

# Interview with Frank Ford

by Joe Mendel

Frank Ford and his partner Richard Johnson opened Gryphon Stringed Instruments in 1969. Frank has become one of the most well known and respected repair people in the business. Frank is not only able to do amazing repair work; he has also invented a dizzying array of methods and tools for doing repairs. His website <http://www.frets.com/> is the widest ranging, most in depth repair site for guitars, mandolins, etc., on the web. In the old days builders and repairers kept their trade secrets, secret. Frank has helped open the doors to repair work through his website, seminars, classes and his membership in The Guild of American Luthiers and A.S.I.A., as well as his willingness to help with specific repairs via e-mail and over the phone.

**Joe Mendel:** Frank let me first say, "Thank you" for all the help you've been over the years. You've been a great help to me with several repairs. How did you get started in the repair business?

**Frank Ford:** The short answer is that I started playing music, and the cheap instrument I bought turned out to be a repair project.

Some of my earliest memories are of my father and grandfather making and fixing things around the house and of being involved in the process myself. I figure I was born with the wiring for that kind of work, and with all the examples and teaching I received at home, I ended up with a fair aptitude for mechanical problem solving.

Near the end of my college experience (zoology major) I became aware that my real calling lay elsewhere, so shortly after I graduated, I started messing around with instruments, eventually building a fleet of dulcimers, a mandolin and a guitar. I'd met Richard Johnston some years earlier, and after I made that guitar we talked about getting together to try to make instruments for a living.

Late in 1969, we hammered out a loose partnership, and we've been together ever since. During those first few years we built around 40 guitars, some banjos and a few F-5 style mandolins. Along the way, we did repairs, too. In 1973, we opened our first retail shop, and from that time, repairs dominated the scene, along with the other parts of running a retail music shop.

**JM:** Several years ago someone sent me a recording of a bluegrass band from a radio show and the mandolin player was none other than Frank Ford. Do you still play mandolin?

**FF:** Mandolin was my first musical love, and I spent most of my energy playing mandolin. Unlike the building and repair, though, I never felt as though I was a natural musician. Learning music was always painfully difficult for me, and over the years I've let that part of my life slide away. My current excuse for not playing is osteoarthritis, which has been an increasingly painful hand problem. While I can't hold a flatpick as I used to, I'm still able to work with my chisels, knives and other important tools. As I often say, "The world didn't lose any kind of great musician when I quit playing."

**JM:** When you started repairing there wasn't a lot of information available, did you just figure things out as you went along?

**FF:** That's about it. The only text in general circulation was Irving Sloane's book on classical guitar construction, and as far as I know, there was no literature on fretted instrument repair. But, I believe I learn best by doing, so I just started in and tried not to make the same mistakes twice.

**JM:** Does finding new and improved repair methods come naturally to you?

**FF:** Well, if there's one part of the instrument repair business I really like, it's working out new procedures, tools and routines. I spend many of my "days off" at home doing just that, even after 35 years in this craft.

**JM:** There's a "flying by the seat of your pants" aspect to many repairs, do you enjoy that?

**FF:** I do enjoy working that way, and try to vary the methods I use all the time. I see it as somewhat analogous to improvising in playing music. I still take on jobs I've never seen before partly to have new experiences and to keep the enthusiasm up for innovation.

**JM:** Do you get a lot of mandolins in for repair?

**FF:** Certainly, the bulk of my work is on acoustic guitars, but, yes, I do see a fair number of mandolins for all kinds of repair. I just had a nice 100 year old bowl back mandola in for a lot of structural work, thanks to UPS.

**JM:** What is the most challenging mandolin repair you've done? Did it turn out the way you hoped it would?

**FF:** Most challenging? Gee, that's hard to say. Some 25 years ago I was called on to disassemble and regraduate a 1930s F-7, and to make a new F-5 length neck for it. At the time it was a mighty challenging job, to say the least. The result was a surprisingly good sounding instrument.

**JM:** Do you ever get nervous or worry about working on particular instruments?

**FF:** Oh yes! These days, we see instruments reaching incredibly high values, so it's difficult not to think about liability. Recently, I was approached by a collector who had just bought a very high priced vintage instrument from a nationally respected dealer. He said it had developed a couple of cracks and even though he didn't have the instrument with him he wanted to know on the spot what I'd charge to "make it perfect" and how long it would take. Fortunately I was able to suggest that he return it to the dealer, who took care of the problem as a matter of courtesy.

**JM:** What's your attitude toward vintage/collectable instruments? Are there some repairs that shouldn't be done even if it makes the instrument better?

**FF:** I do spend a lot of time talking to owners of instruments to make certain that they are aware of the current state of the market, and the other ethical considerations of customizing and repairing vintage instruments. While the owner is the boss and can ultimately call the shots, there are some jobs I really don't want to take on because of the impact on originality. Had the neck not been broken on the F-7 I mentioned earlier, I would have probably chosen not to do that particular job.

Some time ago I was asked to replace the fingerboard on a Loar F-5 with a radius board for "better playability." The owner told me he'd never sell it, but I declined because I really didn't think it was an appropriate thing to do to an otherwise original instrument of that stature. Another local luthier did the job and it came out just right. But, wouldn't you know it, a few years later the owner found he had quite a hard time selling the mandolin...

**JM:** In the violin world most people seem to understand that with age and use an instrument will need maintenance and repair, but a lot of guitar and mandolin owners have expectations that repairs should be invisible and originality be preserved at all costs, why do you think that is?

**FF:** Maturity is the issue, I think. The violin world has had a period of three centuries to develop. The collectible fretted instrument market is still mighty young, and we have a lot of issues to iron out, particularly in view of the fact that some of the materials used in these instruments are volatile and are nearing the end of their lifespan. Celluloid and lacquer in particular deteriorate at an unpredictable rate. Even some of the celluloid binding and pickguards I made years ago are starting to crumble with age. So, one way or another, we'll have to confront these issues and sort out where we stand.

**JM:** What is your favorite common repair job on mandolins?

**FF:** Strangely enough, I enjoy working with those old Gibsons where the sides have come loose and are difficult to press and glue back in shape. My least favorite is dealing with the sagging tops on some of those same old Gibsons.

**JM:** Common knowledge says that the bridge must fit the top of a mandolin perfectly, you're not so sure, could you explain that for us?

**FF:** All I know is that I can't hear the difference. Naturally, it makes sense that the bridge fit closely for structural and cosmetic reasons, but when I've improved the fit, I haven't been able to hear an improvement in tone.

**JM:** What is your opinion of cast tailpieces, ivory saddles, tone guards and all the other hot rod type of accessories now available for mandolins?

**FF:** I don't doubt that different tailpieces have subtle tonal effects on mandolins just as they do on guitars and banjos. Likewise, the wire tone guard makes sense if it keeps you from touching the back of your instrument when you play. The old Gibson catalog was clear on that subject in an article that discussed the "proper" way to hold a mandolin.

Bridges? You bet they can make a difference in tone and volume. I found, for example that I liked the tone of a bone top bridge, but I had a monumental problem of breaking strings when I tried to play really hard like Bill Monroe...

**JM:** What's the single best way to improve the tone of a mandolin? How about volume?

**FF:** Oh, that's an EASY question with a tough answer - technique. I can't tell you how many jam sessions I've attended where instruments got passed around and the tone stayed with the player. The biggest influence on tone and volume comes from the player. Now, I'm not saying that a great player can make a Mid Missouri mandolin sound like an F-5, but I really don't think that there's anything you can do to improve your instrument that even comes close to the improvement that comes with better playing technique.

**JM:** Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

**FF:** These are exciting times for the mandolin world. Never have we seen such an array of truly gifted builders and restorers who have absorbed all that has come before and can synthesize great new stuff! With all the cooperation and communication among builders and restorers, the state of the art has taken serious leaps forward. And, now with the Internet, we can find just about anything we need!

That, to me, is the good news. The bad news, I think, is the growing commodification of high value fretted instruments. These things were, and are, I hope made for playing music, not for use as status symbols.

**JM:** If you are looking for information for a repair, whether you are doing the work yourself, or you are curious about the procedure check out <http://www.frets.com/>, it is loaded with pictures and narratives of many, many repairs in progress. It is truly a great resource.

Frank can be contacted through his website:

<http://www.frets.com/>

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