

Interview: Graham McDonald

by Joe Mendel

Like many of us Graham McDonald started playing guitar in his teen years, and the mandolin soon caught his ear. He has worked in music stores and had various other employment over the years, most jobs having something to do with music. He now has been building fretted instruments for nearly 25 years, in Australia and has written two excellent books on instrument construction; The Bouzouki Book and The Mandolin Project.

Joe Mendel: Hi Graham. What made you decide to take up playing music in the first place?

Graham McDonald: I was sent off to piano lessons while still in primary (elementary) school, which I hated because I was only allowed to play scales and exercises, really boring stuff. I learnt the flute in high school, which was more enjoyable, and especially after I discovered people played jazz on the flute, and then Jethro Tull Flute in a rock band! I think I eventually wanted to play more than one note at a time, so I drifted towards the guitar.

JM: How did the mandolin catch your ear?

GM: I started playing guitar in my teens (didn't everyone?) and discovered mandolin a few years later. It was probably the mandolin playing on Rod Stewart's Every Picture Tells a Story which grabbed me, and I happened to be sharing a flat near Bondi Beach in Sydney with an Englishman who had gone to college with Ray Jackson, the mandolin player from English folk-rock band Lindesfarne who played on those sessions. The music which really grabbed my attention initially was that of the British folk rock bands like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention and then the more acoustic music coming out of Ireland from bands like Planxty and the Bothy Band which featured strong melodic playing of dance tunes with intricate rhythmic backing lines played on guitars, mandolins and this new instrument, the Irish bouzouki.

JM: How did you get into building and repairing?

GM: Over the next few years I became more and more interested in the instruments themselves, doing some repair and restoration work and even steaming apart a cheap Spanish classical (no, it never went back together again). : In the early 80s I ended up working in a music shop in Melbourne which brought me in contact with a very good guitar repairer and a couple of people who actually built instruments and there was a local wholesaler who imported various instrument woods and parts from Germany. So armed with a copy of Irving Sloane's classical guitar building book, a photo of a bouzouki on the back of one of the Planxty LPs and some encouragement from those I worked with I made a bouzouki. Then I made another and another one and it all went on from there.

A year or so later we moved back to Sydney and I was able to spend 18 months working with Jim Williams, which gave me a good solid base for future work. It was the time

when Jim was writing his well known book on guitar buildings and most of the hands you see in that book are mine.

JM: That was one of the earlier repair books I got my hands on, though I can't find my copy of now. Did you learn much from having a hand (pun intended) in Jim's book?

GM: The useful part for me working with Jim as he went through the process of writing the book and his thinking about how to document what he was doing. I was very much the new boy and my contribution was little more than artistically holding a chisel when required. What I was able learn and absorb was his way of building guitars as well learn a lot about repairing instruments. Jim moved back to his home town after those 18 months to go to university and finish the book and I stayed on doing the repairs for the music shop whose back room we had been renting. A few years solidly working on repairs is a great basis for building instruments. If nothing else it focuses the thinking on what can go wrong with an instrument after it has been built.

JM: Did having participated in Jim's book have anything to do with you deciding to write yours?

GM: I suppose it showed me that writing a book was something people could do, rather than having any direct inspiration. I was writing regularly on music subjects for our local newspaper and I had written a fairly lengthy article for American Lutherie, the GAL quarterly on Irish bouzoukis in 1998. Somewhere along the way I figured I could expand the GAL article into something bigger, so it started. I liked doing the first one so much I did it again with The Mandolin Project, published last year, and there is another one in the planning stages at the moment.

JM: How difficult was writing yours books?

GM: I have never thought of it as difficult. It requires a level of organization and commitment as there are a whole lot of factors involved. I had to learn a lot about digital photography and discipline myself to write down what I was doing as I did it and take as many photos as possible at the same time. That documentation process was only the first part as I did all the design and layout work as well, and then had to learn about how the printing industry works. The technology there changes all the time, so that is another thing that you have to keep up to date on.

JM: What is your definition of the difference between a bouzouki and an octave mandolin?

GM: Scale length! I have been on a Irish bouzouki/cittern discussion list for, as I realized recently, close on 12 years, and over that time there have been several 'spirited' discussions to try to come to a concensus on what to call these things. There is now more or less general agreement that an octave mandolin has a scale length of less than 23-24" and a bouzouki a scale length longer than that. A cittern is of octave mandolin scale, but with five rather than four courses of strings, and no one is quite sure what a longer scale five course instrument should be called. In any case it is often comes down to the preference of the builder and the player.

JM: Does building instruments that are not rigidly defined by the market give you any

particular freedom to try things that you might not on a guitar or other more familiar instruments?

GM: Building instruments like bouzoukis allows as much freedom as you want in terms of design and the way you put them together. There is some market expectation of the 'onion on a stick' look, and that style of instrument certainly works fine for some uses. It gives a bright jangly sound that works in a band environment with a guitar as another rhythm instrument. I think when a bouzouki is used as a solo accompanying instrument a little more warmth in the bass is better, so a larger body can help. I build bouzoukis with a guitar body about the size of a 00 and a smaller size which is a teardrop with a small upper bout which both gives a bit more bass and makes it easier to play on your knee. It is a family of instruments that is still evolving as players find new ways to incorporate the instruments in differing forms of music and the builders respond to the demands of the musicians.

JM: In the US, Gibson mandolins have been “the” pattern for most mandolin builders for many years, has not being so close to that affected your instruments one way or another?

GM: Because the initial development of Irish bouzoukis and modern citterns came out of the UK and Ireland, it was those instruments and builders who were my first inspiration. It was the instruments of Stephan Sobell and Peter Abnett that I first saw on record covers, and their instruments were coming out of European traditions rather than the Gibson mould. Sobell's 'cittern' was a mix of the Portuguese guitarra and a Martin carved top guitar with a tenor banjo scale length. Abnett's instruments with their vaulted backs are essentially a scaled up German mandolin, of the style usually called a Portuguese mandolin for some reason lost in the mists of marketing history. Those building styles gave the sound that most of the players expected, so it was the way I built them, though being on the other side of the world I did not have much other than photos to work from.

It is only in recent years as I have drifted towards building more mandolins that I have become more interested in the Gibson style of construction. Not coming from that tradition, with all its attendant mythologies and folklore, means I probably question it a little more, rather than just assuming it is the only way to build an instrument.

JM: Speaking of more than one way to build an instrument, would you mind walking us through the steps in your building process? Without having to write another book, of course.

GM: The first step is deciding the timbers, selecting what combination to use, often in consultation with the customer. Next is all the basic joining and thickening, followed by side bending and constructing the rim assembly. Once that is finished the soundboard and back are braced and the neck is fabricated. When the neck gets attached depends on what instrument I am building. The bouzouki necks are built like a Strat neck and only get bolted on at the end. Glued in mandolin necks go on after the top is glued to the sides. Once the body is all glued up the bindings and purflings do on and then it is sanding and putting on the finish

JM: Do you build in batches? Do you have more than one type of instruments in process at the same time?

GM: My workshop is not very big, about 5m x 3m and filled with machinery. I am usually working on two instruments at a time in some stage of construction and there might be another drying in the garden shed if it is a nitro finish. There might be a bouzouki and a mandolin in process, though I have built a couple of guitars recently for the first time in years

JM: How large is your shop and what types of tools and equipment is found there?

GM: As I said the workshop is pretty small and along with a large L shaped bench and a go-bar deck, I have a 14" bandsaw, a 12" disk sander, a 16" Performax clone drum sander, a 12" thicknesser, a router table, a spindle sander, a small table saw just set up for fret slotting and a milling machine/ drill. And wood, and the usual drills, routers and sanders. The only bit of machinery I don't have is a jointer, but that will require an extension to the workshop.

JM: Please tell us about the woods you use, I'd love to hear about some of your local woods.

GM: I use the usual timbers as much if not more than Australian timbers, if for no other reason than the exotic ones are often easier to get. I prefer using spruces to anything else, and while there are a couple of usable Australian soundboard timbers, they are not easy to source and it is simpler to get spruce from the US and Canada. At the same time there are some very good Australia timbers for bodies and necks. Tasmanian Blackwood is well known as an excellent tonewood and its popularity in the US has pushed the price up here. Queensland maple is similar to mahogany, but lighter in colour, the fashionable timber at the moment Tiger myrtle, again from Tasmania. Most of the myrtle (which is not related to American myrtle, rather a beech botanical name *norhofagus cunninghamii*) is a boring pink colour, but there is the odd tree where the heartwood ends up a purple/brown colour with black stripes. Quite a wonderful timber, but there is not much of it, There are some other timbers which can be used, but finding some and getting it a log cut up properly can be harder than it should be.

JM: What finishes and method(s) of application do you use?

GM: Over the years I have used just about everything, but I do keep coming back to nitro cellulose lacquer. I like wipe-on oil finishes for something quick and simple and there are a few of us out here currently experimenting with a shellac product which has a cross-linker added with the idea that it cures to be like a polyurethane. Thins and cleans up with alcohol and polishes up really well. I know there are folks in the US very keen to try it, but it seems too hard to export it as yet.

JM: On Average, about how long does it take to complete an instrument?

GM: Somewhere between 100 and 150 hours I suspect, though I have never written down the time I take. As I get older and the fingers get a little more arthritic I use more and more power tools to do the things that power tools can do quickly and accurately.

JM: I've never had the privilege of playing any of your instruments, how would you describe your mandolins, octave mandolins, bouzoukis and citterns?

GM: I try to build good functional musical instruments that won't inhibit the player's

creativity. I build tools for musicians. They are not particularly fancy, but I think there is a simple elegance in their design.

JM: What is your favorite combination of woods & finishes?

GM: Don't think I have one, though a good nitro finish on the right combination of timbers will do it for me

JM: What is your favorite part of building? What's the best thing about being a luthier?

GM: I enjoy everything up to the final sanding and finishing, and then there is the first stringing up and the pleasure when the instrument works. Maybe the best thing about being a luthier is hearing one of your instruments played by a really good musician and knowing you had a small part in creating that performance. That and making lots of sawdust

JM: Do you still do repair work?

GM: Not if I can avoid it. The university music school has an active classical guitar department, and I do some setup and repair work for the staff and students there and I do things for friends, but I gently put off anyone else.

JM: Are you currently taking orders? How long is the wait for one of your bouzoukis or mandolins?

GM: I take orders selectively at the moment. For the past three years I have had a really interesting day job, which has taken the pressure off having to make instruments for a living, allowed me to replace quite a bit of aging machinery and given me the time to write *The Mandolin Project*. The book has been published and I have just signed a distribution deal. That means from around September it should be a lot more widely available. It has also meant that I have had time to do some R&D things I had been wanting to do for a while and even building myself a guitar. I lent the only one I had around the house to my nephew a year or so back, and I suspect I won't see it again.

JM: Is there anything you would like to add?

GM: Thank you for the opportunity for this email chat. I hope we can meet in person sometime soon

While I have not had the opportunity to meet Graham in person or to play his instruments, I do have both of his books and would recommend them to anyone looking for information on building mandolin family instruments. They are loaded with great insights about how and why Graham builds his instruments in his particular manner.

Graham may be contacted through his website: <http://www.mcdonaldstrings.com/>
Or by phone at: 612-6251-4372