

John Monteleone

builder



The Mystique of the Man and His Mandolins

By Ginny Hollon

Making instruments for today, but being flexible, open to change and always looking toward tomorrow, John Monteleone's philosophy is that mandolins are not cast in stone, but have momentum — an indicated forward direction — and with that his mandolins have evolved and grown through the first 27 years of practicing his art.

During those years he has taken risks, followed his visions and dreams, incorporated dramatic, innovative, even revolutionary, changes in the mandolin, all the while maintaining his own self-imposed highest standards of excellence, musically, sonically and aesthetically. Every aspect of each instrument is designed and hand-crafted by John in his shop, right down to the wax carvings for casting the metal parts. "I hate to rely on outside sources that can be inflexible, unreliable and expensive," he said.

Reflecting on my interview with John and reviewing the photos and materials he had sent me, as I sat down to write, I realized I was having an emotional experience, not unlike one which occasionally overcomes me after an exceptionally brilliant musical performance when I leave overwhelmed, teary eyed, in awe. This created a conflict with the strong journalistic objectivity which is so much a part of me; and, although I was trying desperately to hold on to that, I made several feeble attempts before completing this more editorialized than I normally allow, but very sincere, article.

In the 20th century, John Monteleone played an important leadership role in the development of the mandolin. He made changes in the instrument from designing his one-piece bridge, changes in his Loar copies, the debut of his Grand Artist mandolin in 1977 and culminating with the innovative Radio Flyer mandolin prototype in 1996 that undoubtedly could carry the instrument to new heights during the 21st century.

His name is well known, his impeccable reputation made initially with mandolin family instruments and then the guitar; however, not many I've spoken with seem to know a lot about him. Who is this man?

I found John Monteleone to be unassuming, soft-spoken, articulate and with a good sense of humor. He's a pianist, designer, philosopher and an artist in every sense of the word, one who incorporates many of the arts into his instrument making, and, one who steps out of the mold — a Renaissance Man. His Radio Flyer —a Renaissance mandolin?

John has an unending love affair with the art of taking a block of wood and translating it into a musical instrument. "I always look forward to the next instrument; it's exciting, challenging. The next is always best," John says.

"From the beginning I wanted to make the mandolin grow, to offer an instrument that makes sense, is as complete as possible in dynamic range and that invites the player to explore."

John was born in Manhattan in 1947. His father was an award-winning sculptor of Italian descent who played a bowl-backed mandolin and one of John's earliest memories is of being put to bed with his father playing a lullaby.

As a youngster, John was curious, taking apart old clocks, radios, wanting to find out "what made them tick. I believe that I was able to look at an object, study and absorb it quite well. That probably comes from being around my father."

When he was twelve, he conducted an "experiment" on a Harmony acoustic archtop guitar, smashing it to bits around a lally-column. When the inside of the instrument was exposed, John said that he took a look at the parts and realized they were somehow important to the sound of a guitar. It was an enlightening experience that planted the seed for the years to follow.

Always "keen on musical sounds," John was classically trained on piano and still plays every day on a 1908 Steinway grand piano that he "rebuilt from the ground up."

He attended Tarkio College in Missouri and earned a degree in applied music in 1970. "I thought I might want to teach music and was involved with many jazz and symphonic groups. I was very interested in building instruments, but didn't know it was possible to make a living building instruments, though I knew of one fellow in New York City building archtop instruments. That was John D'Angelico."

After college, he worked as a substitute teacher and in his father's business as well "But I really was not happy with any of that. By the time 1973 rolled around, I took a trip to Europe to buy some guitar-making tools and while I was there wrote my father a letter informing him I was not going to work for him when I came back. He was pretty upset as I was a very good candidate to eventually take over his business." John is one of four children and said that a brother later took over the family business.

"I was intrigued with the mandolin and with a Gibson A-0 that was for sale in town and wanted to find out about it when I heard the Mandolin Brothers on a radio station inviting the audience to call in. I did and told them I was interested in the mandolin and they wanted to know more. During the conversation, I mentioned that I had made some instruments, a couple of guitars. They were just opening and didn't have a repairman yet.

"It worked out that I went to talk with them and left with three Martin guitars in my Volkswagen for repair. The relationship continued. I got my hands on a lot of the finest instruments in the world to study, repair and evaluate — such good learning tools. In 1974, I built my first mandolin, kind of a copy of an F-5 and I still have it."

John continued working out of his home for two years and in 1976 opened his first shop continuing to handle

Mandolin Brothers work along with his own.

In 1976 he began building Gibson F-5 Loar copies handled through Mandolin Brothers and built about 30 Loar copies, the last in 1985. "The first few said Gibson on the top; then I started putting my name on them. I got tired of making a Gibson product, a product that had been left in its tracks in 1924 without growth or improvement.

"The instrument was abandoned before it had a chance to become a success, an instrument with incredible potential, one that is still being discovered. Right away I saw that certainly it was possible to bring the mandolin forward and improve. I started to rethink the mandolin, using the F-5 as the basis to redraw the entire instrument."

As John continued to build Loar copies, he was making changes to the instrument, including a less massive scroll area and subtle aesthetic improvements.

"Music is the driving force underlying any instrument. Music has a validity and the instrument supports the music — without the music, instruments aren't really worth anything. Music and musicians change, evolve and grow and so should the instrument."

"I wanted to build a mandolin with broader balance, easy action and faster response. I wanted tonal changes and aesthetic changes too."

His ideas continued to evolve and in 1977 he made his first Grand Artist, mandolin number 12, a prototype "made for myself to prove out my design ideas." It had a shortened (abbreviated) pick guard, a new tailpiece design with a built-in string damper on the front edge, re-stylized F-holes, a one-piece bridge purely for tone, less massive (more hollowed out) scroll area and reversed truss rod.

"It was pretty risky. Nothing was accepted at that time except an F-5 or Gibson copy. I didn't know if people would accept it." But the Grand Artist was accepted and continues to flourish and evolve. The line now also includes a mandola, mandocello and the Baby Grand, a fancier version of the Grand Artist with a two-point body and a name inspired by John's fascination with the piano.

The Grand Artist arched fretboard was conceived when David Grisman complained about his hands hurting on conventional flat fretboards, inspiring John to design the arched fingerboard for him on mandolin number 25.

In 1982 David decided that he wanted a version of the Grand Artist as his signature model. John designed an instrument, based on number 25, for Saga to produce in Japan, the Kentucky KM-Dawg. When the prototype was put together, John went to Japan to consult on any problems that might arise.

"I like to grow and evolve and to be able to try new ideas. I don't like repetition. The only problem is that people tend to expect the same. I have been fortunate through the years to have had the kind of clientele that has allowed me to be flexible and take the Grand Artist through the changes."

One very challenging and exciting project was a matched set that John built for the Modern Mandolin Quartet including two mandolins, a mandola and a mandocello. "They wanted a classical presentation that would give their music more credibility.

"The reason they came to me for matched instruments,



was that they were having trouble matching the sound of their instruments because of their various personalities and the balance of the way they played. I listened to them play and evaluated how I could build instruments that would provide the balance they were looking for.

"The instruments also were built for a 'classical look' in the way I approached the ornamentation, binding and color. It was a very rewarding project and they were head over heels."

John said that sometime shortly after he started the Grand Artist line, he became interested in exploring yet a new design. "I had the ideas in my mind for another mandolin with 'dolphin' holes, but it was put on the back burner in the mid '80s."

"I was pretty heavily involved in archtop guitars and then in 1993 the opportunity came along to make an archtop guitar prototype which I called the Radio Flyer and used the dolphin design and ebony pick guard on it." John said that the Radio Flyer line is a tribute to the radio, its place in history and its impact on music.

"I knew when I built the guitar that I just had to make the mandolin. I wanted so badly to make an ebony tailpiece for the mandolin and couldn't wait to hear what it would sound like.

"In 1996 I built the Radio Flyer mandolin prototype, number 186, for myself. It's taken the mandolin voice farther. The Radio Flyer has a big, dynamic range, a profound sound."

The Radio Flyer features several mandolin firsts — an angled, ebony tailpiece, also the first fully adjustable, elevated and free-floating mandolin tailpiece with a string damper made of piano action felt under the front lip of the tailpiece, an asymmetrical head stock, dolphin sound holes, and a convexly contoured, ebony pick guard.

"I wanted to get away from plastics so I used a sculpted pick-guard design and wood bindings."

The back, sides and neck are made of Oregon big leaf

maple and the soundboard of Adirondack red spruce. The body is bound in curly maple and black and white purflings are made from natural and dyed wood strips. The Radio Flyer is Venetian red in color.

"The combination of the asymmetrical head-stock and the angled tailpiece allows me to make the 'feel' of the strings more uniform, giving a better 'touch,' with the strings in a more balanced relationship to each other.

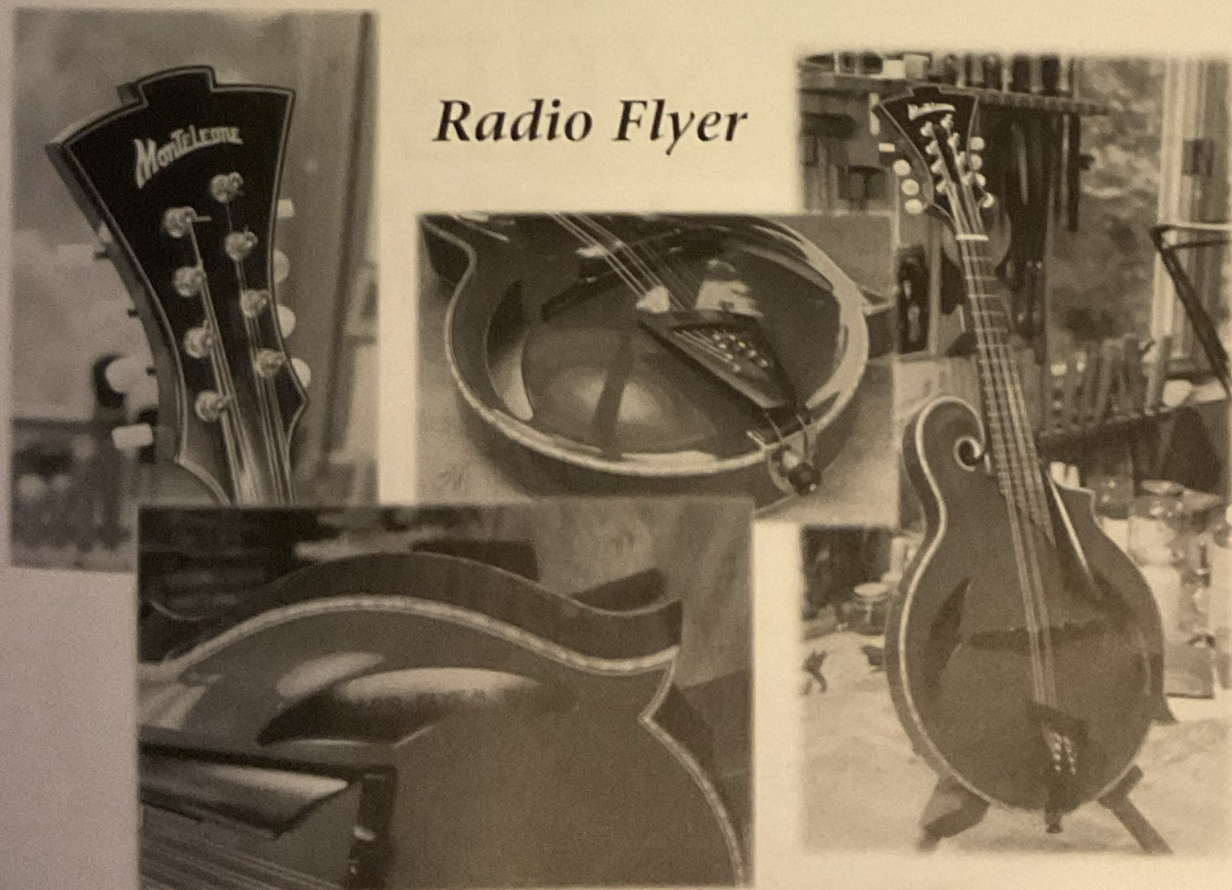
"Most tailpieces have no vertical adjustment; if the tailpiece is elevated to the point where it allows the bridge to function at its peak, sustain is increased and the instrument seems to breathe better with an improved, easier speaking voice."

John said a Radio Flyer teardrop model will be built and his instruments will continue to evolve. "I can't say there's not more, though it's not cohesive yet.

"It's a matter of keeping what's good, combining it with what is better and abandoning what needs to be abandoned. I have a lot of respect for Gibson, to do what they did at the time they did. It's pretty amazing. At the same time, they were not looking at the market we are looking at now.

"The F-5 has a certain pedigree; it's an icon and stands for bluegrass mandolin; but, the world is not wholly made of bluegrass. I want to offer musicians a tool to explore and exploit the music, help them grow and expand, allow a musical instrument to be a musical instrument in the most complete way.

"Plenty of bluegrass players are capable of playing freer forms, jazz, classical. I constantly strive for a high performance instrument with more complex tonal structure that can still handle the chop and biting treble. I can only offer a fair and honest instrument in my experience and knowledge and I've dedicated my life to offering the best that I can offer." ♪



Radio Flyer