

U.S. \$7<sup>00</sup> • Canada \$10<sup>00</sup>

Volume 12, Number 4 • Spring 2011



# MANDOLIN

M · a · g · a · z · i · n · e

*A quarterly magazine for mandolin players & enthusiasts.*

Evan J. Marshall



Photo E.K. Waller

*Inside: Builder Mike Black*



builder  
**Mike Black**

## ***Reaching for a Different Summit***

*by David McCarty*

**F**or mountain climbers, the ultimate goal is reaching the summit of Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain. For most mandolin luthiers, the ultimate summit is building the best-possible version of the iconic F5 mandolin.

Not Mike Black. A talented mandolinist who plays with the band Three Bean Salad and who won the Kansas State Mandolin Championship, Black is building a solid reputation for himself as an up-and-coming luthier focusing on more traditional mandolin styles. A former apprentice with Paul Schneider of Summit Mandolins, Black's done F5s, but says he prefers to focus on short-scale, oval-hole instruments based on the classic snakehead Gibson A4s of the 1920s.

"It's a good niche; everyone and their dog is doing F5-style mandolins, and I love them too," he reports. "But there are only a handful of people doing oval holes and Loar-style A5s, which uses the same body as the oval holes."

He hews to the tried and true recipe for the instrument, keeping the short scale, 12-fret neck and single traverse bracing that give the Gibson originals their fat, rounded tone. Where he deviates is in personal accommodations like wider, radiused fingerboards, Virzi tone producers and a two-way truss rod.

A native of Kansas, Black has gained traction for his instruments with mandolin fans at the annual Winfield, Kansas, acoustic music festival, especially at the huge Celtic jam tent known as Carp Camp. In addition, he's gotten feedback from fellow Lawrence, Kansas, resident *Mandolin Cafe* owner Scott Tichenor, who says the young

builder, while still having some rough edges, is on the right path.

"Mike has built some very compelling instruments, from piccolos to octaves and is currently working on everything in between, as far as I know, and the ones I've had a chance to play have all sounded very good," Tichenor told *Mandolin Magazine*. "He's a serious student of the craft and I think he's one of the young builders we should all be watching."

Black didn't start out on a particularly musical path. He liked music, and always wanted to play guitar. That passion led him to make small Strat-shaped "air guitars" but he was in sixth grade when he started playing an instrument, trumpet.

By eighth grade, he had a guitar and was playing heavy metal, electric guitar in jams with friends. Around 1991, he went with his Dad to Winfield, and when they came back, the family bought his father a mandolin for Christmas. His Dad never really got a chance to play it, but Mike "fell in love with it. I never looked back," he reports.

Mike's built his first instrument as a woodshop project in high school — an electric guitar he built for himself. "I was always good with my hands, always messed around with wood," he says. The project involved Mike building every part of the guitar's body and neck by hand, only buying the electronics, tuners, bridge and a pre-slotted fingerboard.

He wound up doing instrument repair at Crossroad Music in Salina, Kansas, where he did everything from re-frets to miscellaneous instrument repairs. Hearing that Paul Schneider was in business not too far away, Mike called him up to see if he needed any help.

"He said for me to come down, he was quitting his day job to do (Summit Mandolins) fulltime. So I did an apprenticeship with him for a year. I built 10 to 15 mandolins with him, including the mandolin they gave away at Winfield as a prize in the mandolin contest," he explains. "I did the whole gamut



**Black's A4 mandolin, left, with Virzi and the Piccolo mandolin, right, that he made for his son James when he was born (hence the Pearl inlay name on the fingerboard).**

with Paul, did carvings, the necks, fretting, finish and setup. It was a great learning experience. I am indebted to him."

Today, Mike makes a living working in a call center for Medicare, building mandolins in his spare time and on weekends. His building range has included octave mandolins built on an archtop guitar body platform, an instrument that's become highly visible at Winfield. But the A4-style is what resonates with him.

"A friend of mine let me use his '23 A4 oval-hole, snake-head Gibson and I took a lot of measurements and patterns off it, and I built one. Scott Tichenor has been my go-to guy to show him things when I get something done, and he said that I needed to build more of these oval holes." "So he's the one that has steered me in this direction."

Mike is taking great pains to build A4-style instruments that maximize sound, volume and playability. His finishes are done in varnish, followed by a French polish that gives the instrument "a deep glow and luster. It has a nice feel to it," he explains.

The A4 tops are typically Engelmann spruce with a slab-cut, big leaf maple tone wood for the backs and sides. "It's wider-grained and warmer sounding," he says. He's also using hide glue to attach his tops and backs, saying he's using it where he feels its ability to crystallize into a hard joint improves sound transfer.

One key element of his design is his frequent use of the Lloyd Loar-inspired Virzi tone producer in many of his instruments. "I'm sold on the Virzi in the oval holes. All the mandolins I've played that have had (Virzis) have sounded best in oval-hole mandolins. They give oval-hole mandolins more punch and warmth all over."33

Black says one frustration is finding adequate tuners that are period-correct for the reverse worm gear tuners used on the original snakehead Gibsons. "I've been using Gotoh tuners, which are the only ones on the market geared correctly with



**Mark Robertson-Tessi playing mandolin and Dave Firestone with his Carp octave taken at the Tucson Folk Festival.**

## Builder Mike Black *continued*

the worm over the shaft so it fits and looks right on that style of mandolin. Stew-Mac has introduced some retro ones, but the Gotohs are still the closest” he explained.

To date, Mike has made about 10 instruments. He currently has two mandolins that nearly are done, and he has started two more. “I’m trying to keep it pretty low-key,” he said. “I want to keep building because I enjoy it and enjoy playing the instruments that I build.”

An A4 or Loar A5 style instrument from Mike Black costs about \$2400, with his octave mandolins costing upwards of \$3900 for the standard versions. Extra inlays or other upgrades affect the price.

Mike says he tries to avoid asking for a down payment, letting prospective customers get on his waiting list and then accepting a down payment once the instrument is underway so the customer can specify elements like finish color, nut width, binding, bracing, headstock and fingerboard inlay and other custom features.

Ask Mike Black if he ever wants to do this as a fulltime gig, and he becomes philosophical. “I’m kind of torn; I’d love to do it fulltime, but I know how hard it can be to make a living at it. With my job, I get great benefits and that makes it tough (to quit).”

Reaching the summit of oval hole, A-style mandolin building is a worthy goal. For Mike Black, the path ahead is clear, and lovers of this style of instrument will be the ones who benefit. ♪

*Spring 2011*



*A Black 21.5-inch scale-length GBOM — (Guitar Body Octave Mandolin) with side sound-port and floating tailpiece.*