



Interview with Will Kimble

by Joe Mendel

When I spoke with Will Kimble for this interview, the first thing he did was emphasize that Kimble Mandolins is actually two people, Will and his father, Fred Kimble. Fred started building mandolins as a hobby using the Siminoff, "How To Build A Bluegrass Mandolin" book. When Will began playing seriously, he was using a mandolin build by his Dad. In 2000 Will took a job in North Carolina near his father's home, while there he decided to

try his hand at building one. Fred guided him through the process and that snowballed into Kimble Mandolins.

Joe Mendel: What made you decide to build your first mandolin?

Will Kimble: I couldn't afford to buy the ones I really wanted, so I decided to try my hand at building a mandolin. There was a lot of wood and parts laying around my Dad's shop, and I knew with his help I could build a decent instrument.

JM: How much woodworking experience did you have when you started your first one?

WK: I had almost zero woodworking experience, even though I had been around it most of my life.

JM: How did it turn out?

WK: As you would expect, the first one didn't turn out like I wanted. But I was hooked on building mandolins and was determined to figure out how to make them sound like I wanted. Luckily my second mandolin sounded pretty good and that definitely encouraged me to keep building.

JM: What was the hardest part of learning this craft?

WK: The hardest part for me has been developing my woodworking skills so that I can build mandolins with craftsmanship that is as refined as the tone, volume and playability. I have worked very hard at this and am still excited to see each batch turning out a little better than the one before.

JM: Have you built any instruments completely on your own?

WK: Sure, I built the first half dozen or so by myself. Then my Dad began to get more and more interested as he saw them improving. He began to help with the finish work and did a lot to refine our varnish finishes. As I started to receive orders, he helped more and more. And when I made the decision to build mandolins full time, I asked him if he would like to be a part of the business. Luckily he said "yes" and he has been a big part of our success so far.

JM: What is the division of work between you and Fred? Why do you do it this way?

WK: I realized early on that I could learn a lot if I could build lots of mandolins, so that is why I welcomed my Dad's help. I rely on Dad to do some things that are the foundation of the mandolin (rims, necks) so I can concentrate on the parts that I think are most crucial to the sound (tops, backs). I also am lucky to have him doing some things that he is particularly good at, like the varnish work.

Dad makes the rims and does the rough work on the necks - installs the truss rods, glues on the headstock overlays and trims everything down so it looks like a neck. He also lays out and cuts the dovetails, although I do the final fitting. On Fs, Dad does a lot of the freehand work around the scrolls to prepare the bodies for binding.

I concentrate on the parts that I think are most critical to sound and feel, so I carve the tops & backs, locate and shape the bracing, and cut the f-holes. I also do all of the binding, so I make the fingerboards, headstock overlays, and bind the bodies. I am in charge of design so I do things like set the neck angle, the height of the bridge, etc. I shape the necks and do all of the setup and assembly.

Dad is great at finish work and I rely on him for a lot of the final preparation before we stain the mandolins. I stain them and scrape the bindings, Dad varnishes them, and then I french polish them and do the final assembly.

JM: How do you handle the back and forth shipping?

WK: Well for the first few years I worked in my Dad's shop, so shipping wasn't an issue. About a year ago, I moved back to Cincinnati and since then I have been shipping to Dad in North Carolina on a regular basis. So far things are working great, we are still very productive and the mandolins keep getting better and better despite the extra travel. Typically the parts will be shipped a couple times during the build, but I still travel to North Carolina frequently - I am still staining the instruments in my Dad's shop - and I always try to maximize those trips by hauling stuff back & forth.

JM: What is your favorite part of the building process?

WK: I always string my mandolins up in the white, and that is the biggest thrill for me. It is a challenging time because the instrument sounds raw and the setup is usually pretty rough at the beginning. But that is when you first get an idea of what all your work has created, and if any refinements or changes you have made might have been successful.

JM: How many mandolins have you built?

WK: About 90, and that includes F style mandolins, A style mandolins, and 2 point mandolins - both f-hole and oval hole. It also includes other mandolin family instruments - a bunch of mandolas as well as a mandocello and an octave mandolin.

JM: What other instruments have you built?

WK: Not too many, just a 12 fret OOO style guitar a while back, and I am currently finishing up a chambered body electric guitar in the style of a Les Paul with two P-90 pickups.

JM: Does building other mandolin family instruments influence your mandolins?

WK: I think the biggest influence on my mandolins continues to be other mandolins that I really like, especially Gibson F5s from 1922 to 1925.

I do think building other mandolin family instruments has been helpful to me, but I still see each instrument as having its own cycle of development. For instance my mandolas are relatively far along, while I feel like I am just getting started with octave mandolins.

JM: Is each instrument custom made, or do you have standard models?

WK: Everything is custom made, although there is a window in which I feel comfortable and that is where I try to operate most of the time. Once I am ready to build an instrument, I contact the customer and work through a lengthy set of parameters that includes wood choice, stain, binding, inlay, and a whole bunch of neck and fingerboard details.

I don't offer different trim levels or finish options, so there is a lot of freedom to design an instrument with the customer without having to worry about how it is going to impact the price. I only charge extra for things like Waverly tuners or intense inlay work.

JM: The mandolin & mandola you brought to Mandofest both had two point bodies, is there something about that shape you like?

WK: What I like the most about the 2 point shape is that it is accepted as a possibility but it hasn't been standardized - it is a great opportunity to express our design ideas. The design of the F style mandolin is so intricate and so iconic that I am reluctant to change too many things, they just seem to look best when you make them like the old ones.

JM: What style of music do you play? Do you get to play much any more?

WK: I still get to play some, but I have begun to notice that the better I get at building, the worse my playing gets!

I like to play bluegrass and old time music and I especially like Bill Monroe's music and guys like Mike Compton and Roland White that have taken his style and developed it in different directions. I also like to play some classical music on the mandolin, especially a few solo pieces by J.S. Bach that took a really long time for me to learn.

JM: Do you have a waiting list? How long is the wait at this time?

WK: I am backed up pretty far at the moment (2-3 years) and am not taking orders at this time. At this point the best I can do is keep a list of inquiries and notify those folks once I begin taking orders again.

JM: I met Will last spring at Mandofest and was fortunate to be able to hang out with him and play a mandolin and mandola he had made. They were excellent instruments, with a great sound and feel. If you happen to see Will at a festival or mandolin event be sure to try out one of his instruments, a treat to be sure.

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