

# John Monteleone

JOHN MONTELEONE's "burning desire to make instruments" led him three years ago to set up his own business in Bayshore, New York (Long Island). In his cozy workshop, he builds more than a half-dozen guitar styles, including a carved-top model. His forte is the mandolin, and he already has made well over 70. Among John's distinguished customers is David Grisman. "I started specializing in the mandolin because I was intrigued to death by it," John says, "and I felt there was a great need for a very good mandolin."

Monteleone's career had a rather unusual and percussive beginning. "You might say everything started off with a bang!" he says. "My mother had a Stadium guitar that wasn't worth too much — it was only good for playing with a bow, the action was so bad. Once, when I was about 13, while playing with it down in the basement, I accidentally wrapped it right around an iron lolly-column and smashed the thing up. What a sound! That kind of introduced me to the inside of an instrument."

John became swept up in the folk boom of the early '60s, and decided he wanted to play guitar. He went from store to store, trying out various instruments. By 14, he had become attuned to their finer aspects and could distinguish between good, bad, and mediocre instruments. He finally bought an inexpensive Harmony 12-string — one of the two or three guitars he ever bought from music stores — and it helped him develop his craft. "It went out of whack," he recalls. "The neck warped and I couldn't play it anymore. There were no repair people that I knew of, so I figured, why not? I can't play it now, I can't lose anything. I put it in a vise and cut the neck off. I had the body of a guitar, and I had to make a neck. So that's what I did. I made a neck, put it on, and it worked real nice. I got to experiment with that guitar quite a bit later on."

Monteleone's father, a talented pattern-maker, trained in sculpture, jewelry, and the arts, strongly influenced his son from the beginning, encouraging him to do fine handwork and to develop a sense of aesthetics, creativity, and proper working habits. When John was 16, he and his father purchased wood from the H.L. Wild instrument supply company, in New York, for John's first guitar. John spent seven years building that instrument in his spare time, while attending college and pursuing other endeavors.

John attended Tarkio College, in Missouri, and graduated in 1970 with a degree in applied music. When he couldn't find a job teaching music, he returned to Long Island to work part-time for his father, and to build guitars for his friends — just for fun.

They bought the materials, and for no charge, John built the instruments.

One night while listening to the radio, John heard some fine mandolin playing. "It was really nice," he recalls. The next day, he called the radio performers. "We started talking about this and that; I told them that I built instruments and they said they were looking for someone who could do some repair work," John recalls. "I went to meet them the next day, and they were impressed with my stuff and said, 'You've got a job if you want it.' I said, 'Sure, love to!'"

From 1973 to 1976, John did repairs, custom inlay, and restoration. He made it a policy to completely inspect and document many of the fine instruments he had access to — especially several Lloyd Loar F-5 mandolins. He also met luthier Jimmy D'Aquisto. "He never formally taught me, but I absorbed a lot of ideas and information from Jimmy," John says.

John never has been interested in mass production. "It has no purpose for me," he says. "It serves a purpose for 'putting a chicken in everybody's pot,' and that's good. But the caliber of instrument that I'm attempting to make is very specialized. It's taken a long time to get to that point."

From the beginning, Monteleone has tried to build a mandolin that reflects his own musical tastes. He likes mandolins with "bottom character" (bass response), so he creates a slightly larger air chamber by elongating the scroll. He uses a shortened, non-bracketed, free-standing finger-rest, lowered 1/8" below the strum line. To allow the mandolin to ring clear, he designed the finger-rest so that it does not obstruct the treble f-hole. The fretboard extension is sectioned and shortened. John also uses his own finely designed solid brass tailpiece.

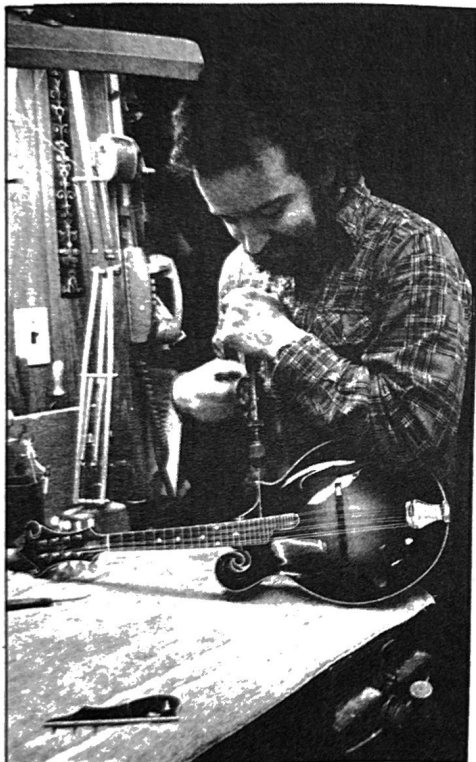
"In terms of tone," he says, "I think that I've been able to open the instrument up to a broader spectrum of tone — to increase the overall tonal response from the bass to the treble register, and in between. Balance is what I am after. The challenge to me is to get that instrument to be responsive at every level. Physically, I like the idea of form and function."

John's workshop is equipped with a wide array of hand tools, many of which are custom made. He also uses power tools — a band saw, drill press, belt sander, and home-made buffing wheel. He has a separate temperature/humidity controlled area for drying and storage of wood, and a spray-booth. "I generally use about 12 coats of natural lacquer, water-thin, for buildup," he says. "When those are cut down, the finish is about half as thick, leaving a finish that is protective, yet minimal. Then I hand rub it to a high gloss."

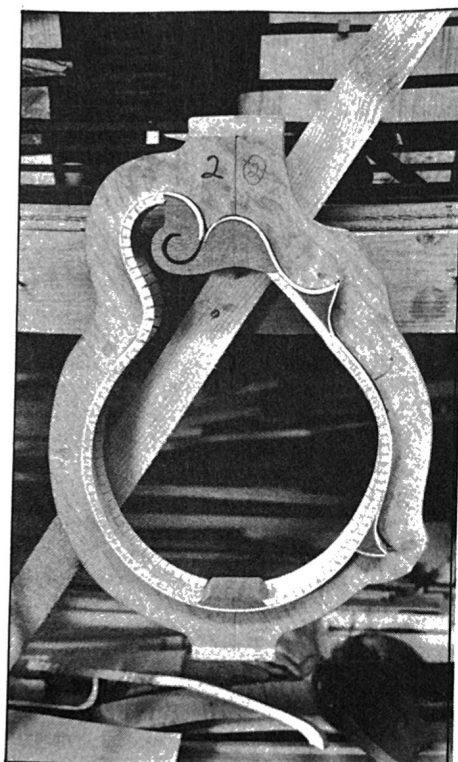




John Monteleone has designed an unusually small finger-rest for his F-series mandolins, to avoid obstructing the f-hole.



**LEFT:** Besides being an excellent craftsman, Monteleone is an innovative and versatile instrument designer. **RIGHT:** The complete rim assembly includes head block, tail block, point blocks, and kerfed lining.



John uses local sources and independent suppliers for his woods and finds "excellent woods at very reasonable prices." He chooses wood by hardness and grain, according to the sound his customer wants. Wide grain is used for more bass, a "chunkier" kind of sound; narrow grain is used for clarity and sweetness of tone.

For his mandolin tops, Monteleone uses German spruce almost exclusively because of its hardness and overall re-

sponse. For the sides and back, he uses Tyrolean maple, which he says lends a subtle softness and flavor to the tone. He finds that Vermont maple, harder than the European variety, works very well for necks. "I think rosewood has its place for certain instruments, too," John explains. "In certain flat-top designs, different varieties of rosewood might be a good relationship for back and sides. I think mahogany flat-tops have been underrated to a large degree. A lot of them sound excellent." Usually, John buys rough logs or planes, which he cuts to size and end-treats to control drying. He then slices the "wedges," stacking them to dry for at least two years.

John uses mother-of-pearl or abalone for delicate inlay decorations. To attach the binding to the routed wooden surface, John makes "glue" by dissolving cellulose nitrate in acetone. Titebond glue is used for all the other construction, but John warns, "You have to experiment with the glue to find out how to use it. For example, putting fretboards on could drive you nuts. The glue is a little thick, and it adds a lot of moisture to the neck. Several times I've put a fretboard on, and it [the glue] has added so much moisture between the joint that the neck has just bent backwards. In those cases, I end up taking the neck apart and straightening it out."

John works strictly on commission, and currently has about an eight-month waiting list for any of his five mandolin models. His instruments range from the very plain "nuts and bolts" two-point (with either oval holes or f-holes) model that sells for \$1,200.00, to the F-5 style model and his top-of-the-line "Grand Artist," each of which sells for \$2,000.00. "The round or oval hole shapes the tone completely differently," he explains. "It makes a hollower, deeper, more resonant sound. The f-hole has a lot more cutting power; it's a more powerful instrument, and its sound is intended to carry a greater distance."

Though John is in the process of expanding his shop, he is not likely to increase production to more than his current two mandolins per month. "I have had several apprentices, but I continue to work by myself. You might say that I enjoy having total control of the instrument. My concept is a total one. I look at a stack of wood first, and can see it as a finished instrument. The idea of understanding tone, volume, and sound came together after my first guitar. The quest for trying to refine and control tone is always a learning process. I don't think you ever sit on top of the situation completely and say 'This is the answer,' because you're working with different pieces of wood all the time. Each time you pick up wood to make an instrument, you turn the page. You've moved on to a new set of circumstances to deal with, which is good. It's a continuing challenge, which keeps me motivated. I think I'll never stop learning about it."

— Ira Landgarten