Interview with Michael Stevens
By
Joe Mendel

In 1993 while I was attending the Luthier program then offered at South Plains College in Levelland, Texas, Michael Stevens showed up to do some demonstrations for our class. I was told he was on the board of directors of the program, but the name was unfamiliar to me. I was fascinated with his demonstration of doing a sunburst finish on a Strat style guitar body, but I was totally blown away by his use of a series of pinned together templates to rout a guitar body from a band-sawed out and thicknessed blank to a nearly finished body, it was true genius at work. Michael hung around for a couple of days freely answering our questions and sharing his knowledge of solid body guitar making. I learned he had gotten his start in luthierie in the San Francisco Bay area with fellow luthier Larry Jameson at their shop, Guitar Resurrection. Larry knew how to repair guitars, but often did things the slow way, Michael's knowledge of tools and mechanical drawing helped to improve both, the speed and quality of their repair work. He built a reputation for doing great repair and custom work, for many well known guitarists, including Stevie Ray & Jimmy Vaughn, Albert King, and too many others to mention, he also built Junior Brown's Guit-steel. In 1986, he was hired by Fender to be the Founder and Senior design engineer of the Fender Custom Shop, along with John Page. He is now building guitars and mandolins under his own name, Stevens Electrical Instruments.

Joe Mendel: Hello Mike, it's good to speak with you after all these years. You are well known among guitar aficionados from your work on famous players' instruments, and being chosen to start the Fender Custom Shop. Would you tell us a little about your background, and how you got started in luthierie?
MS: High school wood shop, mostly. I was a country kid that loved woodshop, a lot. The school system was so small that they paid me $18.00 a day if the teacher wasn't there to teach the class and I scored very well in mechanical drawing, and taught that too. When I got to Berkley California, in 1967, I was playing a Gibson Folksinger Guitar, and then I started paying attention, got hip and bought a 1946 D-28, Herringbone. I decided to put gold Schaller tuners on it, since I didn't have a drill press I just used my hand drill. It worked on the first two, on the rest it just popped through and split the veneer. There I was with the headstock all split up and gold tuners. I took it over to Lundberg's and they wanted $35.00 to put on a new veneer and a decal, I thought that was just outrageous. That was in '67 or '68. Then I met Campbell Coe and he gave me some veneer and I glued it on and hand finished it. I played it that way for a long time. I finally got a decal and put it on, shortly before I sold it. It all started as sort of a fluke, I had no intention of doing this for a living, but was doing repairs on the weekends. I then met Larry Jameson, who did great repairs, and started working with him at Guitar Resurrection, after the tunnel jobs ended on the subway system.
JM: How did you come about your knowledge of templates and machining processes?
MS: I'm not really sure; I don't remember doing that stuff in high school. When I started working with Larry he didn't know much about power tools, but he knew all about guitars and setting them up, fret work & pickups and wiring, all of that. He was into electrics and

I was into acoustics. We started making a lot of pickguards; I don't remember who came up with the idea of templates. We were making pickguards for Strats & Teles and whatever we needed, and I think it just grew out of that. By the time I met you at South Plains College I had spent four years at the Fender custom shop and spent 3 or 4 days hanging out at the Gibson factory. Gibson was doing it pretty much the same way I'm doing it, whereas Fender had gone the metalworking route, due to Leo being a machinist, using big pin routers. They were both using templates just in a different manner.

JM: I am still amazed at what you accomplished with your system of pinned together templates to make a guitar body. Are you still using your templates? Would you mind describing the process, briefly?

MS: I am. I use locator pins to stack the templates up and hold the templates on the guitar, the locator holes in the guitar body blank are either where they will be covered or removed as the body progresses. Each template has the locator holes in the same place, but each template has a different shape and cutouts from the previous one. The first one is for the outside shape of the body, after routing that shape it is removed & the next template is put on. That one might have the pickup & control cavities & the next one might be the neck pocket. It usually takes 3 or 4 templates to completely rout out a body. Since all the templates use the same locator holes, once you get the templates right, everything is repeatable and can be done very quickly. I always keep a master template hanging on the wall in case the one I'm using gets damaged.

JM: Have you considered using CNC machining for your instruments?

MS: I have. If I was in a factory setting, cranking out lots of instruments, I would probably go that route. The learning curve is so steep that it's not worth it at the rate I'm building, I could build a lot instruments in the time it would take to get up and running with CNC. Nothing against it, I just don't have the time.

JM: How do you do the arching on the bodies?

MS: I use a pattern and a Marlin carver (now Terrco) with a circular saw mounted on it. Bill Collings came up with that idea; he thought that routers were too slow. Tom Ellis let us take his Marlin apart and mount the saw on it. It works really well and is fast, I can carve the arches very quickly and cleanly with my set up; it doesn't take a lot of sanding to remove the rough carving marks.

JM: When did you become interested in electric mandolins? When and why did you build your first one?

MS: Larry took me to see Paul Glasse, and I was just blown away. Later I worked on Paul's electric, it seemed a bit clunky and ugly to me. I liked Paul and respected his playing so much I decided to build a better one for him. That's how the Paul Glasse model came about, also.

JM: Most electric mandolins I've heard tend to be overly bright and thin sounding, how have you overcome that problem?

MS: The bodies are chambered, like a 335, and pickup locations play a very important role.

JM: How do you carve the necks?

MS: I rough cut them very close to shape on the bandsaw and do them by hand with a horseshoe rasp. The necks are so short, that I can do them very quickly. I do use templates for the headstock and the neck joint.

JM: Most of the acoustic builders I've spoken with say the wood selection and arching of the plates are the most important aspects of building a great acoustic mandolin, what are the most important parts of building a great electric?
MS: My arching is mostly cosmetic compared to what the chambers do and a good set of pickups, other than that I think it's the tones of the wood, just like an electric guitar. You combine different woods to enhance the sound you are after or counter sounds you don't want.
JM: What type of hardware do you use? Tuners & pickups, etc.
MS: I use Waverly tuners, and proprietary Seymour Duncan Pickups, the other parts are custom machined.
JM: What finish do you use?
MS: Nitrocellulose, thinner is better.
JM: What makes your mandolins different from others on the market?
MS: I've designed them to feel comfortable to someone that switches back and forth between acoustic mandolin and one of mine. I tried to make the angles & bridge location the same, so it doesn't feel too different, and of course the tone.
JM: Do you have a standard line of instruments or are they customized for each buyer?
MS: They are standard in design, but the details can be customized.
JM: How do the upper line models differ from the working man models?
MS: I taken a lot of labor out of the workingman models by not putting binding everywhere, they have a flat back with a plastic back plate instead of a wooden back plate, the tops are still arched, they have the same pickups & hardware and finish.
JM: Is there a lot of demand for electric mandolins? What's the ratio of guitar to mandolins that you build?
MS: I haven't built that many, I think a lot of people haven't heard a good sounding electric mandolin and don't know what to expect from them. I'm not sure what the market for electric mandolins really is.
JM: Mike, it has been great talking with you, it brought back some great memories from my days at South Plains College, and all the great people that were involved in the luthierie program there. Thanks for taking the time for this interview and all the best to you in the future.
MS: Keep in touch.
JM: Mike may be contacted through his website http://www.stevensguitars.com/ and you can see his mandolins here http://stevensguitars.com/models/

Here's what the owners of Stevens Mandolins have to say:

Barry Mitterhoff: I wanted a Michael Stevens electric mandolin for years after seeing Paul Glasse's and meeting Michael when he lived in Austin. I wanted one so I could play Western Swing and Jazz in the style of Tiny Moore, Johnny Gimble and Paul Glasse.
By the time my wife ordered one for me as a surprise gift, I was playing with Jorma Kaukonen & Jack Casady in Hot Tuna Electric. I mostly use my Stevens to play 1960's inspired psychedelic blues-rock with a fair amount of distortion on my electric mandolin.
The Stevens electric mandolin has all the qualities of a great instrument. It feels great in your hands; the fingerboard and neck are easy and smooth to play. The tone is creamy and rich which is important for an electric mandolin because some electric mandos are high end-y and piercing.

Don Stiernberg: I wish I were playing my Stevens "Paul Glasse Model" five string electric mandolin more. Paul and I have talked about recording together for a long time. I hope that can happen soon.

Mike's work is without flaws, stunning and inspiring to look at. But I'm a musician so the SOUND is what really interests me, and the playability. Other 5 string mandolins I had seen or used had intonation problems--a floppy C string that never played in tune. Mike's engineering of the challenging combination of mandolin and mandola fret scales was a success. Even though electric guitar technology and aesthetics are at the heart of this instrument's design, it still has the feel of a mandolin to me.

More details that help the whole thing work? Ebony inserts in the tune-a-matic bridge mellow the tone out just right. Push-pull pots for coil-tapping the two humbuckers allow access to both Fender-like (single-coil) and Gibson-like (humbucker) tones, although I generally use the neck humbucker and go for a warm jazz guitar-like sound. The tone pots actually work--there is a difference between setting something on 5 or 6, for example. This has allowed me to find the sound I like through ANY amp. No kidding.

I asked Mike to make mine black. He didn't want to, but he did, and he did it beautifully. Most luthiers do whatever THEY want.

I liked the mandolin so much I ordered a guitar too! LJ model--been playing it on all manner of jobs for years. I have yet to get as much as a fret job on either instrument!! I've only had to clean the pots, not even many truss rod adjustments. AND I LIVE IN CHICAGO! These things are amazing in their stability.

I feel very fortunate to have Stevens instruments, lucky to get them when I did.
http://www.donstiernberg.com/

Tom Rozum: I was having a hard time finding an electric mandolin that didn't sound too bright. In other words, it was nearly impossible to get a fat, jazzy tone from either of my '50's Fender four strings, or from what I could tell, from any other builder at that time. I was on a quest for Tiny Moore's Bigsby tone, and with the Stevens, I got it! Before I owned this mandolin, I had to use amps with most of the treble turned down and very big, heavy speakers, and still the tone wasn't right. This instrument sounds great through most any amp.

It was very true then that Mike's mandolins were the only electric mandolins that had the sound, playability, workmanship and beauty. Although right now is the supposed Golden Age of mando and guitar building, I think that the Stevens' are still probably the best around. Besides being a perfectionist (it's hard to find a flaw in his instruments), he's also an artist. Open to a customer's needs, Mike works hard at finding way to please both the customer, and his own aesthetic sense.

Paul Glasse worked with Mike to create the first (Stevens) electric mando. He already had things worked out like neck contour (which is great), pickup type, where the neck joins, etc. Mike was still working on pickup placement (and slant) when I ordered my mandolin in 1983, which turned out to be the second one made. I believe Donnie Stiernberg ended up with the third.

At the time, I was playing a lot of different music, so I wanted to be able to get a lot more tones than just the fat jazzy sound. When I ordered mine, I had a few features added, like coil taps with hidden micro switches, and a different placement of the volume knob for swells. Nowadays, since I don't have a need to play popular music or rock and roll with lots of pedals, I mostly use just the neck pickup.

You can hear the Stevens mandolin on the cut "Ramblin Blues" from my CD, **Jubilee** on Dog Boy Records.
http://www.tomrozum.com/