



## Interview: Ken Ratcliff

by Joe Mendel

Ken Ratcliff's first memory of instrument building is from when he was just three years old. He has vivid memories of his father carving a violin top at the kitchen table; it was an experience that stuck with him. While majoring in Art at Morehead State University, his sculpture teacher wanted the class to build trapezoid fiddles;

Ken told him that he would build a real one. The teacher told him it would be too difficult, two weeks later Ken had his fiddle finished, he hasn't stopped yet, though he now builds mandolins exclusively. He has built nearly three hundred, and is well respected in the mandolin community. He studied art in Paris, France and has visited most of the major art museums in the world. He brings his life experience in art and craftsmanship to his mandolin building, often incorporating oil paintings and relief carvings on the instruments. He makes his living building mandolins and painting in a quiet area of Eastern Kentucky.

**Joe Mendel:** Hi Ken, it's nice to speak with you. I'm sure I don't remember anything from when I was three, that memory must have had quite an effect on you?

**Ken Ratcliff:** Yes, it sure did. I know at the age of three not very much is remembered, but I have this sketch or picture in my mind of my dad carving this violin top, and it is very vivid. He still has this violin and the top was something he found under the smokehouse floor and it was a slab cut piece of pine board. You know, that fiddle sounds good. He and my brother are still making violins, good ones too.

**J.M.** How did that first fiddle turn out? What was the teachers' reaction when you turned it in?

**K.R.** That fiddle turned out good. I still have it, but the neck has somehow gotten lost. It was a little crude of course, but everybody has to learn.

**J.M.** Have you built instruments other than fiddles and mandolins? **K.R.** Yes, I've built a number of dulcimers and a guitar, but I don't want to go back to that again.

**J.M.** Why did you choose to build mandolins?

**K.R.** After building several violins, I decided that maybe mandolins would be easier to get a good sound from. I was wrong. Mandolins are just as complicated as violins to get that desired sound from. Some say the F5 mandolin is the most difficult instrument to make, but I'm not so sure. A violin is very difficult with the scroll and purfling etc.

**J.M.** How has being an Artist helped with your instruments?

**K.R.** Being an artist has given me a different perspective on lathery. For me, every mandolin is a different entity, being an individual, it has it's own character. Therefore, I don't use any form of duplication such as the CNC machine. I feel very strongly that art isn't something that should be duplicated on this basis. I know there's a big controversy in this business about this topic, but, to me, if I'm going to have a machine carve my top, back, neck, do the inlay etc, it would take away from the artistic aspect of the process. I really feel that intuition should play a part in the making of these parts, how the wood feels and reacts, the sound from tapping, this part is lost otherwise. I do believe there is an important part that the CNC performs however in the making of bridges and all the parts that need to be the same.

**J.M.** What is your favorite part of building?

**K.R.** That would have to be applying the varnish. Nothing, to me, is more enjoyable than brushing that good oil varnish on and smelling that wonderful turpentine.

**J.M.** Everyone loves a pretty instrument so details are important, but what, in your mind are the most important aspects of building a great sounding and playing mandolin?

**K.R.** Nothing wrong with pretty, but sound is foremost in an instrument. I can't put one big reason on why an instrument is good sounding. It's a combination of many small things that work together, no one big secret. I do believe that the luthier puts something of himself into the instrument that can't be explained by methods. That's why two people can use the same woods and same methods and come up with two different sounding mandolins. It's the mystical part of it, unexplainable. Of course, it has to be built right, but still there's that magical ingredient.

**J.M.** What type of woods do you use in your instruments and why have you chosen these woods?

**K.R.** I use spruce and maple like everyone else. It's been tried and true for centuries. I like hard maple and I like different kinds of spruce, but mainly intuition plays a role in choosing the wood, how it sounds and feels in your hands before anything is cut on. Again, I think it goes back to that mystical ingredient.

**J.M.** Do you make do you make all of the wooden parts for you mandolins?

**K.R.** I do, except for the fingerboard and bridge. I used to make them, but it just isn't worth the time spent getting every fret slot perfect and I used to make bridges, too, but it took away from other more important parts that the luthier does. These are areas where the machine is best.

**J.M.** Your mandolins are inspired by traditional instruments, but you are not copying instruments of the past, aside from aesthetics, how do yours differ from other mandolins?

**K.R.** I always went my own way, and tried to not be influenced by other makers. Therefore, my instruments have a distinct difference from others which is good in a way, but also, it put me on a road that was a little radical and hard to accept for years. Now, I've settled down into what I am doing now and will stay there, more traditional looking, but the sound is my own, I guess due to the fact that I did go my own way for so many years. I wouldn't trade all those experiences for anything.

**J.M.** What finish or finishes do you use?

**K.R.** I use almost exclusively, oil varnish. I learned how to make it from an old Russian violinmaker that lived in Las Vegas back in the 1980's when I lived there. His name was Nicolos Mushkin. It takes a lot of sunlight to make it. I use lacquer too, but very seldom. I don't like the toxicity of it.

**J.M.** Hand built means a lot of different things to different people, how "hand built" are your mandolins?

**K.R.** They are very hand built. Don't get me wrong, I use power tools. I only use the power tools that I can manipulate.

**J.M.** How many different body and headstock styles do you build?

**K.R.** I build the F, the A and a two point. I have had about three different headstock styles, but now I use the traditional headstock.

**J.M.** How much does the shape of the body affect the sound of an instrument? What about the size and shape of the headstock?

**K.R.** The headstock shape has nothing to do with the sound, size, possibly. The body shape and size does play a role in the sound. Of course there are many variables inside the mandolin that dictate what you can do to body size, bracing and arching etc. Some bodies work better with tone bars and others better with x-bracing. It just depends on what the customer asks for. This is where a luthier can try to supply what a factory cannot.

**J.M.** What custom options are available?

**K.R.** I do relief carvings and oil paintings and special inlays. Also, I make a distressed model, which is my most popular model. Actually, I've been building a distressed model since 1981, when I first began building mandolins. I've always had an interest in the antique, and for me it is an attraction to give an instrument a special character, something from your mind, that sets it apart from all the others. Actually, all the old violinmakers of the past did the same. This is part of the finishing process and varnishing, which is my favorite part of the whole process. It seems that the distressed models sound the best too. I can't explain why other than the fact that they have less finish on them.

**J.M.** How long does it typically take from order to completed instruments? **K.R.** One month.

**J.M.** Do you have a waiting list?

**K.R.** Yes, I do, it has been up to a year, but I whittle away at it everyday and it varies greatly.

**J.M.** How did you choose the name Silver Angel?

**K.R.** My last name is similar to another mandolin maker in TN who by the way makes nice mandolin, but I wanted to keep down confusion. It used to be Silver Eagle, but after all the angels that I painted on the backs; I changed it to Silver Angel.

**J.M.** Would you tell us about the paintings and relief carvings on you mandolins?

**K.R.** Yes, The relief carvings are something that I've always done, I enjoy it and they are all completely spontaneous, being hand drawn directly on the wood without patterns. Of course, this makes them all

unique. The paintings are something that I really enjoy doing although I don't get to do it as much as I would like. My house is like a museum with all the paintings that I have done hanging on the wall. I am first an artist and second a mandolin maker. I combined all the things that I know how to do into one and that makes up Silverangel mandolins. I studied art all over and have been to many museums in many countries and this has been a major influence on my work. I like the classical works and I incorporate that in my mandolins when I can.

**J.M.** Your wife, Laura, also build some very beautiful A style mandolins, would you tell us a little bit about her instruments?

**K.R.** I've been teaching her for a few years after we married in 2001. She made the statement that she would like to learn how to build mandolins. I said "WHAT"? But, I have to admit, that she does a good job. Her mandolins, made under my direction, sound very good. She has built 50 now and she knows which pieces of wood will sound the best by tapping. She is starting to get her own sound. She's from Argentina and doesn't speak English perfectly yet. I speak Spanish, so that's what is heard around the shop most of the time.

**J.M.** Why has she chosen to focus on the A-style?

**K.R.** Well, to begin, the A style is much easier to build. I wouldn't recommend anyone starting out on the F style. She also makes two points.

**J.M.** Do you build together in the same shop?

**K.R.** Yes we do. She has her bench and I have mine.

**J.M.** It's been a pleasure Ken; I'm looking forward to seeing more of your mandolins. A friend of mine owns one and it is very, very nice.

If you would like to talk to Ken about his instruments, he may be reached by phone at 606-286-8530, via e-mail at [silverangelmandolins@yahoo.com](mailto:silverangelmandolins@yahoo.com) His web site is: <http://www.silverangelmandolins.com/index.html>

Here is what some owners of Silver Angel mandolins have to say:

I've had Ken craft two different Silver Angel mandolins for me. He was great to work with on both instruments. My first - an F5 he crafted in 2002 - was a great instrument. My first-ever custom-made *anything*, it had a great tone and was just gorgeous. It was red with a yellow-colored sunburst and had a lacquer finish. I even had Ken include a cast-bronze tailpiece he designed. I believe it was the last one he had left of 30 or so cast. The person who had actually cast them had gone to Europe and so Ken didn't figure he'd ever be able to have any more made. (To this date I don't believe he has had any more made.)

Anyway, it was great talking with him on the phone and discussing what I wanted. After I sent him a deposit, I got a receipt for it in the mail, with the envelope address and actual receipt within filled out in *pencil*. I always chuckle at my initial thought of "Wow...this guy IS right off the side of a mountain in Kentucky!" Imagine my surprise - and excitement - when a week or two later, he called me up asking for my email address as he wanted to email me photos of the progress he was making in each step. It was so neat to watch photos of the 'birth' of my Silver Angel appear in my inbox over the next several months.

I had that mandolin - which he named 'Oliva' (*not* Olivia) for nearly three years. When my wife and I vacationed in Kentucky in 2004, Ken and his wife Laura invited us to visit for a day. (We'd been camping in the Daniel Boone National Forest, about a 40-minute drive from Elliottville, KY where Ken and Laura live.) That visit alone was a totally joyous and unique experience. Ken literally lives on the 'top of a mountain' and the scenic view from his workshop is truly awesome. I can see where he gets inspiration for his work, and his house is a work of art in and of itself with hand-made hardwood cupboards and countertops, inlaid hardwood floors, stone fireplaces with flagstone hearths, and Ken's oil and water-color paintings throughout. He and Laura showed us their workshop and several new mandolins in progress - including a couple of wonderful A-styles Laura had strung up 'in the white' and which were headed to IBMA that year - as well as a purple-stained F5 he'd been commissioned to craft. Ken's father dropped in - 91 years old at the time - and we'd never meet a more spry individual! He played my mandolin and really liked it; he's a fine luthier himself and actually re-graduated the top and refinished an old (1890's-era) Sears & Roebuck fiddle I have. I can see where Ken gets his talent from. (Ken's brother Steve is a fine luthier and makes wonderful fiddles as well.)

While there, Ken had been checking over my mandolin and didn't quite care for the action on it. He retired

to his workshop (with me following along), loosened the strings, removed the bridge (which he'd hand-made himself) and started grinding and sanding on it! In less than ten minutes he had it back together and tuned up - now with a lowered action. I thought it had been fine before; when he was done that thing played like a dream and you couldn't drop one of my Jim Dunlop 1mm picks between the frets and strings at the 12th fret! What a great set-up job he did, and what a difference it made.

In May of 2005 I accidentally chipped a bit of the nut while re-stringing it, and sent Oliva back to Ken to have the nut replaced. A number of people who had played mine here in Michigan had ordered mandolins from Ken, and while mine was there being repaired, a 19-year old kid stopped in to Ken's, played Oliva, and fell in love with her. Ken called me up and said, "There's this kid who really wants to buy your mandolin. With all the business you've brought me, I'd be willing to build you a brand-new one - 'even-up' - if you want to sell this one." I pondered on that for about a week, and finally agreed to another Silver Angel - but I had two stipulations: The tailpiece from Oliva had to be transferred to the new one, and the new one had to have a mother-of-pearl flying angel logo on the headstock like my first one. Ken agreed. (On a side note, Ken told me the kid who'd bought my first one promptly entered a mandolin contest in Maryland and won all the marbles with Oliva!)

Unfortunately about the time he sold Oliva and started on my new one, Ken was bitten on his right hand by a brown recluse spider. The effect of the poison on the flesh and nerves on his was gravely serious. Ken and his doctors were very concerned he might lose the hand altogether, and it took several months before the doctors gave him the okay to start working again. Ken was so apologetic every time he'd call or email to update me on his inability to work on my new instrument. However, this gave me some additional time to contemplate the features for my new mandolin. During that time, my wife even talked me into getting an angel portrait painted on the back, as well as having Ken finish it with an oil varnish. I finally received my new Angel - named 'Oliva II' - in October of 2005. It's every bit as beautiful as my first angel, with more of a tobacco-brown sunburst, and the beautiful one-of-a-kind angel portrait on the back. The headstock has a beautiful mother-of-pearl angel on it as well, and the original tailpiece looks even better on this instrument than it did on the first!

The tone of both are exceptional; I believe this newer one has a little more 'bark' to her - perhaps because of the oil varnish finish. Regardless, it's loud, 'woody' and sings like the angel she is!

Ken has always been so patient, polite and accommodating when working with him. I know there are a lot of fine luthiers making great instruments out there in the world, but I don't believe you can get such unique-looking and consistently great-sounding custom-made instruments at the price point as you do with Ken and Laura's Silver Angel mandolins.

Good luck with the article. Contact me anytime; I'd even be willing to chat with you on the phone sometime if you'd like.

**- Mark Walker**

I have owned several of Ken's mandolins. The tone and playability that he is getting out of his mandolins is really incredible considering the price that he sells them at. I have had two custom mandolins built for me by Ken, with that being said, I have always enjoyed dealing with Ken. The last mandolin that I had Ken build me is really a killer mandolin, the tone and sustain are incredible. He and his wife are very easy going and very easy to communicate with even when you need some repair work done in a hurry as I have had. I have also been to their home on a couple of occasions to pick up a mandolin and they have always treated me well. On those occasions when I was at their home we always had a jam session with some of his relatives and friends. Ken and Laura are just good people that happen to build great mandolins.

**- Bobby Nobley**

Ken makes the best mandolins you can get your hands on. Ken would send pictures all along as my mandolin was being made. He asked questions about the voicing of the mandolin and what I was wanting in it as far as tone etc. Ken is very easy going and never rushes anything while building his unbelievable mandolins. His mandolins are worth many times more than what he charges for them. I'm playing with the King James 1611 Boys right now and everyone that hears it loves the tone. I heard Bobby Nobley's Silver Angel mandolin and had to have one. Bobby's new CD has Silver Angel Mandolin playing on it. I plan to buy another Silver Angel mandolin within the coming year for back up, that's how great they are. Ken is honest and the best builder of high end mandolins out there, I've had allot of high end mandolins and Ken's beat them all, hands down. They play and sound great. I would not take \$25,000.00 for mine; it will never be for sale while I'm able to play. Of all the mandolins I still own, I grab Ken's mandolin first every time. It was perfect right out of the case.

**- Chuck Brown**