

# Interview: Dale Ludewig

by Joe Mendel

Having been raised on a farm Dale learned to do many things with his hands, among them was playing the guitar. His father also played guitar and together they listened to a lot of bluegrass and country music, when it really was country music. Dale also played the trombone from late grade school through high school. While still in high school his parents bought him a Harmony A model mandolin, on which he remembers learning Redwing, one of his grandmother's favorite tunes. After high school Dale attended Northern Illinois University and graduated with a degree in creative writing and a minor in history, in 1971.

In college he became interested in classical guitar, which he began teaching himself, but gave it up because he wanted to play with other people and felt that classical guitar did not lend itself to that very well. He then purchased a steel string guitar and began playing fingerstyle guitar, influenced by Doc Watson, Leo Kottke & Mississippi John Hurt, in coffee houses around DeKalb, IL. Later while living in Colorado he was bitten by the banjo bug and bought one from the Ome Company, which was located nearby.

**Joe Mendel: Dale what brought you back to Illinois and how did you get started building instruments?**

**Dale Ludewig:** Well, basically I was running out of money and I couldn't find a job where I was living in Colorado, so I came back to DeKalb. I worked for a short time for a furniture store, then a restaurant, then for a tree nursery as a salesman. But having the farm background, I wasn't comfortable working for other people and started doing carpentry and such with my brother. That led to furniture and cabinets. Then I wanted a better banjo than what I had but couldn't afford what I wanted. So I decided to build one and it turned out very well. I could tell I wanted to make instruments.

**JM: Did you have any plans to work from for the first banjo, or did you use the Ome as a guide?**

**DL:** If I remember correctly, that was about 1978. Irving Sloane had come out with a book called Making Musical Instruments and there was some information in there on building a banjo, and I'm sure the Ome was a guide. I guess I kind of just figured it out. I even made the rim from scratch; that was last time I'd do that!

**JM: How long after your first banjo did it take to try a mandolin or guitar?**

**DL:** Not long, virtually immediately. One thing led to another.

**JM: How many instruments did you build in the 1970's?**

**DL:** About 35 or so. I made a number of banjos for other people, a number of guitars, and a bunch of mandolins. The first mandolins were largely experimental; I was seeing if I could get a carved top sound out of plates that were curved using braces. It didn't work. Then I built two carved top instruments, an A model and then an F5. Somewhere in there I also made 3 solid body, electric mandolins that looked like little Stratocasters.

**JM: Why did you stop building?**

**DL:** Bluntly: money. I wasn't making enough on the instruments to make a living, and there was an increasing demand for my furniture and cabinetwork. So I drifted away from instrument building. I can't say that there was a particular moment that I decided to stop; it just sort of happened.

**JM: Let's fast forward about 20 years. What got you interested in mandolins and in building them again?**

**DL:** About 6 years ago I went to a party at a friend's house on New Year's Day. He was also a band mate (still is), I thought it was going to be just the two of us from the band there and I decided to not bring an instrument. If I brought an instrument people would want us to play and then I couldn't talk to people. Then a 3<sup>rd</sup> band member shows up and I wound up playing mandolin for about 3 hours and I just fell for it. I decided I would get serious about becoming a decent mandolin player. A few months later I decided (this will sound familiar) that I wanted a better one than I was playing, which was one I'd built back in the 70's. I couldn't really afford what I wanted, so I decided to build one. I figured that I had 20 more years of full

time woodworking experience so I'd have a go at it. The response to that mandolin was very positive and people started encouraging me to start building again.

**JM: There were a lot more resources available to guide you in 2001 than there were in 1971. What were the biggest helps in restarting your career as a luthier?**

**DL:** When I'd built my first mandolins, Roger Siminoff's book was just out. I still have my original copy of that. When I started to build again there were other plans available, more tools were available and more instructional material: that all applied to the actual building of a mandolin. As far as the career part of it is concerned, nothing was more important than my wife's encouragement and support. She and I decided that we'd give it 5 years and reassess. Also the encouragement of other people, friends, players both amateur and professional, were important. I also had a well-established woodworking business so that I didn't have to just rely on instruments. And of course, you can't leave out the Internet; it's really helped level the playing field, as they say.

**JM: Would you give us a short trip through your building process?**

**DL:** If it's a custom order, the customer and I will talk about the body style, inlay, hardware, type of wood for the body, and so forth. The usual things I'm sure all builders do. Then when the time comes, I'll build the instrument. I string it up in the white (unfinished) and do the setup. That way I can make final adjustments to some things, including the neck shape. If the customer is close enough to my shop, they can actually come and play it in the white and I'll shape the neck to their preferences right on the spot. Then it comes back apart for final sanding and finishing. I do use a CNC machine for certain operations.

**JM: What wood do you use? How do you go about selecting wood for a particular instrument?**

**DL:** Like I said, the customer decides on the wood for the neck and body. It is usually curly or quilted maple for the back and sides, curly being most common. The neck is usually curly maple. Also a customer may want a one-piece quilted maple back. And there is the occasional birds eye maple instrument. Tops have been either red spruce or Sitka spruce. Most customers want a red spruce top although I personally haven't noticed a huge difference between the two. In fact if they're carved to take into account the particular piece of wood, I can't tell a difference. Maybe you will be able to in ten years. I have made two Engleman topped instruments, but they were both oval holes, so I don't have personal experience in how it would work for me on an f-holed instrument but I'm sure I'll try it sometime.

**JM: What type of finish do you use on your mandolins?**

**DL:** Some get nitrocellulose lacquer. I've done varnish and French polish. Lately I've been experimenting with excellent results with a uralkyd resin; it's actually a floor finish so it's very tough but I've sliced some off of a wood sample and it's flexible like Scotch tape. So it has kind of the best of both worlds.

**JM: Did you have your CNC machine for your cabinet business, or is it used only for mandolins?**

**DL:** I got the CNC machine for mandolin and other instrument building. In fact, I purposely got the smallest model the company makes to prevent me from wandering "off track". However, I have used it a few times for some small non-instrument woodworking projects that were either small production runs or things that would have been very difficult to do otherwise.

**JM: What kind of operations do you use the CNC for?**

**DL:** Primarily I've been using it to rough out the top and back plates. I take the outside very close to final shape but I leave the inside thick so I can do the final graduations by hand. I have started to use it to cut some inlay; that part of the process should expand soon, as well as using it for some binding work on the headstock overlay.

**JM: Have you tried to use the CNC for anything only to decide that it is easier or faster with a less sophisticated method?**

**DL:** Ah, the "I have a new hammer so everything is a nail syndrome". I wouldn't really say so. But I can say that the time it takes to set things up to do with the CNC can make the payback time considerable. But once it's setup and the computer file is sitting there, consistency and speed are far superior than I could do previously. I still shape my necks by hand because I can do that pretty quickly by hand and it would take me more time to set up to do on the CNC than I currently think it's worth in that I'm not a production operation. I also would certainly not say that doing things considered "by hand" is less sophisticated than using a machine to do them. They are different; often I would think that doing certain processes by hand is more sophisticated than using a machine, enabling one to add a human touch that isn't quite the same as doing it by machine. As a customer, I would welcome the inevitable slight flaw here and there where the human hand has touched and made its mark. Korean and Japanese potters from centuries ago thought that a wonderful thing.

**JM: From a builder's perspective what is your definition of "hand made"?**

**DL:** I guess I just kind of answered that question in advance, inadvertently. I find no harm in using technology to do things that suit it. We can't define "hand made" by assuming someone should carve out the mandolin with stone tools. I think everyone would agree to that. On the other extreme, we can't define "hand made" as something where even slight errors are unlikely to happen because of lack of human inclusion in the building process. There is a middle ground. I think the things that are really important are things like graduating each top and back as they need to be, reflecting the characteristics of the plate in question and the final sound goal. Final carving of the scroll, other details like that are extremely important: the little cosmetic things. Tone bar graduations fall into the same area. I know that what I do, even if using CNC and other machines to do certain operations (like routing for the binding) will fall into some folks' heads as not "hand made". But if a person is going to try to make a living at this, time is an extremely important consideration. I guess there is a balance to be struck.

**JM: How do your instruments differ from a factory made instrument?**

**DL:** Which factory? There's quite a range of quality out there. Some factories are putting out instruments that are almost cookie cutter-like, with almost no concern for the difference in different pieces of wood. Workmanship can be questionable at best. There are other factories that are putting out superb work, both in sound, setup, and fit and finish. I guess I can offer a customer more custom options than is practical for a factory, as a generality. I'm also after a particular sound and it is not a copy of the Loar sound. It's not that I don't admire that sound, but I want to do something different.

**JM: How did the Emory Lester model come about? It's quite a bit different than your average A model mandolin.**

**DL:** I met Emory some years ago at IBMA; he was one of my mandolin heroes. We hit it off real well and stayed in touch. He contacted me and wondered if I'd be willing to build a new style A model. Of course I would! So he sent me a drawing of what basically is the Emory Lester model. A few lines had to change in order to make the tuners work. Emory and I tossed some ideas back and forth until we got what we wanted. There is also a matching model mandola now. Plus I have to say that Emory has become a wonderful friend, and needless to say, he's one of the finest players out there.

**JM: Do you have any new models in the works?**

**DL:** If you look at what I've already done, some models are a bit different than normal and color of instruments is wide open in my book. I do have a couple new things coming up in the next year or two, when I can find the time. One will be a two point F hole instrument based on the two point oval hole I do now, but it will have a significantly different sound, of course. And then there's another model that's in the design stages. It is going to be a significantly different body style, quite modern. I believe there is more than one shape that can hold peoples' attention for many years than the F5. People are already doing things that are very stimulating. John Monteleone's Radio Flyer is a perfect example, a beautiful instrument. And the latest instrument that David Grisman is playing is another example.

**JM: If you received an order today about how long would it be before the instrument would be delivered? Do you have waiting list?**

**DL:** A year and a half, approximately. Waiting list: yes.

**JM: Keep up the great work Dale; it's been great talking with you.**

**DL:** Thanks, Joe. It's been a treat. Both meeting you and talking in Springfield, this interview and everything involved- it's all been a very enjoyable experience.

**JM:** I ran into Dale at the Greater Downstate Bluegrass Festival in Springfield Illinois in November 2006 and ended up missing most of the festival. I spent the afternoon talking with him and playing a few of his mandolins. They are fine instruments indeed, and Dale is a great conversationalist. We covered subjects far and wide, as well as instrument building, and generally had a great time.

If you'd like to get in touch with Dale about his instruments or where you might see him at a festival and try some out, he may be contacted via e-mail @: [dale@ludewigmandolins.com](mailto:dale@ludewigmandolins.com) Or visit his website <http://www.ludewigmandolins.com/> for phone and snail mail information.