

## Mandolins

by WARD MEEKER

**A**fter making a living playing guitar and mandolin for more than 20 years, in 1995, Jonathan Mann got married and moved from Florida to Nashville. There, he made ends meet for his family by working as a staff songwriter and woodworker who did various projects, including building a mountain dulcimer. but...

"I'd always dreamed of building a mandolin, but had no clue where to begin," he said. "Then I discovered Roger Siminoff's book, *How to Construct a Bluegrass Mandolin*, which was responsible for getting a lot of mando builders started. I studied it for about a year, but still didn't feel confident enough to dive in. Then one day I got a Stewart-MacDonald catalog, and they had just added a mandolinkit. So I ordered it, and once I had the pieces in my hands and started assembling them, I was hooked. I knew then what my new calling was."

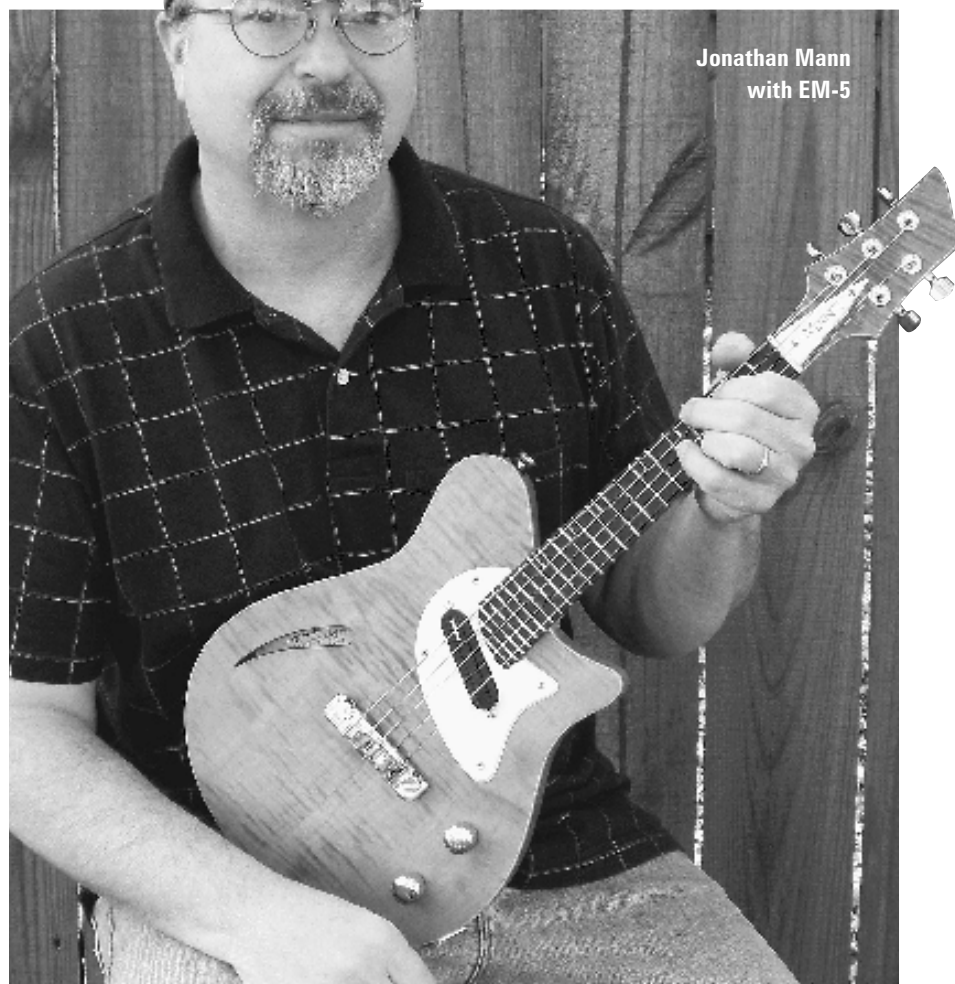
**So, did you keep writing songs**

**to pay the bills, or shift all of your focus to building mandolins?**

Well, my songwriting career was short-lived, so I had to choose between going on the road to play or getting a "real" job that would allow me to stay home with my family. I chose the latter and took a part-time job in sales at a big-box music store in Nashville, which allowed me to be close to my family and also left time to tinker on my newfound passion for building mandos.

A couple of years later, the stringed-instrument-tech position came open at the store. I worked there three days a week while my mandolin business steadily grew. In September of

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Jonathan Mann  
with EM-5

2008, I reached the point where I was just too busy at both jobs to really enjoy either one, so I quit the tech job to focus on building.

**Were you building just one model at the time?**

At first, yes. I followed the traditional approach, per Siminoff's book, building mandolins with a carved back and top,

bent sides, and a dovetail neck joint. I had only built a handful, then one day I found a really nice piece of curly maple that was a tad too thin to carve for a back. So I built an electric solidbody five-string mandolin and used that flamey piece to make a drop-top. It was a miniature Tele-shaped thing with half of a Bill Lawrence P-46 pickup. I used a



Mann EM-5 B Octave Mandolin



Mann Two Point Flat Back



Mann SEM-8



Mann SEM-5 Single Cut

neck-through style because it seemed easier at the time, and I'd always been a fan of neck-through guitars. It was fun, so I built another one, but with a carved top and chambered body. After that, I thought, "I can build a neck-through mando with a flat, chambered body... So why not go one step further and carve the back and make an acoustic neck-through?" From then on, I built every mando as a neck-through.

#### **What was the next move in terms of expanding your product line?**

To adapt the neck-through to the acoustic mandolin, I started with the simple A-7 model, then an F-7 about a year later, and about three years ago I started building a two-point model. I was still building electrics, which were beginning to outsell the acoustics.

I ultimately settled on three body styles for electrics – the EM, a flat-top,

one-pickup, single-cutaway available as a hollow, semi-hollow or solidbody, and the SEM in a single- or double-cutaway. Those have two pickups, a carved maple top, and a solidbody.

I offer all my electric models in four-, five-, or eight-string configurations. In the last year, I added an octave/long-scale version of the EM and SEM models. They're really cool, about halfway between a guitar and mando with 18" scale, they get down into the guitar tonal range. The five-string version has a high B string.

#### **How did you spread the word about your work?**

I was lucky enough to have a few good reviews early on. In 2005, I had two web reviews on the EM-5, and I keep a banner ad on [jazzmando.com](http://jazzmando.com) which helped. Then, a review on my two-point flat-back acoustic appeared in *American Songwriter* magazine in July, 2006, and Steven Stone

reviewed my SEM-5 in the October '08 issue of VG.

#### **What sets your instruments apart?**

As far as I know, I'm the only builder who uses neck-through construction on an acoustic mandolin, and one of very few who uses it on electrics. Because they have short necks and adjustable bridges, mandos rarely need a neck set, unless they have a joint failure. Mine have no joint to fail and there's less mass to the heel of the neck than on a traditional joint.

On my electric semi-hollow and solidbody models, I use my hand-made wrap-around tailpieces machined from aircraft-quality aluminum, plated to match the other hardware.

#### **Do you have any help in the shop?**

Nope. I'm still a "one Mann" operation (chuckles)!

#### **Comparing your mandos to others on the market, what do you point out to potential customers?**

Well, one of my goals is to use as many U.S.-made parts and supplies as possible. I also hope that when a prospective customer is looking for a new instrument, they'll look at one of the many great small U.S. builders before going for the Pacific-rim stuff.

#### **Do you have any goals in terms of growth or expansion?**

My immediate plans are to keep making the best instruments I can, add a few more models to the mandolin line, then maybe build some guitars; I have a couple designs I've been wanting to try.

Ideally, I'd have two or three hired hands and move into this old art-deco building I've had my eye on. **VG**