of the instrument." He points this out in the following video.

[Video Right hand and tone](#) [mp3 right hand and tone](#)

He also has some very specific ideas on how to develop tone. For those of you who are interested, Andy uses an Extra-Heavy Fender pick. He stresses a ninety degree pick angle for individual string playing in this video:

[mp3 pick angle](#)

and in the "Chop" in this video:

[video chop](#)  
[mp3 chop](#)

And, of course, he talks about going from the oval hole AZ2 Gibson to the new will Kimble F5:

[video New F hole](#)  
[mp3 NewF hole](#)

Ultimately, he says, playing the mandolin should be fun

[video mandolin is fun](#)  
[mp3 mandolin is fun](#)

None of this information is new to me, but the passion and intensity that Andy Statman brings to the workshop made me think more about why I play instead of how I play. If you ever get the chance to see him in person, do so and if you can find a workshop, you will never regret it.

## Resources

Andy's web site is at <http://andystatman.org/index.html> and is well worth visiting.

You can get Andy Statman CDs, instructional books, and articles at Elderly instruments (<http://elderly.com/search/elderly?terms=andy+statman&x=0&y=0>) In addition to his mandolin playing, you will be introduced to his clarinet music.

You can get a free copy of Apple's Quicktime at that will work on PCs and Macs at <http://www.apple.com/quicktime/download/>. There are Linux versions available at <http://heroinewarrior.com/quicktime.php3>



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### About the Author

**Mike Keyes**, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Good Luck." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at [mikeyes@charter.net](mailto:mikeyes@charter.net) if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo.