

Breaking in a New Mandolin

by Steve Smith

I have had the good fortune and pleasure to acquire a new Ellis F-5 mandolin SN# 113-07 made in Austin, Texas by Tom Ellis. I have been a fan of Ellis mandolins since playing one belonging to my friend Gary Alter in Virginia a little over two years ago. In this short article I'll share my experiences and opinions on the ongoing process of breaking in a new mandolin.

There really is no substitute for playing an instrument constantly for years; it's what brings the most joy to us. The more you play, the more the instrument responds and the more you learn how to make that particular instrument respond. Ideally we'd like to have one mandolin that can be played in any style with tone suitable for bluegrass, jazz, classical, Celtic, etc. So logically if you use only one musical technique or play just one way or style, the mandolin may not reach its full potential. Try many things!

One comment I often hear from owners of new acoustic instruments in general (and mandolins in particular) is how they often become tight and stiff overnight after a day's playing. I have found this to be true, at least to my ears. But the more I play an instrument the less often this closing up or stiffness occurs - and for shorter periods of time. I do notice a tendency for an instrument to stiffen up if I don't use it for a while, even a vintage instrument. However, these instruments come back much more quickly than some of my newer instruments.

I like to warm my mandolin up a bit before I begin a practice session or performance, just like my hands. Using open sustaining chords is a good start. The basic open G, C, D and A are good places to start but if you move up the neck along the G string first just changing notes on the G and letting the D, A, and E ring, you really begin to drive the whole mandolin. Take it through the twelfth or fourteenth fret and you'll learn some new and very useful one-finger chords along the way. Go back down and add double stops along the G and D strings, again sustaining and learning some new two-finger chords. Chop them and let them ring.

Playing scales in closed positions up and down the neck is another thing to try (you may have done this already). Play all sorts of rhythmic variations from tremolo to sixteenth notes. Play an F# at the fourth fret, third string and feel the response. Play the F# at the eleventh fret on the fourth string and feel the difference. There is certainly more drive on the instrument in general with a larger string playing a certain frequency than a smaller diameter string. Get up there and drive em'. Play all sorts of chords throughout the chromatic range of the mandolin, sustaining and chopping them.

So much of an instrument's tone is in the hands of its owner based on his or her playing style. While different instruments have different characteristics they certainly respond to our individual playing style over time and tone is often shaped accordingly. Hand your mandolin to someone else for a test drive and you may hear something very different coming out. (Didn't know it could sound like that!!!) The more ways you can play your mandolin throughout its range the more it will respond. Try this with an old mandolin as well and notice changes. It is a good idea to record if possible to listen for progress.

We've all heard of the old "speaker in the closet" routine, blasting music through the instrument constantly to drive it nonstop. It can't hurt. I have done this with a guitar with favorable results. The guitar felt a bit more open but still required playing to give it focus.

Based more on experience than on anything scientific, these are things I have done to help bring out tone in a new mandolin (or guitar). There is really no substitute for playing. Give these ideas a try and you are bound to bring out your instrument's voice; you may learn something neat along the way. Oh, and how's my Ellis coming along? Every day it sounds a year older - stunning!

Dig in and play,
Steve Smith