

Interview with Orrin Star
By
Joe Mendel

Though he has played some mandolin at almost every show during his three decades as a full-time musician people are still occasionally surprised to learn that Orrin Star is an accomplished mandolinist; having won the *National Flatpicking Championship* at age 21 and then gone on to create a notable body of work in the flatpicking instructional realm it is only natural that he is thought of first as a guitarist.

But he does indeed play the mandolin (and banjo; and sings; and even placed second in mandolin at Winfield in 1976). And in the past couple years he has found himself giving more mandolin than guitar workshops and getting more into the mandolin world at large.

He plays a mix of styles, a rootsy blend of folk, blues, swing and bluegrass, all leavened with a healthy dose of humor that reflects his slightly skewed view of the world. I have seen Orrin in concert over the years and have used his "Hot Licks for Bluegrass Guitar" book. But it wasn't until earlier this year (when he called inquiring about an instrument I had for sale) that we actually spoke.

What a hoot! His humor isn't an act; it's as much a part of him as his great playing.

Joe Mendel: What's behind your recent burst of mandolin activity and interest?

Orrin Star: There's a number of factors. A couple years ago, for a time, my mandolin workshops started drawing more than my guitar workshops; it seemed like there was something in the air. And with the Mandolin Cafe and a couple other things I do think that the mandolin community was more coherent and hungry for get-togethers than at any time before. I also found that, as I started offering more mando workshops, it was invigorating for me as a teacher to do something new and different from the guitar workshops I'd been giving for years. And then I got intrigued by the mandolins themselves, the differing tones, the diversity of instruments and builders. I also think there's something about the size of the mandolin, its portability, that contributes to my interest in them; it's much easier to transport and store several mandolins than it is guitars or banjos.

JM: How long have you been playing the mandolin, and what got you interested in playing music in general?

OS: I've been playing the mandolin since about 1972, when I bought a simple Epiphone A from a bandmate in a short-lived New Jersey bluegrass band. My musical calling started around 1969, at an arts-oriented summer camp in Connecticut called Buck's Rock, where this cool counselor named Roy Book Binder used to sit on the lawn and play fingerstyle blues most afternoons. That was what really got me into the guitar. And for my first few years I focused on acoustic blues. I also joined the local folk society in nearby Princeton, NJ, and started going to folk festivals and soaking up a whole range of acoustic music. It was at a folk festival workshop with David Bromberg and Lew London in northern New Jersey around 1970 that saw my first real flatpicking —and it blew my mind; I was like "I wanna do *that*".

JM: What other players have had the most impact on your playing?

OS: Well, like most flatpickers of my generation, Doc Watson was tremendously important. In the Ken Burns documentary "Jazz" there's a section about how many musician's lives were changed by hearing Louis Armstrong, and it really reminded me of Doc Watson and how many impressionable young minds like mine he has blown over the years. Other musicians who have affected me quite a bit are Norman Blake, Tony Rice, and any number of fiddlers.

JM: Who is your favorite mandolin player and why?

OS: I can't really name a single favorite. I think Thile and Steffey and Bush are tremendous. Grisman. Jethro. Tiny Moore. There's a player near me here in the DC area named Danny Knicely who is stunningly good. And Danny Roberts is also a great talent.

JM: I have seen one of your guitar videos and the style is different from most videos, where everything is tabbed out and they tell you do this or that. How did you develop your teaching style?

OS: Being analytically minded. And applying the Golden Rule (ie teach unto others what you would've liked taught unto you when you were at their stage of development). Playing music is very much like speaking a language. And there are many things that both experienced pickers and speakers do automatically which don't come naturally to newbies. Say you're a beginning English speaker and, in response to a question from you, I say "well that's no skin off my back". Well, you probably wouldn't have any idea what I meant since that's an idiomatic phrase and not a literal turn of speech. There's lots of things like that in music as well. So I really try to be like a Martian anthropologist and look into the process of playing with fresh eyes and bring to light the subtleties that good players employ but don't often think about. For example, most mature players accent the same notes

that good singers do when they're soloing over a vocal tune: "was in the SPRING one sunny day" is how 'Sitting on Top of the World' starts and 'spring' is always the power vocal note there—so the note that falls there in your solo should also be accented. I try to get students to consider stuff like that.

JM: Are you planning any mandolin videos?

OS: Yes. Now that I've been giving more mando workshops I've started getting asked if I have a DVD "with this stuff on it". I'm confident that I now have something worthwhile to bring to the instructional table. But it's still in the visualization stage.

JM: If I were to take mandolin lessons from you, what could I expect from you and what do you require from a student?

OS: You could expect a good lesson! I don't really require anything beyond an interest. But I do take teaching seriously and we do *work* during a lesson; anyone who comes simply to be coddled and not pushed to learn something is going to be disappointed.

JM: How do you structure your workshops?

OS: Masterfully. Actually, I think "structure" is the key word here. I believe in delivering value to the people who attend them (Golden Rule again). And to me that means planning the workshop to make it both accessible and interesting.

JM: How much can one expect to retain from a workshop?

OS: 84%

JM: What's your favorite workshop to teach?

OS: I actually have about a dozen different workshops that I've developed. Some are on specific tunes (like the old-time 'Sugar Hill' or the celtic 'Dick Gossip's Reel') and some are more foundational ('Making Your Mando Sing' and 'Deciphering the Fretboard'). And there all still pretty fresh for me so still enjoy teaching them all. But perhaps the most fun one to do is a new one called "Rounds on the Mandolin: A Music-Making Workshop", since we spend about three quarters of the workshop actually playing music—and in three- and four-part harmony.

I got the inspiration for that workshop from a week-long mandolin class I gave last November in Alabama. There were just three guys in the class. And I introduced them to a few simple rounds, and we ended up really bonding over those tunes and making real music. The only problem is it's not a particularly easy sell; no one sees 'Mandolin

Rounds Workshop' and says "by golly—that's *exactly* what I've been waiting for!" So I need to come up with a sexier title.

JM: What is the strangest question or request you've ever had in a workshop or concert?

OS: This one—that you just asked. Actually a guy once showed up for a private lesson with a guitar case in one hand—and a guitar stand in the other. (And that was only the tip of the strangeness iceberg.)

JM: What type of tips would you offer to beginning and intermediate players trying to make it over the next hurdle in playing?

OS: 10-15% of the check.

JM: What are some of the things that hold players back that they may not be aware of?

OS: Depending too much on tablature. Also being timid. There's definitely a gumption element to developing your own musical personality if not style. And in order to get there you need to have the courage to fall on your butt musically and keep getting up as many times as it takes. You won't really develop without giving yourself the freedom to stumble.

JM: We all know there are no magic bullets, or picks, strings, bridges, tailpieces, tuners, or even mandolins that will make us play like (insert mandolin hero's name here)—why do you think so many chase those items instead of sitting down and just playing the mandolin?

OS: Because it's easier to obsess than it is to work. And also because the internet is so seductive; it's like crack for the obsessive in all of us.

JM: Having just asked that last question, what brand of mandolin do you play and do you hotrod your instruments in any way?

OS: My two main instruments these days are an F5 reproduction from 1975 by Vern Bryant, and 82 year old maker from Springfield, VA (who also does much of my instrument repair work) and a Rose F5 that was made for me about 3 years ago. I don't do anything to soup them up.

JM: Since you travel a lot I imagine cases are rather important to you. What is your case of choice & why?

OS: Actually since I never need to check a mandolin through baggage, I don't go for any special case; I use a lightweight generic PacRim case.

JM: Are you an A or an F guy? Why?

OS: I've been an F guy most of my life. At this point it's hard to say where habit leaves off and preference starts. But having said that, I do own one really good A—and yet I did notice recently when I held it that I did feel as though I was missing something in the heft area. I also think I probably prefer the the way the strap interacts with the scroll on an F than however you affix it to an A.

JM: What mandolin tunes are part of your concerts these days?

OS: A medley of The Spanish Waltz/Monahan's Reel. Duets on Kitchen Girl and Carolan's Draught (when I'm playing in my duo with John Seebach). A medley of Tamlin/Handsome Molly/Leather Britches. Lady's Fancy (which has been a favorite contest tune of mine over the years and which Jimmy Gaudreau and I play as a duet whenever we perform together). And I recently revived a novelty piece ("The Melting Pot Medley") which I devised years ago for the school assembly programs on folk music I used to do and which combines Trouble In Mind, Irish Washerwoman, Mexican Hat Dance, El Paso and Jesu Joy of Man's Desire in the space of about three minutes.

JM: Can one hear your mandolin playing online?

OS: Yes. There are a couple medleys' posted on the Audio Clips page of my website. There's also a full version of an instrumental I composed (Pretty & Jolly) posted on the mp3 page at mandolincafe.com that's taken from my 1998 live trio CD. And there's video of the two duo shows I've done at the Kennedy Center (with Jimmy Gaudreau: <http://tinyurl.com/39aepe> and with John Seebach: <http://tinyurl.com/yp7tdw>) which feature a number of my mando favorites.

I have enjoyed speaking with you Orrin, thank you for taking the time to be interviewed.

Check out Orrin's website for more information about concerts, workshops, tours and his instruments <http://www.orrinstar.com/>
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