



Interview: Lynn Dudenbostel by Joe Mendel

In 1989 Lynn Dudenbostel built his first guitar, believing that it would be a good first instrument to build before attempting to build an F-5 mandolin. After folks saw the first guitar the orders started coming in, so he built another, then another. By the mid 1990's he was backordered a year and a half

and still hadn't built his first mandolin. It started as a hobby, and quickly got out of control; he was employed full time by Lockheed-Martin, and could not devote the time needed to complete all the orders he had. Then the hand of providence stepped in, the company was downsizing and Thanksgiving week of 1996 Lynn received a layoff notice. He was offered another job within the company, and was tempted to take it, but his wife didn't think he should. He and his wife talked it over, and he talked with George Gruhn about it, and the decision was made for him to become a full time instrument builder. As the old saying goes, the rest is history.

JM: When did you build your first instrument?

LD: Well, my first guitar was in 1989, but prior to that, I built a few mountain dulcimers, probably in 1988. My first mandolin, an F-5, came in 1996.

JM: What are you doing now?

LD: At the moment, I'm knee deep in a batch of guitars. I don't typically build mandolins and guitars at the same time. I'm not sure why, but I like transitioning from one to the other on occasion. When I say a "batch", I mean about 4 instruments. I like to have them at different stages of completion so I'm not doing a lot of repetitive tasks all the time. I started 5 F-5 mandolins at the same time several years ago, and I thought I'd never complete them! I like to have one instrument that I've just started, one with the body assembled, and one in the finishing process. I seem to work more efficiently this way.

JM: So luthierie is a second profession for you?

LD: I guess you could say that although compared to lutherie, I don't feel like I've ever had my heart completely into any other profession. I worked in a camera store for 5 ½ years while in high school and college, then in engineering and safety for 16 years in the corporate world. I'm very glad to be away from that. One of the very best things about my current situation is working at home. Until two years ago, my shop was always in a portion of the basement of our home. Two years ago, I moved into a dedicated shop building that we constructed

behind the house. What I like best about this situation is being at home with my family. How many dads get the opportunity to take their kids to school, and then be home when they come back in the afternoon? For them to be able to wander in and out of the shop in the afternoons or days off really makes this “job” not feel like a “job”.

JM: Are you currently working on anything in particular?

LD: I’m working on developing patterns and templates for a traditional style H-5 type mandola. It’s been a while in planning, but will be coming to fruition soon!

JM: Do you do many repairs?

L LD: I’ve never done a lot of repair work compared to the time I dedicate to building my own instruments; however, in the last couple of years, I’ve taken on even less. Unless it’s just something I really want to do, or for a good friend, I just have to turn it away. It’s just too time consuming. I hate to do that, because good repair/restoration people are hard to find.

JM: What is your favorite part of building?

LD: That is a really tough question. I like just about all aspects of building. Stringing up a new mandolin or guitar and hearing its voice for the first time is still as exciting as it was when I built the first guitar in 1989. It’s the “reward” for all of those hours I’ve put into that instrument.

JM: How did your luthierie career get started?

LD: Well, I’ve always had a love of music, playing clarinet back in grade school, taking up guitar and banjo in junior high, and mandolin in my early 20’s. The bluegrass music scene was pretty rich in Knoxville in the 1970’s and I guess that, together with visiting Gene Horner in his shop on several occasions planted the seed. Then, the Tom Morgan mandolin plans along with the Roger Siminoff book gave me a real boost. However, it wasn’t until I married Amy in 1987 that I started pursuing it in earnest. She was willing to put the car out in the driveway and let me buy tools and set up a shop in the garage that sealed the deal!

JM: How have you promoted your work?

LD: Mostly word of mouth. I had a web site for a few years and have a MySpace page at the present. With the internet, news can spread like wildfire, but so can misinformation! I had a gentleman contact me about mandolins recently who had read somewhere on-line that I no longer built guitars. I assured him that wasn’t the case. When I do get a web site up and running again, it will mostly be

photos, contact information, and a really good “frequently asked questions” page... or two or three!

JM: How has the internet affected your business?

LD: Overall, it has been very good for business, however, as I mentioned before, there is a fair amount of damage control that I have to deal with because of misinformation. If you have a question about a builder’s instruments/policies/etc., it’s always best to contact the builder instead of someone in a forum who may or may not have the correct information! The forums can provide a wonderful place for people to exchange ideas and information, but go to the source when at all possible.

JM: You mentioned having a passion, are mandolins your passion?

LD: Mandolins, specifically F-5 mandolins, are the reason I got into lutherie. To my eye, there simply is no more beautiful instrument. However, I’m equally passionate about steel string guitars, and with both, it’s a passion for tone and attention to detail. That’s always the motivating factor.

JM: Describe your approach in building mandolins.

LD: I’m very traditional, as most readers may know. I try to stay true to the vintage instruments that inspire me. Basically, what worked in the 1920’s and 1930’s still works today. There are very few improvements to be made on those designs with the exception of some of the hardware. However, I find myself drawn to the beauty of others who have stepped outside the box, such as John Monteleone. While I don’t see myself going in that direction, I think John has taken the art of guitars and mandolins to a new level. There are other wonderful contemporary builders plowing new ground as well. I applaud their art and look forward to seeing where it goes in the future.

JM: Why did you decide to exclusively build one style of mandolin?

LD: Actually, I build both F-5 and A-5 style mandolins, and will add the H-5 style mandola in the near future. Outside of that, I don’t see myself building any of the larger mandolin family instruments.

JM: Do you use a lot of jigs and tooling?

LD: Probably not as much as most people would think. I could probably build somewhat more efficiently if I developed more dedicated fixtures and tooling. I visited Roger Siminoff when I was in California, for the Mandolin Symposium last year and left with a serious case of “fixture envy”! He’s an amazing individual with

a real talent for tooling and organization (outside of his obvious building and writing talents).

JM: What sound are you trying to achieve in your instruments?

LD: I'm really not trying to achieve anything "new". I'm trying my best to emulate the sounds produced by the vintage instruments that inspire me, that being the Martin guitars of the 1930's and the Gibson Loar era mandolins.

JM: What type of woods do you use?

LD: Mostly traditional tonewood for the backs/sides/necks. For tops, I've used exclusively eastern red spruce (Adirondack spruce) and Engelmann spruce for quite a few years. About 3 years ago I discovered "Carpathian" spruce (picea abies) from Romania. I am very happy with the results I'm getting from it in both mandolins and guitars. It's very much like eastern red spruce, but with less "break-in" period.

JM: What is your most popular body style?

LD: Definitely the F-5 mandolin and the 14 fret dreadnaught guitar.

JM: Do you make all the parts for your instruments?

LD: With the exception of tuners/tailpieces/truss rods/mandolin bridges, yes, I make it all right down to the kerfed lining.

JM: How would you describe the sound of your mandolins?

LD: Well, it's hard to generalize because of the various top woods and graduations I use. I feel that I have a good grasp of how to achieve different sounds depending on what a client wants, Engelmann for a dark rich sound, a nice hard Carpathian spruce for a brighter, crisper sound. I like to think I have some consistency between instruments of similar specs; however, there are a lot of combinations of material and graduation that yield unique sounds. That's part of the fun of it to me.

JM: Do you have any long-term goals in building?

LD: I hope I have many more years to put in behind the bench and I hope I continue to grow and develop as a builder.

JM: Have your mandolins changed over the years?

LD: Not that much, actually. I have added another top wood and some other graduations as time has moved on, but my early instruments look pretty much

like my current ones. I was very fortunate to “hit the ground running” (as some have said) with a good eye for detail.

Thank you, Lynn for taking the time out of your busy schedule to do this interview; I've enjoyed speaking with you.

If you are interested in a Dudenbostel guitar or mandolin, it is best to contact Lynn directly via e-mail @ knoxdude@charter.net
Or by phone @ 865-980-0084 to find out his current order status or the possible availability of pre-owned Dudenbostel instruments.