

# Interview: Peter Mix

by Joe Mendel

The love of music and stringed instruments runs deep in Peter Mix. His paternal grandparents were musicians in Europe and his father was a great stride blues piano player. At 19, Peter bought his first mandolin shortly after his grandmother, a retired concert violinist, gave him her violins. The mandolin seemed like the ideal bridge from guitar to violin and the 1918 Gibson A1 came with its original catalog full of photos of solo artists, duos, ensembles and orchestras, all playing mandolin-family instruments. It opened a door to a world that remains a focal point in his life.

Over the years, Peter has worked as a guitarist, mandolinist, violinist and tenor guitarist while running a number of retail ventures, all the while buying and selling stringed instruments. He spent the past 9 years working with Pete Langdell and a crew of skilled luthiers at Rigel.

**Joe Mendel:** It's nice to talk with you again, Peter. You have a long history with mandolins, and while I know you respect the traditional instruments, having met you a few times over the years I'm not surprised that you have a liking for things a little bit out of the ordinary. How did you become interested in mandolins that were outside those traditions?

**Peter Mix:** It's hard to say with certainty, but I became a big fan of John Monteleone's work in the early '80's and had him build for me a 10-string mandolin/mandola which was one of 4 that he built. That may have been the start.

**JM:** The Rigel mandolins were extremely original in their construction and look, but used traditional materials, is carbon fiber the next logical step? Or is this a big leap into the unknown?

**PM:** In some respects, this is a logical next step. I believe that fine carved-wood instruments will always be of major appeal to players, but one of the realities with these instruments is that they are delicate and increasingly dear. Whether you travel with a fine mandolin or guitar or violin, you have to deal with the climate changes that will affect your instrument as well having to deal with the safety of your instrument. Of course, you can ignore these factors, but your instrument is still likely to get cranky if you travel to a high-humidity locale from a dry one or vice versa. You have to be careful about high heat. You want to avoid leaving them behind in a taxi. Having found myself chasing a cab with my L&H mandocello in the trunk, I can speak from first-hand experience.

Carbon fiber doesn't react adversely to climate changes. They tend to hold pitch much more dependably. They are also replaceable.

**JM:** The Mix A-5 looks very traditional in its outline and shape, why did you use the A shape as the beginning point for them?

**PM:** We would have started with an F5, but it was simply too daunting to begin there. Carbon fiber has doesn't particularly like sharp points and tight curves, both of which pretty much define the F5, so we chose a more practical starting point by focusing on the A5 design.

For me, the A5's sound chamber has been so well-proved over the years that I felt no need to re-invent it. It struck me that the best approach we could take was to treat carbon fiber as another kind of tonewood that required different construction techniques. Building around a proven sound chamber offered the highest probability of success as far as I was concerned.

Will Kimble has proven to be the perfect collaborator on this project. He works at an extremely high level and has a wonderfully inquiring mind. We looked at the project from a very similar perspective.

**JM:** Did working with Pete Langdell open your eyes to new way of seeing things?

**PM:** Absolutely. Pete is a brilliant acoustic designer and extraordinarily gifted with his hands. He can make whatever he puts his mind to and he's compelled to find his own way. He could build a fabulous F5, but chooses not to simply because everyone else does. I still hope he builds one or two as I know he'll do a great job.

**JM:** Why do you think it took so long for someone to make a CF mandolin? CF guitars have been around for several years, as have CF violin family instruments.

**PM:** I have to assume that the daunting cost of development was a part of it. With Rigel's demise and the need to turn to some useful purpose, it became clear to me that if no one else was going to develop it, I knew exactly how it could be done and I simply put the idea in motion.

**JM:** Working with carbon fiber is completely different animal than wood, are there any similarities with building a mandolin from wood.

**PM:** The construction is quite different and the lay-up of the fabric is a fine art that requires considerable knowledge and skill. Once the parts are molded, they have to be assembled very much as a wood mandolin is assembled. Finish and set-up are identical.

**JM:** Would you describe the building process you are using for these instruments?

**PM:** Much of the method is proprietary, but suffice it to say that the component parts are built in a mold and glued together once they've come out of the autoclave and cured.

**JM:** Did you know anything about working with CF before starting this project? How much help did you require, and from whom did you get guidance for this project?

**PM:** I knew only as much as the average person. I immediately went to the folks who build superb bowed instruments, Clear Carbon & Components. Working with them and Will Kimble is producing fantastic results.

**JM:** What were the main obstacles you needed to overcome?

**PM:** Raising capital, of course, is always a challenge, particularly when the risk of failure is considerable. I had complete confidence right from the start, but I've been far more deeply involved in mandolin production than most people, so where some see insurmountable problems, I see challenges that I know I can overcome. Conveying my certainty to others was not easy, but the concept is so solid and promising that we were able to raise the funds needed to get it off the ground.

Honestly, I've known from the start that it would work and I could see each step in the process, so I just took the first step, then the next.

**JM:** How long does it take, from start to finish, to build one of your mandolins?

**PM:** Build-time is roughly a month, like many production instruments. Each aspect is time-consuming, but has to be done right.

**JM:** What was the reaction to them at the winter NAMM show? Did dealers take to them pretty well?

**PM:** Cynthia and I were bowled over by the response. From the moment the show opened on Thursday morning, right through Sunday afternoon, we were swamped with visitors who had come specifically to see and play the carbon fiber mandolins. Dealers and players alike were amazed and delighted. Over and over again we heard "I expected them to be good, but I had no idea they'd be this good".

**JM:** Having not seen the Mix A-5 in person yet, I have to say there is something I find very exciting about the whole idea, much more than CF guitars. I'm pleased to know that there will be a dealer in my area; I can't wait to play one.

Are you getting a lot of positive feedback from those who have seen them?

**PM:** Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, really extraordinarily so. They are marvelous instruments that feel right in the hands, sound superb and look amazing. Carbon fiber is quite beautiful and no two instruments are identical visually. The fabric settles around the mold a bit differently each time and the result is a bit like the figure in maple- it's always different. Structurally, the instruments are identical, so each will sound and feel like the others.

**JM:** How would you describe the sound from each of your models, the oval hole and the F-hole? Do they correspond to comparable wooden instruments?

**PM:** Yes, they are quite similar to their wood counterparts. Again, if you think of carbon fiber as another kind of tonewood, you can readily imagine what the voices will be. Our A4 has the best qualities of a fine ovalhole mandolin with an enveloping, rich bass that wraps around the player. As well, it has the clarity and punch on the treble end that you look for in a great f-hole instrument, so it's a bit of both.

The A5 is everything one can hope for in a great f-hole mandolin- powerful, complex of voice, crystal clear and warm with great sustain and powerful bottom end.

**JM:** Do they feel like mandolins we are used to playing? What are the biggest differences & similarities?

**PM:** Our neck is exceptionally comfortable. I have a blind 95-year-old student who has been playing the same instrument for many years (her father bought it used in 1920) and when she picks up one of the carbon fiber mandolins, she frequently cannot tell which instrument she's playing, at least not by feel.

The biggest difference aside from the unusual beauty of the material is the weight. The Mix A4 and A5 are considerably lighter than their wood counter-parts. They are astonishingly responsive.

**JM:** Do you think players will replace their more traditional mandolins with the Mix A-5 or will it be another color in the palette? Or both?

**PM:** Well, if they choose to replace their fine traditional instruments with ours, please send your cast-offs to us! Honestly, I don't expect carbon fiber to replace maple and spruce mandolins. Each is different, each has virtues. As we all know, it is NOT possible to have too many mandolins.

**JM:** Will you be making F-5 models or other body styles in the future? How about mandolas, octave mandolins & mando-cellos?

**PM:** We're working now on an F5 and a mandola. Each is a challenge in its own way, but we are intent upon developing them in carbon fiber because it makes so much sense.

Larger mandolin-family instruments are always on my mind, so we hope to develop them as well as time and capital allow.

**JM:** When can we expect to hear that CD you've been working on?

**PM:** That's a good question and I wish I had an answer for you. Perhaps by the end of the year.... I first met Peter at the January 2005 NAMM show, and again at Mandofest 2005, where I was able to just hang out with him and get to know him a bit. We've kept in touch via telephone and e-mail. Peter is a very interesting guy to hang out with, an excellent mandolinist, and an innovator in mandolin design. He has a pleasantly different way of looking at things and this is one of the endearing things about him. When the news of the demise of Rigel Mandolins came out I felt very bad for all involved, but it was not long before Peter introduced New Millennium Acoustic Design and the Mix A-5. It looks like a very promising concept in mandolins, to find out more peter can be contacted @:

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