

# Interview: Joe Vest

by Joe Mendel

Inspiration sometimes strikes at odd moments, for Joe Vest it came in 1962 on a trip to the outhouse. He heard a Johnny Cash song on the radio and thought to himself, "I've got to get a guitar." A couple of years later his Mother bought him a Stella guitar that he played until a string broke. When he took it to a local music shop to ask if he needed a new guitar, they laughed at him. He decided then, that no one would ever laugh at him again over a question concerning guitars.

He now manages the retail and repair functions at the Gibson Showcase at Opry Mills in Nashville, Tennessee. It is one of the largest retail music stores and repair shops in the country.

**Joe Mendel:** Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed and thank you for your tribute to Charlie Derrington, in the last issue.

How did you begin your journey from knowing very little about musical instruments to your present position at Gibson?

**Joe Vest:** I was interested in instruments from the time I first got my first guitar in the mid sixties. I loved everything about them. I studied them, talked to everyone I could about them, visited anywhere I could where instruments were, repaired them, took them apart and put them back together, talked to builders and asked non stop questions to try and appease my curiosity. My knowledge base grew and in the course of this journey...which still continues to this day...I wound up at Gibson and working with Charlie Derrington.

**JM:** When did you discover the mandolin?

**JV:** I was in a band with three other guitar players. We realized we could not be much of a band without other instruments. One of the guys got an upright bass and I visited music stores looking for something I thought I could play that was not a guitar. On the wall was this odd looking instrument with a vine of life on the fingerboard. I asked the store owner what that thing was. He told me it was a mandolin. I told him I would buy it if he could show me three chords. He showed me the open G, C and D chords. I bought it and played it that night in our show. My love affair with the mandolin took hold that day and has not diminished one iota!

**JM:** What was the first mandolin you bought?

**JV:** It was an Alvarez A800 F style. It was a good looking mandolin. It sounded good to me until I got around some better instruments a few years later. At that time there were not many good mandolins available anywhere.

**JM:** When did you move to Nashville? Were you hoping to make it as a musician, or was building & repairing your goal?

**JV:** I moved to Nashville in 92. I had no intention of working as a musician. I was hired by Gibson and came to Nashville to work there. In a short time I began working with Charlie Derrington and realized the dream job of my life...working with the mandolins, repairs, and the pickers. It was like a dream come true!

**JM:** Have you worked anywhere in Nashville repairing besides Gibson?

**JV:** I started with Gibson, went to National Guitar Repair (Charlie's shop) and back to Gibson.

**JM:** What was your very first job in the company?

**JV:** My first job was in dealer sales.

**JM:** What is your current job description and what are your duties?

**JV:** I am Senior Manager of Retail/ Repair. I oversee the entire retail and repair division and anything to do with either function.

**JM:** Do you do any repairs yourself, these days?

**JV:** Very few. Most of my time is taken by management and administrative duties.

**JM:** At the Gibson Showcase you do repairs on all brands of instruments as well as Gibsons. How many repair folks work for you and what type of repairs do you do? How long is the average turnaround time for a repair? Do Gibson instruments get priority?

**JV:** We work on any kind of stringed instrument that you can carry in. In other words, almost anything except pianos. We have fifteen people in our repair facility. Part of them are at the Opry Mills location and part of them downtown in another facility. Turn around time is wholly dependent upon the job and what needs to be done to repair it properly. We do everything from minor set ups to complete restorations of vintage instruments. You can see some of our work on our web site at [www.gibson.com](http://www.gibson.com) then go under repair and restoration. We have had several stories in magazines in the last year also. Vintage Guitar <http://www.vguitar.com/> did a good story a few months ago and Acoustic Guitar <http://www.acousticguitar.com/> did a recent article. We do not prioritize by brand, but by what needs doing and whether it is an artist who needs his tool to get back to work. We work for a great number of artists in nearly every genre of music. Some of these artists are on our website. We are currently restoring two of Les Paul's Les Pauls.

**JM:** How big is the repair workload, generally speaking?

**JV:** We normally have a couple hundred instruments in repair at any given time.

**JM:** What is the procedure for sending an instrument to Gibson for repair?

**JV:** You can contact Gibson Customer Service for an RA number and get shipping information from them for most instruments. For mandolins I suggest you ship it to:

Gibson Bluegrass Showcase  
161 Opry Mills Drive  
Nashville, TN 37214  
ATTN: Big Joe

**JM:** How do you go about estimating a repair price before you have the instrument in front of you? Do you give a rough estimate beforehand, and then an actual estimate when you receive it?

**JV:** Estimating a repair without seeing the instrument is like giving an estimate for heart problems without seeing a doctor. We prefer to have the instrument shipped to us and we will give a price with a detailed discussion of what needs to be done and why. The customer can choose to have the work done or the instrument returned. We will only do jobs that we can do right. We do not take shortcuts. Sometimes we are asked to take shortcuts to save a few dollars on the repair. We are aware that each person needs to get the work done as economically as possible, but we would rather not do the work as not be able to do it right. A good amount of our work is re-doing something others did cheaply or wrong.

**JM:** I know you are a big fan of Gibson mandolins from your posts on [www.mandolincafe.com](http://www.mandolincafe.com), why do you believe that they are the very best? Do you own any by other builders?

**JV:** I do love the current Gibson mandolins. I believe there are none better. That does not mean there are not others that are equal in build quality. My opinion is based upon build quality and tone. I love the 'Loar' tone and have found it in no other instrument. That does not mean the others sound bad, just different. I have owned other brands but do not currently own anything else. If I had an unlimited budget I would love to have a few others. Still, I cannot imagine liking anything more than my Distressed Master Model named "Brutus".

**JM:** The popularity of the mandolin has been growing in recent years, and there are a lot of new builders, do you find it flattering that so many builders copy Gibson style mandolins? Or is that a function of Gibson setting the standard, and creating the market (with a little help from Bill Monroe), and that is what people expect from a mandolin?

**JV:** I don't take it as flattery. I would love to see some of the current talented builders do their own thing rather than just attempt to duplicate what we have already done. I love some of the things I have seen from Michael Lewis and Hans Brentrup. They build an incredible mandolin with their own look and tone. They are talented enough and secure in their art to express their own voice. I would rather see more builders stretch rather than continue to reinvent the wheel.

**JM:** Do you like any of the non-traditional mandolins being made these days?

**JV:** I loved Rigel and am sorry they are no longer with us. I mentioned two of my favorite builders above. I always enjoy seeing Michael and his new inventions. Hans was at IBMA and I got to spend some time in his booth play his new Pink Ivory mandolin that has a cool shape. It sounded GREAT!

**JM:** Thanks, again, Joe for taking the time to speak with me. Next time I'm in Nashville I'll stop by and say "Hi."

**JV:** I hope you do Joe. It has been a pleasure to be interviewed. Let me add one last thing. Charlie Derrington was the most knowledgeable person I have ever met on mandolins and repairs. It was a pleasure to be mentored by him for so many years. I will never be Charlie, but I will try to continue to standards of excellence he held for all of us.

**JM:** If you have any instrument you'd like the folks at the Gibson Showcase to look at or need information about, or you would like information about new mandolins they have in stock look them up on the web at; <http://www.gibson.com/Products/Bluegrass/Gibson%20Original/>  
Or give them a call at; 1-800-444-2766