

**Interview with Andrew Mowry**  
**By**  
**Joe Mendel**

Things are going well for Andrew Mowry, he's making a living doing something he loves; his instruments are quite beautiful, his reputation as a builder is growing, he has a waiting list and he and his wife just became new parents.

Andrew built his first instrument at age 10, built his first mandolin in high school and has built several other instruments as well. Andrew grew up in Vermont where he acquired a love for woodworking, music & the outdoors. He has a geology degree from Middlebury College and a masters degree in physical geography from the University of Oregon

**JM:** Hi Andrew. Growing up in Vermont and now living in Oregon you have certainly been surrounded by the woods typically used to build mandolins. Is it a coincidence that you've chosen to make your living building them?

**AM:** No, one of the things that drew me to mandolins was that they use locally available woods. I have emotional ties to maple and spruce that I don't have to, say, rosewood or mahogany. Being a Vermonter at heart, of course I hold the sugar maple in highest esteem. The smell inside a steam-filled sugarhouse is the best in the world! The first few mandolins I made had sugar maple necks from my parents' firewood pile, that I hewed square with an axe and drawknife. There are probably thousands of nice mandolin necks sitting in firewood piles across New England as we speak. We had both red and black spruce in the area where I grew up, and we used both for Christmas trees. I read early on about the special qualities of spruce wood, and when I was twelve or so I built a dogsled and a canvas-covered kayak out of saplings and branches. Our black lab wouldn't pull the sled and after a few years I couldn't fit in the kayak, but they were fun projects and a good introduction to the wood.

When I first moved to Oregon I was delighted to discover bigleaf maples, which I later found are the source for quilted wood. I've even heard you can make maple syrup from bigleafs, although I haven't tried yet. We also have engelmann and Sitka spruce here, as well as other top woods like cedars and Doug fir. I use mostly bigleaf and engelmann now, and I think they give my instruments a certain northwest flare. On an upcoming custom instrument I'll be doing some inlays styled after northwest Native American art, which will be really fun and will be another regional tie. Sarah and I feel that a sense of place is important, and that's one the things we hope to convey to our new son.

**JM:** How did you first become interested in traditional wood working methods and wood working in general?

**AM:** I probably became interested in woodworking as a pastime—I had a pocketknife and a lot of free time, and many acres of incredibly diverse tree species. I was too young

to really remember, though. I have an uncle who does some woodworking, and my grandfather was an eternal tinkerer, so they probably had some influence. My mom does a lot of stuff with her hands, like sewing and knitting. I have a brother who has since become a woodworker, another who is trained as a chef. I think some people have some sort of innate mandate to work with their hands, and for me woodworking just always seemed the natural outlet. I actually struggle with it, because I do think that humans produce a lot more “stuff” these days than we need to, but I get solace from the fact that I put a tremendous amount of time into producing a few high-quality items that (hopefully) have some cultural value.

I latched onto traditional woodworking techniques partly out of necessity, partly because of some sort of romantic notion, and partly because I had an aversion to loud power tools that I’ve only recently overcome. The flea markets in Vermont were a treasure trove of hand tools, many from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I really liked the history that they seemed to hold, and in my teens I started buying some old wooden planes and chisels, mostly. I got more interested in them and read more about them, which fuelled my interest even more. I think I developed a romantic vision of the colonial joiner producing fabulous work in a post-and-beam shop with only hand tools. I’m not a history buff or anything, but rural New England just seemed infused in it, and as a kid I sometimes had that sense that I was born in the wrong century (I no longer feel that way, now that I have a more realistic view of past conditions!). I built my first few mandolins with no power tools whatsoever, partly just because I just didn’t have any. Unfortunately, F5 mandolins really don’t lend themselves well to that. I still don’t have a large quantity of power tools, but I wouldn’t trade my bandsaw or drill press for anything.

**JM:** Why did you want to build musical instruments in the first place?

**AM:** It mostly just seemed a natural intersection of my interests in woodworking and in music. I love many kinds of music, and most instruments, which is one reason why I never got very good at playing any (that and lack of talent!). I always had too many irons in the fire, as it were. I don’t remember what my very first instruments were, but at some point I got a few books on making folk instruments, and I made a mountain dulcimer and a fretless banjo. At one point I tried to make a simple fiddle and stopped because I kept breaking the sides trying to bend them (they were birch plywood). I think that’s the only instrument in progress I’ve ever given up on, but I’ve sawn a few apart to resurrect parts a few years after building them.

I still occasionally build some furniture and other odds and ends, but instruments seem much more, full of life, and more useful than furniture. Of course, non-musicians don’t always see it that way.

**JM:** When did you first discover the mandolin? Why did you want to build one?

**AM:** I played the fiddle first, mostly Irish and contradance. It probably wasn’t really until my mid teens that I started hearing much mandolin. My brother had some Grisman

recordings, and that's probably what clinched it, along with the realization that my fiddle background would make transitioning easy. I built my first mandolin before ever really playing another one, mostly because it seemed cheaper than buying one. I think a lot of builders get started that way. I built my first F5 a few years later while I was playing in a bluegrass band with college friends (Bristol Gap—what, you never heard of us?).

**JM:** How many have you built to date and do you build the entire mandolin family of instruments?

**AM:** I'm working on number 32 at the moment. So far I've only built mandolins and octave mandolins, but I love the sound of mandolas and I'd love to build some of those. I've sort of been waiting for a custom order, because I don't have a lot of time to build spec instruments now.

**JM:** What is the mix of your instruments? The flat top oval hole pictured on your web site looks much more elaborate than most flat tops, do you build carved top & back oval hole mandolins as well?

**AM:** I haven't yet, but that's something else I'm itching to get into. I'm really into Celtic music, to which those instruments lend themselves quite well. They're really sweet and buttery sounding. Right now I build roughly 50% F5s, and the rest are carved-top A5s, two-points, and guitar-bodied octaves. That flat top was one of the only ones I've ever built, but it renewed my interest in them, and the customer and I were very pleased with the results. He plays mostly Celtic music, but also plays in a Led Zeppelin cover band and wanted something that would stand out visually and acoustically.

**JM:** What woods do you typically use for your mandolins? Are there any non-traditional woods that you think show promise or would like to try?

**AM:** I use mostly bigleaf maple and engelmann, although I've been using red maple for some of my octave mandolins, and I happily use red spruce when customers request it. It seems to have that drier sound that many bluegrass purists prefer. I don't mind using exotic woods occasionally, but there are also lots of other domestic woods that I think hold promise. Cherry is one of my favorite woods and I use it for most of my furniture projects. It smells great, and I still get a kick out of watching the wood darken over time when it's exposed to the sun. I think it would make great mandolins, although the trick would be getting clear quartersawn pieces large enough for backs. Walnut is another wood that holds a lot of promise for instruments, and both it and cherry sometimes have nice figure.

**JM:** Do you make all of the wooden parts of you instruments?

**AM:** I guess endpins are the only thing I don't make (I don't have a lathe). I started out making my own bridges, then bought some for a while, and now I make them again. When I bought them I always ended up reworking them to an extent that was impractical, because they weren't clean enough, the arch was way off, the height wasn't right, the

hardware wasn't right, the compensation was off, etc. It wasn't necessarily that they were of low quality; it's mostly just that bridges need to be customized to the instrument more than a lot of people realize. My top arches are a little higher than "normal", and I like to have the bridge right in the middle of the adjustment range when I set it up, so the customer has plenty of room for adjustment in either direction. I customize the compensation to each instrument when I string it up.

Now I have jigs designed that let me make bridges pretty quickly, and I can use ebony left over from making fretboards and peghead overlays, so less is wasted. I've also changed the bridge design a little to make them stronger without being heavier.

**JM:** What is your favorite part of building?

**AM:** This is probably a copout, but whatever part I'm working on seems to be my favorite (with the possible exception of sanding, although the result of sanding is great). The nice thing about what I do is that when I just start to get tired of one step, it's time to move onto the next one. When I repeat the cycle four months later, everything seems fresh and new again. When I start a new batch of four or five instruments, I've just gotten off of nearly two months of sanding and finishing, and getting back to working with wood is really nice, and it seems to go very quickly. However, I also get a lot of satisfaction from the slow, detailed stuff like binding and inlay. A lot of people talk about how much they dislike binding, but I really enjoy it and I try to take a Zen-like approach, however hackneyed that may sound. I think the other main way to keep everything interesting is to try to improve on your previous work every time. I get a lot of satisfaction from thinking of better or more efficient ways to do things, and I still end up making a few new jigs or tools with every batch of instruments.

Even tedious things like sanding are still far better than having a desk job! I try not to complain about anything, because I know how lucky I am. I don't think work could be any better than being in the shop, listening to NPR, and doing what I love.

**JM:** Could you give us a short walk through your building process?

**AM:** The customer and I have all the wood picked out ahead of time. I start by building the rim assembly, which takes about a week for five instruments. I've recently started using reverse-kerfed lining, meaning that the saw kerfs are against the rim instead of away from it. It makes for a really stable rim assembly that holds its shape, so once it's assembled I never have to put it back in the mold. It simplifies a lot of the assembly. I then join the tops and backs and trace the rim shape on them. I cut out the tops and backs, and I remove the bulk of the exterior wood using a Safe-T-Planer (a rotary planer that goes in the drill press). I use gouges and planes to finish the exterior and carve the interior (about 1-2 weeks). I shape and glue the bracing, then attach the top and then the back.

After some cleanup I cut the binding channel on the router table (and by hand in all the hard to reach spots on F5s). The binding is the most time-consuming step after varnishing (about two weeks for five instruments).

After the binding is done and I do some cleanup, the body is basically complete and I move on to necks. I make the fretboards and peghead overlays first so I can use them to establish the neck and peghead shape. I make the oversized neck blanks, glue on the peghead overlay, cut out the peghead shape, do any inlay work, and drill the tuner holes. I then true up the fretboard and peghead surfaces, and then cut the dovetails. Next machine and carve the neck to nearly its final dimensions. I don't do any sanding on the neck shaft before assembly; I just scrape the surface with a piece of broken glass or a steel scraper. After the neck and fifteenth fret crosspiece are glued on, I true up the top surface with a router jig and a sanding board. I then glue on the fretboard, which completes the assembly (always a satisfying day!). From then on its lots of sanding and scraping (at least two weeks), and varnishing (at least a month). For anyone who's interested, I have lots of construction photos on my website.

**JM:** How open are mandolin players in general to something that's not a Gibson clone? Why do you think the F-5 is so heavily favored, even outside Blue Grass circles?

**AM:** I can't say that I'm necessarily in tune with the market as a whole, but I've gotten good response from my non-clones, and I hope to come up with additional designs. I think we only have to look at the success of builders like John Monteleone to see that players are willing and even eager to see non-traditional stuff.

I think the F5 is largely a status symbol. Because the mandolin's dominant role in the U.S. has been bluegrass, other players look to bluegrass to see what instruments are being used. I believe the F5 design does produce a special sound, though. There are those who argue with that, but when you're carving an F5 top and an A5 top, you tap them and they sound completely different. You can get that sound with different designs that mimic the F5, though. The asymmetrical two-point design that I borrowed from Mike Kemnitzer and Bill Bussman is one possibility.

**JM:** As beautiful as F-5s are I find myself more and more attracted to less ornate instruments, your two point is very cool. Have you noticed any trends in that direction?

**AM:** Yes, I think a lot of people are drawn to more modern designs. They look nice and clean, and they're much more affordable. The amount of labor in an F5 is incredible, so builders have to charge so much more for them. The F5 design is beautiful in its own way, but it's also totally over the top. Many players still like that, but many don't. They're a good way for builders to showcase their skills, but it's also kind of silly that a builder has to make a clean F5 before being accepted. I love F5s, but the community is definitely becoming increasingly aware that there's much more in the mandolin world.

**JM:** Are there any other instruments you'd like to try your hand at building? How about variations on the mandolin that you haven't done yet?

**AM:** I currently have an order for a double-necked guitar/mandolin, and I think that will be a lot of fun. I also have an order for an octave mandolin and a parlor guitar comprising a matched pair. I haven't built many guitars because I don't really play and there are so many other folks making them, but some of these oddballs are too irresistible to turn down. My octave mandolins are just small archtop guitars, so archtops would be a natural extension for me.

I still love Celtic music, and I'd like to get into carved-top mandolin-family instruments geared more toward the Celtic player, both in terms of aesthetics and sound. It would also be fun to build more electric instruments at some point. If I ever get caught up on my waiting list, I hope to build myself an octave mandolin and then experiment with some of these other ideas on spec instruments. At the moment, though, I'm pretty content taking custom orders, and my customers are great at coming up with new ideas and variations. That's one reason I love doing custom work.

**JM:** Are all of your instruments finished with varnish? Why did you choose to use it?

**AM:** Yes. I'm actually not really opposed to lacquer as a finish, like a lot of people are. I think if it's applied thinly its fine. However, I dislike it for health and environmental reasons. My varnish is mostly shellac, which has been used as a finish forever. It's completely benign, and is even used in food products. It's probably not quite as durable as lacquer, but it looks great, is nice to work with, easy to repair, and has stood the test of time. I think most mandolin players appreciate a varnish finish these days, and accept the fact that it's not quite as durable as lacquer. The interesting thing is that shellac gets continually more durable over time, whereas lacquer breaks down.

I've also experimented with waterbase finishes, and I think they hold a lot of promise. They are more difficult to apply than lacquer, but when you get the hang of it the results can be fantastic. You can also French polish on top of waterbase, just like you can on top of oil varnish.

**JM:** Do you mix your own varnish?

**AM:** Yes; I make it from shellac and a few tree resins, which I grind in a coffee grinder and dissolve in Everclear. Shellac pretty much has to be made up fresh each time you use it, or you can't be sure that it will harden properly.

**JM:** What kind of hardware do you use?

**AM:** For the most part I use whatever the customer requests. I think that the major competing brands are pretty similar in terms of quality, and they each have their own aesthetic and functional quirks. Waverly tuners are fantastic for those who can afford them, but they're a major investment for a lot of people.

I've mostly been using the Bill James tailpieces lately (I offer them as an upgrade from the standard stamped tailpiece), and they are really a great design. Both the Waverlys and the James tailpieces are a little heavier than other options, which can be either good or bad depending how you see it. For octave tailpieces I've been taking the crossbar off of an archtop guitar tailpiece and making a custom ebony crosspiece with a brass insert that takes eight ball-end strings.

**JM:** How do your instruments differ from others on the market?

**AM:** I've made a point of trying to do really clean work, and customers tend to say it's among the cleanest they've seen. That has probably been the biggest thing that has helped me start to build a reputation. I started doing it that way because I hadn't seen many other instruments, and I didn't know any better. Now I've locked myself into doing it that way, because it's what people expect from me! Seriously, I think you have to have some aspect of your work that makes it stand out, because there are a lot of people building instruments out there. I also try to make occasional structural improvements, like the reverse-kerfed lining and laminated tailblocks that resist splitting if the instrument should ever dropped on its endpin.

In terms of sound, I've always just tried to make my instruments sound good to me, and fortunately it's turned out that other people seem to have the same taste. I try to avoid saying how great my instruments sound, because what else is anyone going to say? It's so subjective that I just let people decide for themselves. I've always gotten positive feedback, though. I do try to get the customer to steer me in some direction depending on their personal taste. That affects the wood choice and how I do some of the carving. I try to build my instruments to be fairly lightweight, yet sturdy, which I think makes them fairly loud. The first comments of my octave customers in particular tend to be that they are surprised how lightweight and loud the instrument is.

**JM:** What type of neck joint and neck re-enforcement do you use?

**AM:** I use the traditional sliding dovetail, with just a slight compound taper, meaning it's a hair wider at the top than at the bottom. That allows me to get the heel area, where most of the stress is concentrated, nice and snug. The neck joint is quite complicated to cut because of the rounded mating surface on the body, but it's stood the test of time and it's strong. I think bolt-on necks are probably fine, but they add a little more weight to the instrument.

I've recently switched to carbon-fiber neck reinforcement on mandolins, unless a customer requests an adjustable trussrod. That was another attempt to reduce weight, although the carbon fiber makes the neck much stiffer, too, which in theory is a good thing because it minimizes energy loss. It's really amazing stuff. I think mandolin necks are too short to require adjustable trussrods, and several other well-known builders have been using carbon fiber successfully for a while. I still use adjustable rods on my octaves mandolins, because of the longer necks.

**JM:** Any final words?

**AM:** Thanks Joe for this opportunity! I'd also like to thank all those folks who still see the value in buying a small-shop instrument, when there are so many factory and imported instruments available. It means a lot to us builders!

Andrew, thank you for taking the time to be interviewed and congratulations on the birth of your son. I hope to see more of your instruments and wish you all the best in the future. Andrew may be contacted through his web site @ <http://mowrystrings.com/>, via e-mail @ [andrew@mowrystrings.com](mailto:andrew@mowrystrings.com) or by phone @ 541-617-1203.

Here's what a couple of Mowry owner have to say about working with Andrew and their instruments:

It's my pleasure to write to you about my experience working with Andrew Mowry, who built me a lovely A5 mandolin, completed in February of 2007. In April of 2006, I had been playing my Phoenix Europa NeoClassical for around six months, and there's nothing like one great mandolin to inspire the quest for another! The NeoClassical is spectacular, but it was built to sound sweet and clear, and I was looking for something with a bit more punch for the jazz that I like to play. At first, I was interested in perhaps having an oval hole made, and I asked around to a few luthiers whose work I admire for their thoughts. Andrew wrote me back very promptly saying that he could work with me on any design I chose, and he recommended some wood choices and bracing styles for the sound I was after. He also contacted some great jazz players to ask about the construction of their mandolins, and passed that information along. In the meantime, I checked out Andrew's gallery of instruments and was struck by the aesthetic quality of his carving. His lines were remarkably clean, very nicely matched bindings to finishes, and the character of the wood really stood out in his work. Something about these forms persuaded me that Andrew could probably make wood sound the way he wanted if he could make it LOOK that great. Plus, he offers an extraordinary return policy, so I felt very comfortable asking him to build me a mandolin.

After a bit more searching around, looking at pictures, and thinking about my own aesthetic interests, I asked Andrew if he would be willing to build something rather unconventional, an A5 with dolphin holes, block inlay, and a distinctive headstock. He was as enthusiastic about my ideas as I was, and offered some great ideas of his own to enhance mine. I liked the idea of block inlays and a headstock carved to match the James tailpiece he was going to use; Andrew made up some illustrations that gave me a wide range of choices, all suited to exactly what I was looking for. Over the course of the nine months, from order to shipping, Andrew and I exchanged over a hundred emails – he's always VERY prompt in responding- and he sent me beautiful photos at every stage in the building process. I felt involved all the way. When the mandolin arrived I was stunned by it's beauty out of the box. Within a few hours it had settled in really nicely with a perfectly balanced, clean and punchy tone. It's also a joy to play, and gets richer every week. To say nothing of the fact that it was an amazing bargain – I couldn't possibly find an instrument as nice for twice the price - and I've looked!

All in all, every phase of working with Andrew has been a pleasure. I feel like I really got to express myself and develop a creative interest I had, all by means of Andrew's masterful artistry that brought my conception to a beautiful realization.

Best,

Brad Weiss

I am the fortunate owner of an F5 mandolin, made by luthier Andrew Mowry. It is his 12<sup>th</sup> instrument, and it was completed in March of 2006. It has an Engelmann spruce top, Bigleaf maple back and sides, a James tailpiece, set up with J-74 strings.

I acquired my first mandolin 6 years ago, which was also my first attempt to play an instrument of any kind. With some success in learning to play, albeit modest, I was interested to upgrade to a better quality instrument after two years. At that time I purchased a very nice A5-style instrument, and realized the truth in what people say – a good quality instrument will draw you to it and make you want to play. Subsequently, I continued to improve.

Being a fan of the Mandolin Café web site, I always enjoy the multitude of high-quality luthiers one can learn about at that site, including a number of individuals who are regular visitors and posters to this site's message board. As a window shopper, I had browsed many links to builder web sites, often contemplating the purchase of an instrument from an individual. One of the sites I visited was that of Andrew Mowry, who's early instruments had received positive comments about their sound and looks from a retail shop that supports the Mandolin Cafe (*if it matters, the shop was Greg Boyd's House of Fine Instruments*).

Andrew's web site includes a "more about me" section, and it was reading that where I sensed a connection. Born and raised in New England (same as me), we attended the same college (some 10 years apart), and both enjoy the outdoors. I figured if we went to school at the same time, we could have easily been in the same circle of friends. And, hey, the prices he was charging for an F5 (scroll envy, I admit) were a bargain.

What put me over the edge was seeing a photograph of a newly completed mandolin built by Andrew that was posted on the Café. A chestnut-colored mando - I had to e-mail Andrew soon after. I was not yet ready to buy a new instrument, but I was clearly interested. After sending my e-mail asking about the process and timeframe of building, Andrew sent me a prompt reply kindly answering all my questions, and offering to help out with any further questions I had. At the time (October), I was up front about not immediately being able to consider a purchase, but that I might be able to swing something in the new year.

A good businessman, Andrew got back in touch with me in January, asking if I had thought any more about ordering a mandolin. Of course I had! A few e-mails later, and a discussion about a new mandolin with my wife (who, gladly, supports my musical interests), and I was on the list! Yow – I'm gonna buy a killer mandolin! After discussing choices of wood, hardware, fretboard dimensions, etc., a final spec. sheet was sent for review and approval. While I did have some specifications I was interested in, I also put my faith in Andrew to build "his" instrument.

As Andrew began the build, he not only sent regular e-mails telling me of the mandolin's progress, but he also sent new photos of it nearly every week. It was a treat to watch the instrument come to life, from the initial carving, to a rough product, to something nearly

done “in the white.” All along the way, the e-mails would also include non-mando conversation, including GIS software, owls, photography and his wife Sarah’s job with a land trust; another connection, as I am a land manager for a conservation organization. So, in addition to an appreciation for Andrew’s skill as a luthier, I also felt as though I was getting to know him as a person as well, even from a few thousand miles away.

Throughout the whole process, Andrew was great about letting me know what was just done, what would come next, and also what his timeframe would be – being in regular communication, I even knew when the mando building was on hiatus due to travel and even a sore back for a few days. Obviously, I was not physically in the workshop with Andrew, but it was still like looking over his shoulder. I sure spent a lot of time staring at the photos he sent.

With the varnish and sanding done, it was only a matter of time before the instrument would be ready to be shipped. Andrew explained the shipping process, which would take nearly a week. He was also very interested to get honest feedback following the instrument’s arrival.

Well, once the mando came, it was everything I could have hoped for, it is drop-dead gorgeous. I tuned it up and began to play, the set up was perfect, the intonation right on, and the sound was a joy to listen to – even with my playing! In the 16 months since Mowry # 12 arrived, my playing has improved, and my interest to play continues to increase. There’s an old saying (Buddhist proverb?) that goes: when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. I think that’s very true in my case; I aspire to play as well as Andrew’s instrument will allow – while that day may never come, the joy is in the journey. Thanks to Andrew Mowry, I have a world-class instrument to play, and a friend I hope to meet some day.

*In general, Andrew was friendly, good with communication, appreciative of you the buyer being willing to order an instrument from him, and clearly a highly-skilled luthier who makes you a part of the process as he builds your instrument.*

Dave Gumbart