



# Interview with Brian Dean

by Joe Mendel

I had run across the name Brian Dean on [mandolincafe.com](http://mandolincafe.com), but was not very familiar with his instruments until a customer posted pictures of a bowlback mandolin Brian had just finished for him. Wow, it was a work of art as well as a musical instrument. Brian had taken elements from old bowlback mandolins and violins, old ideas and new ones for this mandolin, and he made a custom case for it, also. I immediately went to Brian's website <http://www.bfolk.com> to see what other treasures were there, I was not disappointed. Brian's main interest is not bluegrass mandolins, but a much wider variety of instruments and at the same time he uses many influences old or new, from around the world, to create one of a kind instruments for his customers.

**Joe Mendel:** Hi Brian, what was your introduction to the mandolin? Do you play mandolin? Did you take lessons?

**Brian Dean:** Hi Joe. Hmm, yes, to start, you could say that I did not exactly grow up in a musical family, nor a very culturally rich city. Thankfully I had a very music-loving father, and art school, to rectify the two. My father had an exceptional stereo system he'd bought back in the 1970's which continues to play wonderfully to this day--huge speaker cabinets occupying the entire corners of his office, which I was endlessly blasting Jethro Tull's *Aqualung* on. It was Jethro Tull who, as I dove deeper into their later albums, introduced me both to folk music and an appreciation for the mandolin. It was 1978's *Heavy Horses* album that did it. "What is that funky little instrument?" That's it; I set out to find one. It was an 1893, or so said the date on the leather case, Angelo Mannello sitting in the glass case at the antique shop. I scooped it up for \$200, and set off to learn some songs. It wasn't until University that I started to take lessons though. Imagine, this straggly little long-haired fellow marching into the local music shop with a funky old bowlback mandolin, "I'm here for the bluegrass lessons." (Laughs) I didn't understand at the time just how weird that really was. But I did learn some tunes that year.

**JM:** What about that instrument caught your attention? What made you decide on a bowlback and not a more modern A- or F-model?

**BD:** Well, it had a tremendous Renaissance appeal which I liked very much, with its thick pearl and ebony herringbone bindings. It was very different than anything I'd seen before... and of course I do like being different, doing things differently. Always have. I just needed something to play, and why not something that stood apart. People love just looking at it, they still are amazed that this isn't something from Mars; they're so used to electric guitars, drums, and keyboards. And it still plays great.

**JM:** What styles of music are you most interested in?

**BD:** What styles... Well, style really is the key word, but not in the normal sense. Style meaning anything that is



authentic, which has a story behind it, which focuses on the spirit of the music, technical perfection being very secondary. I listen to a lot of old vinyl and adore the pops and clicks, and wondering who might've owned this record before, and where were those people living when they recorded it long ago... Anything with a mystique, with a good dose of cathedral-like reverb, even the old folk recordings on a copper reel that people say are of great archival value but just plain annoying to listen to. Those people and those days are gone now. They lived something, and they wrote it and sang it, and it all lives in those recordings. . And I want to relive that authentic spirit when I listen. No matter what genre it is. But mostly I like old-time, early music, baroque and traditional world music. Ok and I'll admit, I do have some Herb Alpert.

**JM:** Do you have a wood working background? What was the first instrument you built?

**BD:** Yes, I was building model rockets when I was 8. Skateboard ramps were another favorite. I carved a bit out of my arm with the X-acto kit I got for Christmas when I was 12. But it wasn't until University that I began taking it very seriously. I enjoyed building crossbows and other medieval weapons of destruction, then peaced out a bit and got more into musical ideas. I was already a huge fan of Robin Williamson of the Incredible String Band, and after many years of hippie-type world music explorations, he had settled and become a modern day bard, accompanied by his own Celtic harp. Musicmakers Kits sold me the raw plans for my first harp, which I built from scratch in three days. Another harp followed before I got into mandolin building.

**JM:** Like many others, you used Roger Siminoff's "Building a Bluegrass Mandolin" book as a guide for your first mandolin, but you took off in a totally different direction than most. How did you get from that book to building such a wide variety of instruments?

**BD:** First I have to say I'm an irredeemable autodidact, not fond of following instruction manuals or watching too closely what others are doing or have done. Not because I don't feel others have great things to offer, but because I have a deep need to be original-and like the learned scholar who sets out to write a love poem, he can't write an original line without his mind harkening upon some other's work. I did need some help though, just the basics were all I wanted, that book served a good purpose in the beginning. I wanted a Celtic flat-top mandolin, and so what I really paid attention to was how to do a neck joint, how to select woods, how to do the finishing, and things like that. I took his raw plans and made something that I felt was more my own. I've done the same for my other designs, though many of these came from simple sketches or ideas grown from the imagination of the customer and me. Now that I have a good sense, of aesthetics and tone production, I have a good base for seeing what my fellow luthiers are up to-I know where I stand.

**JM:** Would you tell us how you built your first mandolin?

**BD:** Very badly. (Laughs) I never had any thoughts of doing this professionally, it was all for fun and learning. I took the A-shape by folding the F-style plans in half and tracing out what looked nice to the eye. I used a too-thin cedar top with not enough bracing, the back had no bracing either, "that's what the book shows!" Ah, what a failure. It sounded like a banjo-lin. It's somewhere in Vermont now. I left it with a friend for fear the border patrol would banish me from Canada (a second time) for, what was the charge again? Maybe they thought it sounded like a banjo too.



**JM:** Tell us a little about your shop, your tooling and the balance you try to strike between hand work and power tools?

**BD:** Yes, well maybe you know a little about the Japanese woodworking tradition, they often sit stooped on the floor when they work, and they practically worship their tools. I like that humility, that closeness and connection with the work. I don't want to sound too principled, though, because I'm not in reality. I just have a natural tendency towards simplicity. I enjoy the beauty of good hand tools, they feel comfortable in my hands, and I don't feel a great danger in losing a finger with them, so that is what I use most. Whenever something I am doing, no matter what it is in life, begins to feel too complicated, with convoluted plans on getting from point A to point B, I stop, and

usually something ends up in the trash. I work as often as possible without jigs, though there are a few very important ones, such as the one I use for cutting the proper dovetail angle on the band saw. Generally, though, over-reliance on jigs and patterns take away the chance for new direction, because they tend to eliminate error. In art school as a boy, my teachers were very good about not scolding us for making a "mistake". You're drawing a still-life and you slip, and that ugly black mark becomes a feather that touches off the ultimate balance of the painting. That advice has stuck with me to this day. I won't get heavily into any sort of theology, but I do believe that the divine works through chance happenings. I welcome this in my work.

**JM:** How did you become a full time mandolin builder?

**BD:** Like most, probably, I held a full time job first. In my spare time I'd build and improve on my designs. One day I had the idea to build one for auction, and from that sale came two more orders. I built at least five more mandolins while holding a full time job, and one day I received a yellow slip in the mail from my work, it was to apply for unemployment benefits. You know, charity from the government? No way, I had two hands and a lot of pride. It felt like a huge weight was lifted; in fact, now I'd have time! The next week I had a whole shop full of tools I'd bought with my savings. That was in January of 2004. A lot of things have changed since then!

**JM:** Is there a lot of information available about the various styles of mandolins you build, or do you have to design and engineer each instrument?

**BD:** I would like very much one day to standardize the "overall" of my instruments, allowing room for artistic interpretation, and yet for someone to know on sight "that must be one of his." But, no, I have not yet settled on which models I would like to focus on. Classical bowlbacks are a very attractive idea, one which I am seriously considering at the moment. Classical guitars as well, even. I'm enjoying the exploration at this point, the engineering as you say, but more in the sense of style, aesthetics. I think things will just keep getting better, more refined, and until then, I can't say I'd want to lock myself into this or that, let alone "publish" anything about it.

**JM:** What is the most challenging instrument you've built?

**BD:** All of them. Each one has presented new challenges, without exception. You know, Buddha taught a lot about meditation on nothing, I learned to meditate on mandolins. I find myself thinking about their mechanics and design aspects, interactions, a disproportionate amount of each 24 hours. It's quite, well, envahissant, you'd say in French. It takes over your mind, and I think things can only get more refined because of it. You pay a lot more attention to tree stumps and alligator scales, because you can't help but wonder if that wouldn't look good on the next inlay scheme. "You have an empty page to fill in the mandolin world, what will it be?" The mind can get overwhelmed with all the possibilities. I love the difficulty of it all, but it does call for serious breaks from the work from time to time, a week or so here and there. But then who doesn't need that...

**JM:** Do you build all members of the mandolins family? How many instruments have you built to date?

**BD:** Yes, I'm still waiting for that mandocello order though! I've done piccolo through octave mandolin. And currently on instrument number 35.

**JM:** So that's 35 instruments, and not, say 35 F-styles?

**BD:** Right. At approximately nine non-identical instruments a year, I've a ways to go to hit number 35 of any one exclusive style. But that's what I enjoy so much. The variety is tremendously encouraging.



**JM:** Most builders of bluegrass mandolins are expected to adhere to a fairly strict tradition in their instruments; do you feel like you have more freedom by not being bound to that tradition?

**BD:** Absolutely! Freedom is a high ideal, and it takes a much disciplined soul to tolerate any kind of repetition, in my view. I'm at times envious of people who can tolerate this kind of work--sometimes it would be nice to shut off the brain and just cut like I've done a hundred times before. I wouldn't have to take naps so often perhaps. (Laughs) But our brains just work in certain ways, we're all different from each other and made for certain things and I am happy with my lot.

**JM:** Are you currently taking orders and what is the average time between ordering and delivery?

**BD:** Well, I've been very restrictive about who I take on board. Often I get emails just about price information, and I can't bring myself to reply to that kind of inquiry anymore. I have had some exceptional clients, however. People who seem to know I am their man from the beginning, and things just click between us. But this is not everyday, so generally I keep a short waiting list...very desirable for an artist-type, by the way, if you can believe it--not to feel to weighed down in knowing just precisely what sort of "creating" we'll be doing 2 years down the road, it's very nice to have a sort of freedom to move and change as you see fit, and not feel like you're letting down your customers who've put their faith in you. So basically what I do now is be very picky, and during any downtimes create like mad. The personal satisfaction is tremendous at times like that, and only adds to the fire. Ordering times vary from, at one end, my being wrong about the delivery date, to the other, my being very wrong. Happily, everyone has been ok with the small waits so far, despite what seems to be a sort of terminal case of jet-lag on my part.

**JM:** Brian I certainly hope to see some of your instruments in person sometime, they look so beautiful in the pictures that my MAS kicked right in.

**BD:** Thanks much, Joe.

**JM:** If you would like to check out Brian's work, his web site; <http://www.bfolk.com/> has many pictures, and he can be contacted via e-mail at: [brian@bfolk.com](mailto:brian@bfolk.com), or by snail mail @ Brian Dean  
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