



## Interview: Andrew Poe

by Joe Mendel

Andrew Poe began playing and working on mandolins in the late 1990's and undertook the task of building his first one in 2003. His first twenty three instruments were built under the name Driftwood, as he began building a reputation he decided to use his own last name on the headstock. As we spoke for this interview he

was applying the finish to numbers sixteen and seventeen under the Poe name. His instruments have drawn rave reviews by owners posting on [mandolincafe.com](http://mandolincafe.com) and from the pictures I've seen they look like fine instruments.

**Joe Mendel:** Hi Andrew. How did you first become interested in the mandolin, and what made you decide to try your hand at building them?

**Andrew Poe:** I was on a camping trip with some friends in the Ozarks. A friend put on the Jerry Garcia and David Grisman CD "Shady Grove" and I was in love. As soon as I got back from that camping trip, I went to the local music store and purchased my first mandolin, a Kentucky A5 style. This was the first instrument I had ever owned. I had no prior musical instrument experience. So I got a beginner mandolin book and have been at it ever since. I knew that I wanted to build mandolins from almost the beginning. I have always been a "crafty" person and enjoy art and making things. David Grisman's CD "DGQ-20" was one of my first mandolin CDs. In the introduction when Dawg introduces Todd Phillips he says, "Todd actually built the mandolin he's playing". I remember the very first time I heard that, I said to myself "that's what I want to do". I had no money, facility, or idea of where to begin. But, I knew that I would eventually build mandolins. About 5 years later after getting married and having two kids, I finally got started on my first mandolin.

**JM:** Did you have any previous woodworking or other experience that lent itself to building mandolins?

**AP:** Does building tree houses qualify? No, I really didn't. I spent years researching, mainly violin making books from the University library in the earlier years because I didn't have a computer. Eventually I did get a computer and found luthier supply houses and started to get an idea of how much it was going to cost me to get started. I was still not quite there financially. I worked in manufacturing for 8 years and worked as much overtime as I could get. Even though the manufacturing job was not woodworking, I really did learn a lot to prepare me for instrument making. I started out as a general operator, worked my way up to a machine set up position, and then to manager. As manager, I supervised about 40 employees over three shifts. During this time, I really developed a good understanding of machinery, fixture design and construction, quality control, customer service and business management. For my first three years of mandolin building, I was also working 40-60 hours a week in the factory. Eventually, I became self-employed. In mid-2005 my wife went back to work and I left the factory work to focus on building mandolins full time.

**JM:** Have you built other instruments of the mandolin family? Have you built any outside of the mandolin family?

**AP:** It has mainly been mandolins. The last instrument under the Driftwood name was a mandola and I am currently working on Poe mandola #1. Being the son of a missionary, I grew up in the country of Mexico. We lived there for 10 years, until I was 15. They play a lot of gut/nylon stringed instruments down there that I have always liked. One of my favorites is the ukulele, similar to some of the small fretted instruments played in Latin and Brazilian music. There is a lot of potential for the ukulele in modern acoustic music and I am excited about its growth along with the mandolin. Poe ukuleles #1 and #2 are almost done.

**JM:** Obviously, the Gibson Co. set the standard for modern mandolins, what do your instruments have in common with that standard and how do they differ?

**AP:** Yes, Gibson has set the standard for modern mandolins. And as is in the violin family, I believe it to be a standard that will be followed for centuries to come. I strive to make my mandolins similar to those built during the Gibson Loar era. Mine are very similar in terms of methods of construction and materials used. I have used Engelmann spruce for some of my mandolins, which tends to give a warmer more modern tone to the instrument. There are not many Loar era mandolins with Engelmann that I am aware of, if any. My mandolins are similar to Gibson in that they are hand graduated, tap tuned, hand cut inlay, hand varnished, etc. I guess the main differences would be that, from what I am told by my customers, my work is cleaner and they sound as good or better. Not to mention that they are independently made (not manufactured), and currently at a fraction of the price.

**JM:** Have you used any non-traditional woods?

**AP:** For the most part, I use traditional woods for my mandolins. Spruce tops and maple back, sides and necks. I built one mandolin with curly sycamore back, sides and neck. Other than that, it has been all traditional woods.

**JM:** It looks like the supply of maple is safe for the near future, but mahogany, rosewood and ebony are getting more expensive all the time, are there any woods you would like to try? Do you think players will be open to alternative woods in mandolins?

**AP:** Luckily mandolins are small and don't require large pieces of wood. I have no plans on using alternative woods at this point. Wood is a renewable resource. As long as wood harvesters are regulated and it is done responsibly, we will have wood in the future. Sure, wood may increase in price but I see it affecting the larger factories more than small independent luthiers such as myself. But I don't consider myself an expert on the subject.

**JM:** How have your mandolins evolved over time?

**AP:** As with anything, I get better with practice and experience. I have definitely improved in terms of aesthetic detail. My finishing methods have definitely evolved as well. I started out with water based on my first 2 mandolins. Then I used nitro lacquer for the following 20 mandolins. Wanting to follow in some of my mandolin making hero's footsteps, I made the decision to switch to varnish. So now I am hand applying a very fine oil varnish that is French polished. It's a lot more work than spraying on a finish, but I feel it's worth it. I believe that a fine varnish allows the instruments to resonate more freely. I also think it looks better. I love the patina that fine old violins and mandolins have. You just don't get that with lacquer. I also feel that with experience I have improved at graduating the plates to get better tone and projection out of my instruments.

**JM:** After almost forty instruments are your methods pretty well set, or does it change a bit with each instrument?

**AP:** A lot of the process has been set. I am aware of the fact that there is always room for improvement, but most of my methods are pretty well set. I am mainly working on refining and perfecting the methods I currently use. I have no intention of ever outsourcing things like inlay work or getting into CNC fabrication or any of that. So although my methods are not set in stone, they are rather consistent.

**JM:** There is a lot of discussion among luthiers and players about which neck joints are preferred, and there are some big names on opposite sides of the discussion. Why do you believe the compound dovetail is superior to other methods?

**AP:** I don't necessarily believe it to be superior, but I definitely don't think that it is inferior. Dovetail neck joints have been in use on mandolins and other instruments for over one hundred years and most of those original dovetail joints are still rock solid today, if the instrument has been cared for. The dovetail neck joint has stood the test of time and is trusted, that's why I use it. I have no reason to believe that an alternative method would make the instrument sound better. The only reason I could see one really preferring an alternative neck joint method is to save time in construction. Fitting a dovetail neck joint on a mandolin can be time consuming and for that reason, I could see why a company or independent builder would prefer an alternative method. But I have no intention on switching to an alternative, be it bolt-on, dowels or whatever.

**JM:** Do you build in batches or one at a time, or a combination of both methods?

**AP:** I usually build in batches of two. And while building those two, I'm varnishing the previous two. My varnishing method takes me 4-6 weeks. So usually, varnishing two while building two keeps me pretty busy.

**JM:** Would you give us an outline of your building process, from taking the order to finished mandolin?

**AP:** Once the customer places an order by paying a small deposit, their name goes on the list. When I get close to starting on their instrument, we work on wood selection. Usually we discuss what they are wanting in terms of looks and sound, and based on that I will select the wood. I often send emails with wood selection or pictures of several pieces for the customer to choose from. From there it's on to:

- joining and carving top and back
- bending and assembling sides to the body blocks
- making and shaping the neck
- cutting soundholes
- fitting and gluing bracing
- glue on the top the finished rim assembly
- cutting the dovetail joints on the neck and body and fitting them
- glue on the carved and graduated back to the body
- slot and cut fingerboard
- get the body, headstock and fingerboard ready for binding
- do the binding
- do all the inlay work
- glue on the neck
- make the fingerboard extension and glue in place
- fret and glue on the finger board
- do any needed shaping and sanding
- make bridge, truss rod cover, and fit hardware
- final sanding
- stain and finish
- set it up and play

Well Joe, that's what you call building a mandolin in a nutshell. Throughout the process I am in contact with the customer and send some photos of progress here and there.

**JM:** Which body style is most requested by customers? What is the mix of body styles you've built so far?

**AP:** F style is the most popular and commonly ordered. I would say that A and C styles (what I call two points) are about equal.

**JM:** Two point mandolins seem to be getting popular, why do you think that is? I like them, there is much more allowance for the builder to make variations on the theme than other body styles.

**AP:** Yea, I like them too. But I like all three styles. It seems to me that it's usually the jazzier players that like the C styles most. I think that people like that they are a little fancier than the As but not as fancy as the Fs. And the C style mandolins are a little different but at the same time they are kind of traditional. It's usually the Jethro Burns fans that buy them. Jethro will always be one of my hero's. He was one of the finest mandolin players the world has ever known and a true showman with a good sense of humor. I always pull out the Jethro CDs when building C styles and can picture him in my mind just making old "Red" swing. Thank you Mel Bay for the wonderful Jethro books!

**JM:** Do you build as you get orders or do you ever get to build spec instruments?

**AP:** I'm mainly working on orders. I currently don't have much time for spec instruments. But I will sometimes squeeze in a spec instrument. For example, the two ukuleles that I am currently getting ready to finish are spec instruments. I usually do that about once a year.

**JM:** Do you have a waiting list at this time?

**AP:** Yes, currently new orders will have around a one-year wait for completion.

**JM:** It was nice talking to you Andrew, next time I head to Columbia, MO, I'll give you a call and maybe I'll get the chance to see and play a Poe mandolin or two. Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed. Best of luck to you and I hope our paths cross soon.

**AP:** It has been my pleasure. Thanks Joe and Mel Bay! And thanks to all the wonderful folks that play my instruments. You guys are awesome! Play it purty!

Andrew's website has many pictures of the mandolins he has built along with sound clips and testimonials. Andrew maybe contacted through his website: [www.poestrings.com](http://www.poestrings.com)