

Interview: James Condino
by Joe Mendel

James Condino has been around a bit, literally. He has lived on both coasts of the US, and lead adventures all over the world, traveling in over 40 different countries. He calls home Asheville, NC. In addition to getting around, he grew up in a family where the men had good workshops and made things with their hands. So much so, that no one raised an eyebrow when, at age 11, he decided he was going to build a guitar. The family philosophy was, if you need something, you make it. He wasn't afraid to take things apart to see how they worked and didn't hesitate to seek advice from those more experienced in the things he wanted to do.

His personality, interest in music and building things with his hands may well have been the perfect set of circumstances for him to end up as a luthier.

Joe Mendel: Hi James, thank you for taking the time to be interviewed. Let's start with your background; do you come from a musical family? What were the workshops that your father & grandfather had like?

JC: My great grandfather was in an old mandolin orchestra about a hundred years ago. I had an uncle who played a little guitar, but nobody else was very musical in the family. I'll make a big leap here and admit that as a little kid, I can remember watching Hee Haw on TV and being fascinated by that red, white and blue guitar and the fast picking every week. I bet I bothered my parents every day for a couple of years until they bought me a guitar- a Stella, complete with a faux denim covered cardboard case.

My father didn't have a workshop, but both of my grandfathers had nice workshops. My father's father was a patternmaker. He could build anything, down to very precise details.

JM: Did you do any wood working before you decided to build a guitar?

JC: Yes, but I'd say that the guitar was the first project that I had to think out very well and knew it was going to take quite a while. That's a big step – especially for a 12 year old. It seems like a long time ago from where I sit today, but just last week I had a conversation with someone who was 14 and building their first mandolin. I could relate, and tried to be pretty encouraging, but on the same point I was able to laugh with him and tell him that he'd better get going- he was already two years behind the curve.

JM: How much of the work did you do yourself?

JC: All of it except slotting the fretboard.

JM: Did you any power tools, or was it mostly hand tools?

JC: Both. There were a couple of local fellows that I knew who did repairs and such- I picked their brains for information any time I could. It wasn't until I was about 18 that I found David Russell Young's book on steel string guitar building. I'd finished the first one long before then and hot-rodged/modified many others. Sometimes it was subtle; others not so. Pete Townsend and the Who were pretty popular then, so there was a LOT of instrument smashing going on if you were trying to be noticed...

JM: How many guitars' did you build in your Dad's shop? Did they turn out well? Do you still have any of those instruments?

JC: I don't have any of the early instruments. I played the first one in a band for a few years in high school, then sold it, and have been selling them every since.

JM: When did you begin building mandolins & mandolin family instruments?

JC: I started building mandolins about 12 years ago. I was in the middle of taking a jazz guitar lesson when my teacher picked up a mandolin and showed me how much he liked a flat 7 regardless of whether it was a John Coltrane song or a Bill Monroe. I ended the guitar lesson right then and have been enjoying the mandolin every since. I didn't know anything about mandolins, but I had a shop full of guitar scraps and started building one within a couple of months. I used his as a basis- 'turns out he had a really nice A2Z snakehead.

JM: You've had many great luthiers as neighbors and friends. How did that shape the way you view instrument building?

JC: You're right; "famous" builders that I used to read about as a boy are some of my best friends these days. There is a little bit of them in every one of my instruments. The main thing that I've been able to learn from a lot of the old masters that I've been able to study with and associate with has more to do time and patience. A more metaphysical appreciation of the subtle nuances in the slight refraction of the curve in the grain of wooden binding; the translucent warmth of a natural dark amber shellac; the confidence acquired from a lifetime of knowing that hot hide glue works great and why I like rabbit glue over cow glue or sturgeon bladders...

When he was about 72, one of my favorites said to me, "Why would I need to take up fly fishing when I can French polish shellac all day? Why would I need to take up yoga when I can carve spruce by hand and the spruce tells me when to push when to pull; when to give and when to take?..."

JM: The luthier's lunches sound like they were a great time, would you mind describing how those came about and what they were like?

JC: When my wife was in grad school, we live in Portland, Oregon for a couple of years. It is a great city and has one of the best luthier communities in the country. We had sort of a working lunch club, get together and share a few laughs over lunch and socialize a

bit, but also to exchange ideas and bounce new things off your peers. Jeffrey Elliot, Cyndi Burton, Mike Doolin, John Greven, Kerry Char, Charles Fox , Ted Megas, John Sullivan and a number of their great folks- we all lived within a few blocks or a few miles of each other. Run short on a piece of European spruce? Mike's got some from John that he got from Jeff who got it from Richard Schneider when he was an apprentice back in the day from....come by after lunch and get it. Pass the wasabi...Good learning and good fun. When somebody would get a good commission or instrument sale, it would be the same cast of characters out to the pub that night.

JM: Who & what were your biggest influences? How have those filtered into your instruments?

JC: Imagine you were in a band with Buckminster Fuller, James D'Acquisto, Michael Hedges, David Grisman, James Krenov, Django, and Miles Davis. While their music and their own individual approaches to life have had a tremendous influence on me, I think traveling all over the world in my 20s/30s and being an active musician had the greatest effect on my approach to life and instrument design.

JM: What instruments are you currently most interested in building?

JC: The mandolin is my primary new instrument build. I also build the rest of the mandolin family, but the simplicity of an A5 and how much sound that comes out of that tiny box when you do it really well is probably the most fun for me. I think an afternoon with the Loar A5 set in pretty hard for me.

I finished building my first double bass this year. It was a monumental task that took up enough resources to build 20 mandolins, but it helped me to learn a lot in ways that those 20 mandolins would never have taught me.

JM: What are your favorite woods and materials to work with? And why?

JC: Currently I'm enjoying some great well seasoned red spruce that came from the late Ted Davis. He had some of his favorite woods collected from three decades of cutting his own spruce trees by hand. I was lucky to be able to go through about 4000 sets of that and select my favorites, based primarily upon how they sounded. I've got enough for about ten years of building. It is fantastic wood- rings louder than anything else I've worked with and has a huge chop.

I've been known to use a lot of non traditional woods. I generally shop for wood 2-3 days per week, in some fashion, and only buy a small amount 3-4 times per year. That's a lot of work for a tiny return, but it makes a difference to me. Over the years I've tried almost everything available on the commercial market for building instruments. A good builder can work anything into a nice instrument, but if someone comes to me with a specific voice in mind, the best way to replicate it is to start with exactly the woods used in the instrument that is in his head. Traditional spruce, maple, and ebony held together with hide glue make a fantastic traditional sounding instrument. Once you start varying things, everything shuffles around. Usually the woods chose me. I might start out looking

for a particular thing in my head, but after I get searching around the woods, tapping, scratching, sniffing, scraping, feeling all the textures and sounds coming off the board- it tells me where it wants to go and what to combine with it. The same is true when it comes time to add color to the finish.

I showed off one of my early mandolins to a fantastic, very well known player. I worked really hard to make it a simple, unadorned, blonde instrument. After playing it for quite a while and being very candid about several features, he looked at me all seriousness and said, “You need to paint it. It plays and sounds great, but it looks awful against my suit, all blonde and no color....I could never play it at a gig. See how my 1923 F5 looks all warm against my suit and has some style to it?” A mandolin has to play and sound great, but it should also have style. Why go to all of that work and not express yourself?

JM: You’re known for taking your instruments to some pretty adventurous places. Do you try to build that in mind in your instruments?

JC: I don’t like to sit still. I’ve been fortunate to be able to travel to some amazing places around the globe. I’ve never considered it not an option to bring an instrument traveling with me- usually my favorite one. I’ve also found that the best places I’ve ever played music took some work to get to- a couple of weeks down a big river, deep in some desert slot canyon, high up on a glacier, or in some remote village in Nepal. No matter where, life was always better with an instrument. I’ve been playing every day since I was about 6 or 7 years old. I break instruments all of the time - sometimes on purpose; sometimes by accident. I learn a tremendous amount from it.

http://jazzmando.com/field_testing.shtml I’m the hardest customer on my instruments that I know. If it can pass “the James test”, then I’m happy sending it out the door. Nobody enjoys warranty work.

JM: What has the shift in location from Oregon to North Carolina been like?

JC: Asheville and the surrounding western North Carolina has an amazing blend of cultural and musical heritages that go back a long time. I’ve never been anywhere in the world that had as many musicians in the adult population. It covers all genres. On any night of the week you might catch me playing bluegrass, old time, hard driving Gypsy swing, late 50s Bebop with a horn section and piano player, Irish fiddle music, you name it- all of it with very high caliber musicians, and I might be switching off on the mandolin, guitar, or double bass. I tell all of my students, from my perspective, it is really important that you be a good musician if you want to be a good builder. Enzo Ferrari wasn’t just a good designer who liked red sports cars; he was also an accomplished racer who drove cars hard.

In the 20 years I lived in the Northwest, I only saw three Loars: one was a nice F5 that the owner was friendly with, the other was locked up in a glass case and, NO, I couldn’t play it. The third was the Griffith A5, and luckily, I was able to play that as much as I wanted and check it out pretty intensely for the afternoon.

Since I've been in North Carolina, I probably get my hands on a Loar era instrument about twice a month; the same for outstanding vintage guitars and basses- sometimes several a week. When I was a kid, I used to read stories of builders that I admired working at places like George Gruhn's or Mandolin Brothers. Helping Paul Heumiller (the owner), over at his Dream Guitars shop is just like that- an amazing education. The best builders in the world send their nicest work to him, in addition to some of the best vintage models of the last 100 years pass through. Everyone in the place is walking around grinning from ear to ear.

I was always after a lot of sustain and crystal clarity with even separation of the notes throughout the whole range. It's great when you can have that and a rock solid chop and low end foundation.

A lot of that handling of all those old instruments and that vintage voice and feel along with the newer approaches is coming into my work these days.

JM: What about teaching and passing the information down to the next generation of builders?

JC: I taught instrument building for four years Oregon State University. Big classes of a dozen or so people, using the nice old wood shop at the school, masters' series workshops out of my own place, and a variety of other formats. The main thing I got out of those larger classes was that it isn't very productive for everyone on an even level. There always seemed to be a couple of people who were working at a different level that demanded a disproportionate amount of time and energy.

These days, I have about 12-15 students per year come directly to my place now. There are very few places where you can learn how to build a mandolin. We generally meet one on one, and we focus on exactly what I can do to help them get the most out of their time on their level. Some folks come in for a week and we do a carving and voicing session, others focus on setup and fretwork, others need help with body geometry or fitting a dovetail by hand. Others I see multiple times as we build a complete instrument together. Surprisingly, about half of them have already been to one of the big brand name schools around the country. They know how to walk through that school's production setup, but they can't think for themselves, or they missed an area. I think the mandolin is a fantastic medium to learn lutherie. It is very user friendly in terms of size and space that it takes up, yet it still requires a lot of hand tools and skills to learn. Materials are easily had and they are not very expensive compared to a larger instrument made with imported materials.

JM: You do a bit of writing?

JC: I've got a regular column, The Luthier's Toolbox, in Mandolin Magazine, do a couple of articles a year for the GAL in American Lutherie Magazine, and had a print article and video on hand rubbing a sunburst finish
<http://www.finewoodworking.com/SkillsAndTechniques/SkillsAndTechniquesArticle.as>

[px?id=30182](#)) with Fine Woodworking last year. In the next year you should see a blueprint of a great vintage D'Acquisto I drew for the GAL, a couple of new magazines I'm working with, and hopefully I'll finish the draft for my new book. I've been working on it for several years- the Modern Mandolin: History, Design, and Construction. If it goes well, I'd like to have a trilogy- one on mandolins, one on guitars, and one on the double bass. The mandolin and bass books are pretty close to finished. There are several books that try to give you a recipe- follow these directions, carve this part like so, and you'll wind up with a "mandolin". It will be shaped similar to what a mandolin looks like in your head, and it will generally sound like a mandolin. Having always been a very curious and creative person, I never had a problem being able to copy someone else's work. When I started building instruments, I had a 1000 questions about why did this work. What would happen if I changed this? There was never any source I could find on mandolins that would venture outside of the 75-100 year old box. For the book, I'm trying to break it down into more of the standpoint of, I don't want you to think how to build a mandolin. I want you to think like a mandolin builder would. Every step of a build has 25 different ways that you could accomplish the same task and many of them have very different outcomes. An F5 doesn't sound different from a teen's A1 because of the scroll alone. There are so many variables that a more advanced builder is able to manipulate in order to get to the end result. I don't care if you ever build a mandolin from my book. You can easily get a nice mandolin from any number of places with less work. It takes a lot of effort to build a mandolin, especially your first one. If you're going to spend that much time involved in a task, I'd like it to teach you some life skills and creative problem solving skills that will have application all over life. I can teach someone how to build an F5 copy - a good one- fairly well with out a lot of work. What I'd rather be able to do is help you find the instrument that only exists in your head and your ears, in your heart, and in your hands that only you understand and to be able to get that out and in a form that brings you as much pleasure to play as I experience every time I pick up one of my instruments. I might be able to find the chop, or the feel of the neck, or the smooth finish, I can't go out and buy that feeling that only comes from expressing yourself through music on an instrument that is already an expression of yourself.

JM: So you build all three of those instruments mandolin, guitar, and upright bass?

JC: I started as a guitar builder- 1978 I built my first one, and I've been hooked every since. Building and playing all three of those, it covers a full range in the sound spectrum. For me, it has made a big difference in how I perceive and build instruments - having a strong awareness of the surrounding voices and how they both stand out and compliment each other in the spectrum. The better I get at listening to the sounds of a bass, the more I notice subtleties in a mandolin that were not there with the mandolin alone. It is also nice in that even with playing trends and fluctuations, there is always work!

JM: Generally, it seems like a builder's newest designs are always take a while to get out into the public eye. What's coming out of your shop these days?

JC: I'll be starting in on my 30th anniversary series this year. You'll be able to recognize them as distinctly mine, but there will be some fresh new designs coming that will expand upon all the themes I've been evolving over the years. The materials will be the top of the pile from the best that I have been accumulating.

I'm very excited for the upcoming collaborative project. For over a year, I've been quietly gathering together a fantastic team of about 25 of the best mandolin builders alive to join me in a single collaborative build, similar to the Zeidler guitar project that happened a few years back. Using the F5 as a platform, we will each build a particular area of the instrument and then pass it along to the next to end up with a final instrument that is an expression of all of us, and yet more. We're also trying to have the end result be used for some sort of philanthropic purpose, rather than just going out to the highest bidder or such. The details are being worked out; we should start right after the New Year.

JM: That sounds very cool, I'll be looking forward to seeing that one, as well as reading your books. I'm sure there will be a lot of good information in them, some folks read novels, I read luthierie books. I really appreciate that you took the time for this interview

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