

## **"Mr. Custom" A Profile of Luthier Jim Triggs By Maxwell McCullough**

This past October Francie and I made what has become an annual pilgrimage for us, to the 4th Annual Oklahoma International Bluegrass Festival in Guthrie' Oklahoma. While there, I caught up with Jim Triggs, whose luthiery work I had admired for years, and was both surprised and delighted to find that he had several mandolins in hand. I had been aware of Jim's important role in bringing quality back to the Gibson mandolin line in the mid-1980s, but like many mandophiles had lost track of his activities after he left Gibson to concentrate on his exquisite guitars.

Jim had set up a display of three of his recently-completed mandolins in the back room of Byron Berline's Double Stop Fiddle Shop in downtown Guthrie, where they were drawing serious attention from players and guests who gathered in that cozy venue to pick a tune or two. Out in the front window of the shop, a fourth Triggs mandolin was on display - this one donated by Jim for the annual auction to be held on Saturday night at the closing Festival concert. Two were F-5 style, the third (as well as the auction mandolin) were A-5 style. After arranging a time to get together with Jim to do an interview I took the opportunity to play each of the instruments on display - a process which took a while, as there were a good many other players who wanted to do the same thing - and was impressed with the craftsmanship, tone and playability of each of them, both as a player and a listener. Comments heard from the other players confirmed my conclusion that Mr. Triggs had not lost his mando-luthiery touch during his years of producing upscale guitars for many of the big names in the music world, and that his re-entry into the mandolin business was something our readers should know more about.

We found a mostly quiet spot in the rear of Byron's building, a storeroom shared with the florist shop next door, and set up the tape recorder. Jim is an easy interview subject, with the quiet confidence of someone who has been around and seen a great deal of the music business from more sides than just the instrument-building perspective. I asked him how he got into luthiery.

Jim's first interest in Topeka, Kansas as a youth was in art, and later woodworking. In his junior high and high school years he took all of the art classes available, and then did in-school independent study in drawing, painting, sculpture and carving; an educational foundation which served him well in viewing his later creations as pieces of art rather than simply assemblies of wood and wire. By high school he was also interested in the banjo and started playing in bluegrass bands, where he found his interest shifting to the mandolin. "I wanted a Gibson F-5L, but those were about \$2000 at the time and I couldn't afford to buy one, so I bought [Roger] Siminoff's book and started to build my own." The Siminoff manual, despite some errors which lengthened the learning process, was a valuable resource and indeed the only comprehensive work on the subject of mandolin-building, and Jim worked "off and on for about a year" on that first instrument, which he still owns.

"I wasn't particularly impressed with the craftsmanship in that first mandolin, but some of my friends were and I got several orders to make more of them." For the next three years or so, mandolin-building was both a hobby and a quest for perfection. His Website writeup says that he made those first instruments in his parents' driveway. "I was working for UPS by this time on the early shift - 4 am to 8 am - and so had time during the day to work on mandolins. I found I could turn out about 15 or 20 instruments a year on a part-time basis. I'd go to bluegrass festivals, set up a card table and show what I had", and received a growing backlog of orders. In the process, Triggs met many of the bluegrass and country artists who would remain loyal customers and supporters for many years.

In 1983 Jim and his wife, Mary Ann, moved to California, which had been her home. He had gotten to know Byron Berline well by that time, and Byron encouraged him to make contact once he had settled in. Jim built one of his first California mandolins for Berline, who played it on stage and spoke highly of its quality, and this generated additional orders. "I made about fifty mandolins a year during those three years. I still got back to the Midwest and down to Texas once in a while, but mostly showed my work at the California festivals. Then in 1986, at a festival in Orange County, Charlie Derrington was there," [mandophiles will remember Derrington as the craftsman who painstakingly reassembled Bill Monroe's legendary F-5 after a girlfriend had smashed it into small pieces with a fireplace poker] "and he was working for Gibson. They were looking for someone to come to work for them and take charge of upgrading their mandolin product line, and that to me was the dream job for a mandolin-maker."

Gibson had built a production facility in Nashville in 1980, initially to make the popular Les Paul guitars, which were their bread-and-butter product at the time. By 1983, all of the Kalamazoo production lines had been moved to Nashville. In early 1986, an era of poor management by Gibson's parent company, Norlin, ended when Gibson was sold to a trio of Harvard-educated MBAs who immediately sought new ways to enhance the product lines, boost sagging sales and make the Gibson name once again synonymous with quality. Hence, Derrington's quest for a recognized luthier with a solid reputation and the Triggs family's move to a new home in Nashville.

"At that time, very few archtop guitars or mandolins were being built at Gibson. I was hired to make F-5s - good ones - so I made a prototype and we took it to the next NAMM [ National Association of Music Merchandisers ] Show and we came away with 120 orders. I couldn't make all of these myself, and we didn't have a big staff of trained mandolin builders at the time." Triggs was splitting his time between mandolins and the Gibson Custom Shop, where he spent much of his time doing one-of-a-kind detail, finishing and setup work. "If Emmylou [Harris] or Vince Gill brought in a guitar for setup, either I or one of the others would do it on a rush basis, and we didn't have a lot of time to work on production."

At that same NAMM show where the Triggs prototype stimulated mandolin orders, Steve Carlson of Flatiron in Bozeman, Montana was also showing his products. Carlson and Gibson's Henry Juskiewicz came to agreement on Gibson's purchase of Flatiron, with its mandolin production already well established, to make the Gibson products as well. Triggs worked closely with Carlson to establish a separate production line for the Gibson mandolins and to insure that product distinctions were maintained between the Gibson and Flatiron lines. With Carlson focusing on machining and detail and Triggs on craftsmanship, the Gibson mandolin regained much of the reputation it had lost during the prior twenty years.

After getting the Montana production set up, Triggs came back to Nashville to run the 15-person Custom Shop. In the

evenings and on weekends, he spent his time in artist relations, selling the major artists in country and bluegrass music on the steadily improving Gibson products. "After several years of success, they [Gibson] asked me to do artist relations full time. By 1990, we had 90 percent of the country artists playing Gibsons - people like Clint Black, Alan Jackson, George Strait, Chris Hillman, Herb Pedersen, and of course Emmylou." Gibson built the custom Rose J-200 for Ms. Harris to replace her original, now retired to the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Triggs did the inlay work on the new one. Triggs and colleague Greg Rich attended a dozen or so festivals and shows a year, promoting Gibson and its products.

Rich and Triggs collaborated on more than just publicity - they would produce custom, out-of-this-world banjos and guitars for each new NAMM show and became legendary not only for their creative instrument building but for the "crazy suits and rhinestone getups" which became a part of the Gibson 'show' at each exposition. Hard-core mandophiles will recall the 1988 NAMM show, where Triggs' all-white F-5, elaborately painted and inlaid by Triggs and Rich, took the honors. This one-of-a-kind beauty now resides in Butch Baldassari's collection. "Greg and I did art guitars for each show, and people looked forward every year to what we might come up with. The [Gibson] owners gave us the latitude to build pretty much what we wanted, all on spec. We knew that everything we built would be sold before the end of the show. The flip side of the crazy stuff, of course, was a serious attention to quality, and people recognized that."

Triggs' next assignment was as supervisor of the Gibson archtop guitar line. Still working out of the Custom Shop, he found time to make twelve mandolins in his remaining time with Gibson and during his last year started on one for Sam Bush, based on Bush's legendary late-1930s F-5, "Hoss." He finished Sam's mandolin six months later, after he had left Gibson, and this mandolin - which Sam calls "Little Joe" (it helps to be a 'Bonanza' devotee to follow the naming logic) - became the prototype for the model announced eight years later [2000] as Gibson's "Sam Bush Mandolin." Sam uses Little Joe in the studio for recording, and in climates where Hoss suffers from humidity changes. I opined that this new product would be a plus for Gibson, due to Bush's enormous popularity among the younger players, and Triggs agreed. "Sam is one of the most discriminating customers I've worked with, down to every detail. If Gibson does it the way we designed it, it'll be a winner for them."

The Gibson years were important to Triggs' later career; in fact, Jim describes the work with Gibson as "a master's degree in custom luthiery." Not only was he able to work on or create the custom instruments played by the industry's major stars, but he got to know the dealer network throughout the United States and gain the respect of the people who would be responsible, through endorsement and use of the instruments, for bringing the Gibson name - and Triggs' - to the attention of the instrument-buying public. "Almost everybody we built for would want some kind of custom touch, whether it was an inlay detail, a carved heel or a whole instrument, and this is what I enjoyed most." The artist list on Triggs' website reads like a Who's Who of the country entertainment business.

Jim left Gibson in the Spring of 1992, to spend more time on custom luthiery. His first two years back on his own were almost exclusively devoted to archtop guitars, most in the D'Angelico and Stromberg styles. The word quickly spread and his backlog quickly reached four years with orders still coming in. "I was doing 30 a year and killing myself", Triggs says. "I burned myself out pretty quickly working 80-hour weeks and developed Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, so I stopped building completely for four months. Now, I try to put in as close to 40 hours a week as I can. If I can stay around a year backlogged, that's comfortable for me." About half of the work he has been doing since leaving Gibson is electric, which surprises people. "A lot of builders don't have much exposure to electric instruments and don't want to bother with them, but that's another thing I picked up during the Gibson years and I'm as comfortable building electric as I am acoustic." By his own admission, Triggs gets bored easily and so relishes the opportunity to work across a broad spectrum of instruments, from \$1000 Telecasters to \$20,000 archtops.

In 1998, the Triggs family moved back to Kansas City. "I had been out of mandolins for a good many years and wanted to get back to serious mandolin-building once I got the guitar backlog down to something I could deal with," Jim says. By 2000 he was able to do that, and the four he had on display in Guthrie (and earlier at Winfield) were the first he had made since finishing "Little Joe" in 1992. And still making "about eight archtops a year," he will concentrate for a while on mandolins, working out of a spacious workshop at home. "I saw a lot of old mandolins while I was at Gibson, including a good many Loars. [Bill] Monroe would bring his in for setup, and I'd do whatever was needed to make him happy with it again." As often as possible, he would take detailed notes and measurements of the early Gibsons that passed through his hands and has the specifications for some 30 Loars and later Ferns in his notebook.

I asked him if he builds to match any particular vintage sound. "I find that people who are into the old Gibsons like one of two sounds - the '23 Loar or the '28 Fern are the ones I use as references. These are two distinctly different sounds, and when someone asks me to build a custom mandolin for them I always ask them if there is a particular instrument they've played or heard which they like the best. A lot of times they'll say Bill's, or Bobby's [Osborne] or Herschel's [Sizemore] or Butch's [Baldassari], or one they've heard on a recording. Usually I've worked on it, seen it or heard it, and I can work from this to give them the sound they want." He 'colors' the tone by moving the tone bars, adjusting top and finish thickness and changing neck angle and height, among other techniques. All of his mandolins are tone-bar braced, rather than x-braced. Fingerboards are flat, but Triggs is happy to arch them if the customer prefers.

As to woods, he prefers the harder Alaskan Sitka, though he has used Red, Engleman, Adirondack and cedar. "I can take just about any type of wood and work with it to color it so that my instruments sound the same." He experiments, but strives for a sound that is consistently even across and up and down the fingerboard.

The four mandolins he showed at Guthrie - his 'pilot run', as he called it - were the first he had done as a batch. "At Gibson," Jim says, "we pretty much did everything one at a time, at least in the Custom Shop." He likes to work in batches of three, and does his own top and back carving without using a Pantograph or form duplicator. "I like starting with nothing and creating something with my hands - to me, it's more of an art when you do it that way." Looking at the three on display in the other room, I could not discern any difference in arch or shape, so Jim has evidently done enough of this to get it right with his Makita grinder and Sir Lance-A-Lot blade, though he does acknowledge that he may have to get a duplicator if the

mandolin business takes off.

I asked Jim about tap-tuning. "I've done that, but don't anymore," he replied. "I've found I can get very, very close to the right tone just by feel - the flex, the thickness, the way the wood responds. The Gibson bodies were supposed to note out at a D-sharp, sometimes to E. My finished mandos note out at or very close to that without tap-tuning during the construction phase." His thoughts on technique are interesting. "As luthiers grow older, their own hearing and eyesight starts to fail in a lot of cases their quality suffers because they rely on those senses as their primary gauges in instrument building. I prefer to put more weight on the feeling I get as I handle the wood at the various stages."

I was interested to learn that Jim likes to do what he calls 'speaker therapy' with his finished mandolins - a technique I firmly believe in and am often surprised when others do not. "A mandolin sounds pretty green just after it's finished, but if you put it in front of a speaker for several hours it will start to warm up and sound like a broken-in instrument. If you put your hand on the body of that mandolin and feel the vibrations, whether you're playing Sweet Home Alabama or Sinatra, it's the same feel you get when you're playing the instrument."

A week or so after Guthrie, Triggs took his mandolins to IBMA [International Bluegrass Music Association] in Louisville, where he hooked up with Wayne Benson, mandolinist for IIIrd Tyme Out, one of bluegrass' hottest performing groups. Benson left with one of Jim's mandolins and will be acting as a sales agent on the band's road appearances. I spoke with Wayne by phone, and he was very pleased with his new acquisition. "I love the feel, the look and the responsiveness," Wayne commented, "and I will tell you that these mandolins got a lot of attention at IBMA."

We discussed where Jim would like to go from here. He allowed that he loves the feeling of letting his career go in whatever direction it takes him. "I did just about everything I wanted to do in my life by the time I was 30, including going to Gibson. I do have to be flexible because I don't build a lot on spec, and any kind of order can come in when you're in the custom business. Or no orders. I still carve heels for Martin, do design work for Cort Guitars, and I'm doing my own bluegrass festival next year down in Lynn County, about 70 miles south of Kansas City." He has created a non-profit corporation, of which he is president, to run the festival, and not surprisingly many of his old friends in bluegrass have arranged to be there, including IIIrd Tyme Out, the Byron Berline Band with talented guitarist Jim Fish playing his amazing Jim Triggs flattop), Country Gazette Reunion and others. He is sponsoring a band contest on Saturday and is making an F-5, a Bella Voce-style banjo, a D-45-type guitar and an electric bass as prizes for the competition. The festival will take place July 15-16-17, 2001 and information will be available on Jim's Web site [see below].

"As I said earlier, I think I tend to get bored if I just do one thing all the time. I've been lucky to be able to work on a lot of different types of instruments; I have a lot of fun going from an F-5 to an L-5 to a flattop guitar or a Telecaster. I think my experience at Gibson of being around every kind of instrument they built - and they built a lot - has colored my thinking." His consulting work for Cort Guitars has resulted in a product line named for him, and he still does custom carving for Martin and others. He maintains his artist contacts and is the luthier of choice for many of the top names in the music business. "I don't know where the mandolin making is going to go. I'm prepared to put guitars on the back burner for a couple of years if the mandolins do well. Bluegrass is bigger than it has ever been, and I have a history that goes back a lot of years with many of the major players, so the word will get around that I'm doing mandolins again. I want to promote the music now; it has been good to me and I want to give something back."

Jim also said he'd like to start a bluegrass band in the Kansas City area, to get back into playing. In the meantime, he sounds like a very comfortable and well-centered guy: "It's nice to be able to wake up every day and do something a little different. If I want to work on an F-5 I can, or a flattop or an archtop; the orders are there. Sometimes I wake up with an idea and go to work on a prototype."

But back to Guthrie for a moment. It was down in the 40s on Saturday night for the final Festival concert, which featured noted bluegrass Willie Nelson as the headline act, and Francie and I had hunkered down in our chairs wearing just about everything we had with us. The auction was coming up, and I'd decided to see if I could buy that Triggs A-5 mandolin I'd seen in Byron's shop window for the past three days. I hadn't shared that plan with anybody else, but it was lodged pretty firmly in my own head. As Jim and Byron came up on stage with it, I turned and mentioned to my friend Dick Vincent, who was sitting next to me, that that sure was a fine-sounding mandolin. Well, as soon as the auctioneer asked for bids, doggoned if Dick's hand didn't pop into the air! The bidding went on for a while, but Dick hung in there and I never uttered a peep. After the gavel went down and it was his, Dick turned and said, "You weren't going to bid on that, were you?"

As fate would have it, I did buy the next auction item, a Taylor Dan Crary guitar, so the four of us went back to the B&B where we were staying and picked until about 2 in the morning like kids with new toys. I sure did hate to see that mandolin go off to Houston, though, and it looks like I'll have to get in line for one of my own.

Judging from what I saw and heard, 'Mr. Custom' is on the right track, and in my considered judgment the mandolin world will be the much the richer for his decision to return to building the instrument that got him started.