

Tribute to Charlie Derrington

by Joe Vest
Foreword by Joe Mendel

Foreword

In the long history of The Gibson Company mandolins there have been many innovations. First came Orville Gibson with his idea to carve the top and back, similar to violin family instruments, then came Lloyd Loar who refined Orville's idea's further to create what many believe are the finest mandolins ever made. Unfortunately, Mr. Loar's innovations came at a time when mandolins and mandolin orchestras were fading from favor and banjos were gaining popularity as the instrument of choice. The Lloyd Loar F-5's did not fare well in the market of the day, less than 500 were made, and the emphasis at Gibson turned to more profitable instruments. Several years later an innovative young mandolin player, Bill Monroe, bought a used one to use in his then unique style of country music. As Bluegrass music gained favor other players began to copy Monroe's style, and Gibson mandolins were the mandolin of choice. However, the quality of later Gibsons weren't up to the standards set by Mr. Loar, and players began to seek out those particular instruments. By the 1980's bluegrass was more popular than ever and other makers were beginning to fill the niche for F-5 style mandolins. Gibson wanted to regain their place in the mandolin market. This is where Charlie Derrington became the next great link in the history of the Gibson F-5 mandolin. He was a true believer that the Loar Gibsons are the very best mandolins ever made. Gibson called on Charlie to recreate that quality in their mandolins. Most agree that he did just that.

On August 1, 2006 Charlie Derrington was killed by drunk, wrong way driver. I had planned to interview Joe Vest and Charlie for upcoming issues of mandolinseason.com. On August 1st as I was getting ready to call Joe for the first of these interviews, I was saddened to read the news of Charlie's death. Instead of an interview I asked Joe Vest if he would write a tribute to his friend and co-worker. He agreed, the following is his tribute:



Tribute

Charlie Derrington was born in March of 1955 in the southern city of Paris, Tennessee. He was raised in a middle class home in small town America with the values and lifestyle so often associated with that era. He was graduated from high school and went off to college to study vocal performance and jazz bass.

It was during his early college days he discovered the mandolin and his life was to take a left turn that would drive him from then on. In his early days he played in a band with fellow Paris native, Mike Snyder, of Grand Ole Opry fame.

After a few years with Mike, playing the festival and contest circuit, he met David Luttrell in Memphis. They found they had similar musical tastes and joined forces. While playing in the band with David, he met David's sister, Susan, and fell madly in love. They were married not too long after that and were to the day of Charlie's passing.

In 1983 Charlie applied to Gibson for a job in the repair department. He was accepted and moved to Nashville. Gibson was in a real state of flux at that time under Norlin's ownership. The factory was relocating to Tennessee from Kalamazoo, Michigan. It was certainly an interesting time in Gibson's history.

Not long after this Bill Monroe's mandolins were destroyed by an intruder who took a fireplace poker to his famed Lloyd Loar mandolins. They came to Charlie in hundreds of pieces. Charlie had to painstakingly catalogue each piece and where it needed to be placed. After all the parts were carefully assembled, Charlie made the remaining pieces to finalize the assembly. The end result was two Loars that were fully functional after being nearly destroyed. One of those mandolins, Mr. Bill's favorite, is now in residence at the Country Music Hall of Fame. Charlie and Mr. Bill were close friends after that time. Mr. Monroe actually borrowed Charlie's Loar during the time his were being repaired.

Charlie brought such luminaries as Greg Rich, and Jim Triggs to Gibson. They have each gone on to other successful endeavors after leaving Gibson. Charlie left Gibson for a few years to start National Guitar Repair in Nashville. This was, at that time, the largest fretted instrument repair company in the nation. He stayed there until he came back to Gibson in the mid 90's. At NGR some of the most gifted men were assembled and some incredible work was done under his guidance. Nearly all of the staff there has gone on to other positions of significance in the music industry.

When Charlie came back to Gibson it was to resurrect the standards of excellence found in the early 20's in Gibson's bluegrass mandolins. While the Montana made instruments were nice instruments and were certainly some of the finest made during that time, they were not close to the construction or graduations used on the finest of Gibson's mandolins. Charlie wanted to restore the mandolin to its glory as it was under the leadership of Lloyd Loar. Charlie was more than successful. Many believe the mandolins Charlie brought to the market were even better than those of the 20's.

Charlie was an incredible person and was talented on so many levels. He performed in many groups. He played with Mike Snyder, Columbia Highway, Dave Peterson and 1946, filled in for many mandolin players when needed, and finally with his brother in law and long time friend, David Luttrell in Trayler Parker and the Propane Tanks. His vocals were found on many recordings. His high tenor voice was a great harmony to many other artists. He was also an incredible bass player and performed on bass as well as mandolin.

Charlie was never one to put himself in the limelight. He was very happy just being part of a team that would accomplish incredible feats. Whether in his music, or his lutherie, or his management skills he was always ready to share the glory with others. He was a genuinely gracious and giving person willing to share whatever he had with those he loved, and often even strangers. He will be sorely missed by his wife, daughter, many close friends, co-workers, Gibson Musical Instrument Company, and the music and lutherie communities as a whole. He closed his eyes on this world for the last time on August 1, 2006. We love you Charlie, and we will always miss you!

Donations may be made to Charlie's family at:

Charlie Derrington Memorial Fund
Gibson Guitar Corp
309 Plus Park Avenue
Nashville, TN 37217
Attention: Becky Dixon, Treasury Dept



[PHOTO CREDIT] Charlie Derrington, Jack Shultz, Dan Beimborn. Charlie is holding his unsigned 1925 Gibson F5. Jack is holding Loar 76547. Taken at Charlie's office at Gibson Opry Mills, Nashville, July 2004. Photo by Chipper Thompson.