

Interview with Jamie Wiens

by Joe Mendel

Jamie Wiens began learning to play at age 12 on his sister's guitar. Shortly afterward his parents gave him his own electric guitar, that guitar became his first lutherie project. He didn't care for the finish so he took it apart, refinished and reassembled it. In woodshop in junior high he built his first guitar, an explorer-style electric, which he sold to a classmate. The next one was a flying V that he also sold. The next several years were spent in serious study of guitar playing, and at age 19 he moved to Vancouver, BC to pursue a career in music. As luck would have it his home in Vancouver was only a block away from Jean Larrivee's shop and Jamie stopped by to introduce himself. Jean saw his interest and it wasn't long before Jamie was working for Larrivee. He fell in love with the smell of the guitar shop and spent many evenings after hours working side by side with Jean. While he enjoyed the work, Jamie wasn't yet convinced it would make a good a career choice, and he left to explore other avenues. However it wasn't long before he was back in Vancouver working for Larrivee. During his second stint at Larrivee he decided he could start doing lutherie on his own. About the same time Jamie was introduced to bluegrass music and became fascinated by the F-5 mandolin. In 1994 he move back to his hometown of Cranbrook, B.C. Canada to gather tools and go into lutherie full time and that year built his first F-5 mandolin.

JM: What kind of music did you play while you were trying to make it as a musician?

JW: It was the Beatles' music that first grabbed me and made a deep impression on me in my early teens. In the late 80's I got caught up in hair rock and tried to play guitar like Eddy Van Halen and Randy Rhoads...It didn't really go too far though and I lost interest in rock music and the idea of being rock star after a few years. However, I was still very interested in playing and learning more about music. In my early 20's I became interested in blues and folk music... Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, the Everly Bros, Mississippi John Hurt....that sort of thing, and I began playing a fair bit of blues harmonica and finger style guitar. That eventually led to me stumbling onto David Grisman's music, which really blew my mind at the time...And that led to an interest in mandolin and Bluegrass music.

JM: It seems like a long jump from explorers and flying V's to F-5's, how did you make that leap?

JW: I've always built instruments designed for the music that I was interested in at the time, as my tastes in music changed from Rock to acoustic Folk & Blues and then to Country & Bluegrass, my instrument building went along with it.

JM: Did you start out building or repairing, or both?

JW: I started out just tinkering with my own instruments, taking them apart, refinishing, modifying & noodling with them. I think I got most of my information from "Guitar Player" magazine articles. It wasn't till I started working at Larrivee guitars when I was 19 that I began to learn the proper way to build and repair instruments.

After I took up lutherie for myself, I did repair work for 6 or 7 years, but eventually found that it was a world of headaches and I wasn't enjoying it. It was also getting in the way of my instrument building, which I did enjoy and had orders for. At that point I realized that while repair work is a great teacher, my passion lies more in the creative process of designing and constructing an instrument. And so I stopped taking repairs to better concentrate on building.

Having said that, I have nothing but respect for instrument repairmen, that work requires a huge mixed-bag of skills and techniques to do it well.

JM: Were you always a stickler for the details, or is that something you've learned as you gotten farther into the Lloyd Loar style of mandolin?

JW: I've always been a slightly obsessed with details, so this "vintage style" instrument-making thing just happens to be a fertile playground for that.

JM: What other types of instruments have you built between your first two electric guitars and your Lloyd Loar reproductions?

JW: I've built 4 & 5 string electric basses, a few Dreadnaught acoustic guitars, an old-time fretless banjo, a 10-string long-neck cittern. In 1998 I actually designed a line of acoustic guitars with the thought of focusing on guitars instead of mandolins, which are so much more difficult and time consuming. The line included a 12-fret parlor guitar, an auditorium or "OM" size, a 6 or 12-string concert size, and an oversize 5-string fretless acoustic bass guitar. More recently, there was also a piccolo mandolin based on one Steve Gilchrist built.

JM: Have you ever built an A model mandolin, or did you go for the F-5 right away?

JW: I've never built an "A" model. When I first started listening to players like David Grisman, John Reischman and Sam Bush, it was the scroll and other details of their F-5s that really caught my eye and presented a challenge to me as a young instrument maker.... that tight bend in the scroll, the binding work, the F-holes... Coming from a flattop guitar background, it was all pretty fascinating to me. So I bought Roger Siminoff's book "Constructing a Bluegrass Mandolin" and started work on an F-5 right away.

JM: Why did you decide to try to reproduce the Loar style F-5 as exactly as you can? After all there are many fine F-5's out there that don't adhere to those standards very closely.

JW: Actually, when I first got into mandolins, I didn't view the Loar F-5s as the be-all end-all. At the time, the acoustic lutherie world was exploding with talent, so I was more interested in the work of modern F-5 builders like Michael Heiden, Lawrence Smart and John Sullivan. I was impressed by their slightly modernized take on the Loar F-5, built with alternative woods, thicker binding, larger overhanging frets, artistic inlays etc. ...And so that's what I was interested in building for several years. It wasn't until I had an encounter with John Reischman's '24 Loar that I became interested in vintage details.

JM: What do you think makes the Loar era F-5's so special?

JW: I think a lot of folks don't appreciate how special the Loar F-5 mandolins really were. I look at that period between the first Orville Gibsons of the late 1890's and the Lloyd Loars of the 1920's and marvel at the dramatic evolution of the mandolin. It went from the lute-looking taterbug type, to the highly refined, almost violin-like Loar F-5 in less than 25 years. With that in mind, look at the appreciable improvements in mandolins in the 80-odd years since then. There's been very few, and I think that's because the F-5 was a near-perfect mandolin design. Also, the Bill Monroe factor cannot be ignored. He's the one who invented the music that the F-5 mandolin sound is closely associated with. He gave the F-5 a popular musical platform and is basically why we're all here talking about mandolins.

JM: Are there any materials used in the Loars that aren't available today? How do you deal with that?

JW: For the most part, you can still find or make everything that would have been used on the Loars if you care to chase it down. The fretwire they used back then seems to be more durable than what's being made today; however, I'm not quite convinced that I need to be making my own fretwire yet. (Laughs)

There are also strange little things that are harder to come by than you'd think. For instance, the off-quarter cut of the soundboard wood used on the Loars. Under stains it looks nothing like the perfectly quartered vertical grain that we typically see from suppliers today....In fact I think that this is evidence that they likely just used high grade lumber from local sawmills on the old Gibsons, not wedge-cut rounds like instrument wood suppliers offer today. Besides just a different look, that off-quarter grain orientation changes the way you approach carving a top, and that changes the way the instrument will ultimately sound.

JM: What is it that you're after in your instruments? There is quite a bit of variation between the Loars, they are not all the same in sound or feel.

JW: And mine won't all be the same either. I try to choose pieces of wood and build towards my individual client's needs, within a certain range. But overall I guess I'm chasing that basic vibe that I first encountered on John Reischman's Loar. I want that organic feel, so as a result there's very little that is symmetrical or straight in my design. I also chase after an old sound, with a nice rich bottom and that tubular clarity that you hear up high on some Loars. It's very a tall order of course, and unfortunately I

don't think there's anything that can take the place of time in an instrument's development. So I might not be around when I finally get the sound I'm after.

JM: How has being able to examine John Reischman's Loar and others changed your approach to building mandolins?

JW: My first experience with John's Loar completely changed my whole idea of what a mandolin should be....The way it looked, felt and sounded was just so far from what I was making at the time. I recall going home that night and completely re-designing my F-5 in my head. Physically, the most obvious thing to me was the beautiful plate arching. It's so gentle and flowing, especially the way the top is so full under the fingerboard extension. The shallower neck angle with it's higher action was a surprise, The scroll shape was also quite far from what I was doing. Sound-wise that mando taught me a huge lesson. I remember strumming it the first time and suddenly smiling and saying "Oh"! As if I'd just discovered ice cream, or boobies or something.

JM: What kind of changes have you made in your instruments over the years and why?

JW: My F-5 has gone through 5 complete re-designs since I started making them in 1994, so there have been countless little changes. Besides learning from encounters with original Loar instruments, I got a lot of info along the way from guys like The F-5 Journal's Darryl Wolfe, Gibson's Charlie Derrington and more recently The Mandolin Archive's Dan Beimborn. They really encouraged me to always dive deeper into the whole Loar mystique and that resulted in a lot of refinements to my design. Generally, I think as a young builder starting out, it's easy to gloss-over certain features and chalk them up to being archaic or obsolete. But then as you progress and learn, your values and tastes change and you realize the importance of the features you previously ignored. You get a better sense of what you do well, and what players want from their instruments.

JM: What things are you doing with your instruments that you think are overlooked by many other builders? What details are you doing that others don't bother with?

JW: All builders have different ideals, so I wouldn't say they overlook details that I'd consider important. Rather, a lot of other builders would consider some of the things I do unnecessary, too time-consuming or even too silly to reproduce. (Laughs)

One basic part of my approach is I assemble the entire instrument with Hide Glue...Not cheap or easy to do, but I have some very good reasons for using it. Another example of something I think is visually critical that people often miss is the binding sizes. On the Loars they are a bit thicker than what's typically available, so I actually have my binding specially sized for me so I can get the look I'm after. And finally a good example of something some might find silly is I don't use the typical ebony peg-head veneer. It looks far too slick and modern to me....Instead, I make a Dyed Pearwood & holly peg-head overlay just like the originals had. Then during the finishing process, it gets completely painted over with blackened shellac and the paint painstakingly scraped off the binding & inlay to give the authentic Loar appearance.

JM: How many mandolins have you built to date? About how long does it take you from start to finish? Do you built in batches or one at a time?

JW: I'm working on only my 23rd F-5 right now. My career so far seems to have been an extended period of R&D with only an occasional instrument being produced as a by-product. I guess I've come a long ways and dabbled in quite a few different aspects of lutherie and I feel that I'm finally at a point where the learning curve is leveling off, and now hopefully I can put more energy towards just producing larger numbers of F-5 mandolins.

As for the building process, I tend to build batches of instrument parts, like necks and top & backs & rims. Then as I get the instruments assembled and start on binding and finish, things slow down and I tend to take them one by one from there. It takes me a long time to make a mandolin right now because of all the hand work and finishing. I estimate it's over 300 hours a piece, with the french polish varnish being a large part of that.

JM: What materials do you use in your instruments?

JW: I only use Adirondack Spruce soundboards nowadays. I've used Engelmann and Sitka in the past with decent results, but I think The Adirondack spruce, with its bell-tone, tremendous cross-grain stiffness and excellent "carvability", is an ideal soundboard material for arch top mandolins.

For the neck & body, I tend to be using the harder eastern species of maple like Sugar and Red-maple. I like a stiff rim and neck on my instruments and the Sugar maple certainly delivers that. For the back, I find I can nudge the tone of an instrument one way or another by varying the density of the back wood. So I'd use a harder piece of Sugar maple for more bite, or a softer piece of Red maple or occasionally Bigleaf maple for a deeper woof. So I'll definitely mix the species up a bit depending on who I'm building for.

My finish is a two step oil varnish/french polish technique. I use a very dark seed-lac based french polish that I mix myself. It's great for sound and gives the binding that old-time look, but it's incredibly time consuming to apply.

The hardware I use includes Waverly tuners, Steve Smith bridges & pick-guard brackets, Bill James or Gary Price tailpieces, and Calton or Pegasus cases.

JM: What is a Virzi, or in this case a Wienzi, and what does it do?

JW: The Virzi is a thin, wooden disc with little f-holes that is suspended from the soundboard in some Loar F-5s and other models. It acts as a second internal soundboard and It seems to cancel out some of the peaks and valleys in the sound, giving a smoother, warmer sound than a non-Virzi instrument. 'Course for some players, that's exactly what they don't like about it. Myself, I definitely like what it does and that's why I offer it as an option on my instruments.

JM: Jamie, thank you for taking the time to speak with me for this interview, it's been very enjoyable. I hope we can cross paths sometime; I'd love to try one of your mandolins. **JW:** Thanks Joe, it's been a pleasure and I look forward to running into you sometime and talking shop in person.

Jamie is a very friendly guy that knows his stuff when it comes to the Lloyd Loar style F-5 mandolin. There seems to be no detail that he'd overlook in his quest to capture the mystique of the Loar F-5. It appears that he is doing a fine job of reproducing the Loar era instruments. Jamie is getting rave reviews on his mandolins, and making quite a name in the mandolin world. He may be contacted at:

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