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LAID-BACK AND SELF-MADE

AUDEY RATLIFF AND RATLIFF MANDOLINS

By Tim Stafford
Photos by John Maylater

Audey Ratliff sits back in his Church Hill, Tenn., shop, pondering a question. The time ticks by, but Audey is not one to rush anything. It may have taken him 27 years to make his one thousandth mandolin, but that number of instruments is a remarkable feat for a solo luthier. If anything, it's a testament to his persistence and creativity.

Audey is one of the most impressive self-made men I've ever met. And I'm not alone with that opinion. Renowned bassist Barry Bales (of Alison Krauss + Union Station) says, "I've always thought he is a borderline, if not bona fide, genius. When people first meet Audey, they don't readily get it. He just looks like a regular guy with his shirttail hanging out. I've often wondered where his intelligence might have taken him if he had cared about 'worldly' success and monetary gain, and not gone the way of a bluegrass musician and luthier." Bales' former bandmate and perennial IBMA Mandolin Player Of The Year, Adam Steffey, agrees. "It's probably as much by his design as anything, but I think he's still probably the most unrecognized talent at what he does as anybody in the world."

In another room of his shop sits an airplane. Audey is building it from the ground up. Up the street is his house, which he built by hand—inside are incredible sculptures, including a stunning mermaid carved out of a block of wood. The most amazing thing is he's had no training, no formal education. "I read a lot," he says.

One book he decided to read in the late '70s changed his life forever. It was Roger Siminoff's *Constructing A Bluegrass Mandolin*. Audey recalls, "I read it very carefully all the way through and decided, 'I can do that.'" Pretty confident for a guy who had only been playing mandolin for a few years at that point and had no experience in woodworking or art carving.

Like most builders, Audey Ratliff was a player first—self-taught, of course. Seems unlikely for a Navy brat who grew up wherever his dad, Tom Ratliff, was stationed: Norfolk/Portsmouth (where Audey was born on August 2, 1957), Alaska, Panama, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and finally Kingsport, Tenn. The only constant was his dad's music—Tom learned resonator guitar and bought his first one from Josh Graves in the early 1960s. Audey didn't get into the music until he was a sophomore at Sullivan Central High School, around 1971. His first instrument was guitar, and he was inspired by G.C. Matlock, a local

legend, who played in a band at that time with Tom, Jerry Keys, Jerry's father-in-law George Hazelwood, and Roger Bush. G.C.'s sense of timing and touch always impressed Audey. "The first time I ever stepped on stage was at the Gem Theater hiding behind G.C. Matlock," he remembers.

Like so many East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia musicians in the early 1970s, Audey cut his musical teeth at jam sessions at Hickory Tree, a local music gathering near Bristol. It was there he met banjoist Tim Harkleroad, a prodigious youngster from nearby Bluff City who was a fine player as well as a comedian, magician, and ventriloquist. Soon, Tim, Audey, Tom, bassist John Myers, and mandolinist/tenor singer Earl Humphreys had formed a popular local group called Grassfire.

In the 1970s East Tennessee bluegrass scene, Audey was known as a remarkable musician who simply switched instruments when needed and was equally proficient on all of them. When Grassfire fell apart, Tom and Audey joined forces with Frank Wing and Wayne Chilcote (of late with Country Comfort) to form the Boys In The Band. Audey simply switched to bass and eventually mandolin, and became one of the better players in the area practically overnight.

It started out as a rather arbitrary decision. "We decided we had to have a mandolin player and between me and Wayne (Chilcote), we literally drew straws." Problem was, Audey is left-handed. It's still difficult to find lefty instruments, but it was even harder in the late '70s. "I guess as a consolation prize for losing, Wayne took me up to Wayne Henderson's and ordered *that* mandolin." (He points to his prized Henderson left-handed F-model hanging on the wall, the first lefty Wayne ever built.)

Henderson's shop made a definite impression. "Until that point, I had always thought that places to build instruments had to be huge, well-lit, with clean floors—factory kinds of things. I didn't realize people could just make them on the kitchen table, so to speak, or just in a shop with a bench. So it was kind of an eye opener."

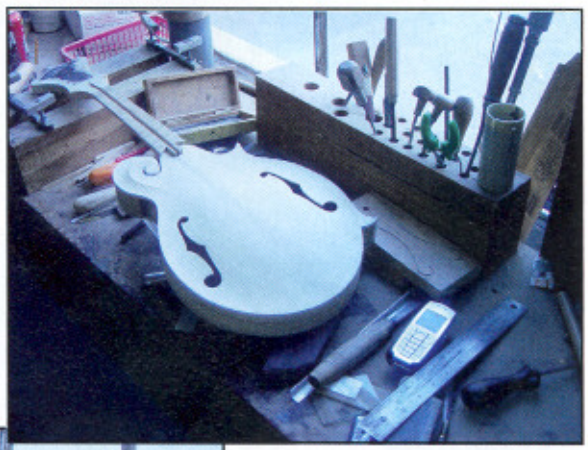
The Boys In The Band produced a recording for Trail Records in 1976, featuring Audey's fine mandolin playing. The group's repertoire was varied and differed from most local bands at the time, spotlighting obscure folk material along with bluegrass and gospel standards. The band was influential in bluegrass circles in East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, but Audey left for a time to play bass with Pennsylvania-based Whetstone Run. Bandmate Lee Olsen recalls, "When Audey joined us, he had made a great sacrifice in his personal life. He had just gotten married and he left home to come to Pennsylvania just to help us out. I never understood why he did that other than to say that I think Audey has a generous soul and knew we needed help. It made a great impression on me."

When he returned to East Tennessee, whether by fate, circumstance, or maybe a little bit of both, he happened to pick up a copy of Roger Siminoff's book. "I read that thing about seven times before I said, 'I can do that.' Then I built one."

That was around 1980. Audey sold the first Ratliff mandolin to a man from Hiltons, Va. By this time, he was also teaching mandolin and guitar at a music store on Market Street in downtown Kingsport called the Guitar Shop. (The same year, this writer joined the Boys In The Band and began teaching there, too.) One of his early students was a 14-year-old from Lynn Garden, Va. His name was Adam Steffey. Adam's grandfather had bought him an Arrow mandolin at a local flea market, and when he came to the Guitar Shop for his first lesson, Audey tried to tune it up for the young fellow. Adam remembers, "I think he had a tuning fork for A and as he started tuning it up to standard, the top caved in on it. It went from convex to concave, just kind of folded in. It didn't split or blow up or anything, but it just kind of flopped down with the bridge. So he said, 'Well, we got two options. We can either sell you a new mandolin out here off the wall, or I can try and fix this one.'" Ratliff put a sound post in the mandolin, which held well enough for Steffey to take lessons, but Adam soon decided he had to have a higher-quality instrument if he was going to progress, so he ordered what became Ratliff #2.

Adam recalls, "I liked the fact that I was going to get what I considered a real mandolin. This was what bluegrass people played, an F-style. I would call down there every couple of weeks asking him, 'Are you getting close?' I know I was pestering him to death. It was really cool, because he was close by and I knew that if something happened to it, he could repair it. Good repair people are hard to find. Audey had built it from a block of wood—everything but the hardware, he had put together. And I never had any trouble."

When he got #2, it was an unusual shade of green, because Audey was still learning how to mix colors to get the right sunburst effect. But Adam didn't care. It was an F-5 like his hero Dempsey Young played, and his playing began to take off under Audey's tutelage. Ratliff was a good teacher, always laid back, and his left-handed playing was actually benefi-



'Are you getting close?' I know I was pestering him to death.

cial for Steffey, who is himself left-handed but decided to switch to playing right-handed early on. "When I went in and took a lesson, his mandolin was facing *this* way, and I'm sitting there the other way, so it was easier for me to look and see what he was doing. It was like looking in a mirror.

"Just being around Audey, because of the way he is, he doesn't get excited about nothing. If you asked him to try something on the mandolin, he'd say, 'Well, you know, we can try it.' He was open to doing anything. I'm just fortunate that I got to know him early. If the first teacher had been someone else, I probably would have quit playing, probably would have lost interest immediately. But Audey, rather than saying, 'You can't play "Rawhide," you'll never be able to play it,' the way he handled it was by saying, 'Well, that's a pretty intricate song, let's start with something a little more simple, and then we'll work our way up to that.'"

Steffey eventually owned three Ratliff mandolins, #2, #17, and # 84. He feels that the mandolins helped him develop his style, in part because he cranked up the action so high on both #2 and #17 because someone had told him it would make the instrument louder. As a result, he learned to play cleaner and faster. "I think through setting that mandolin up that way and the mandolin being able to handle being cranked up that high with a thin top and all, it taught me separation of notes, because if it's that high, you're not going to be able to get as much sustain on a faster song, so you're thinking more dat, dat, dat, dat...separation like a really good banjo player would get, somebody like Terry Baucom, J.D. Crowe, or Scott Vestal."

When Audey eventually decided to switch to bass with the Boys In The Band in 1983, he asked Adam, who had progressed by leaps and bounds, to take his mandolin spot. A few years later, when he decided he wanted to leave the group altogether, he recruited Barry Bales as the bassist. Like Adam, Barry had met Audey at the Guitar Shop. As they played together in informal jams, Bales soon gained a valuable lesson. "Audey is one that tells you what is on his mind. I don't remember the exact situation, but early on I remember him basically telling me I didn't play in time. Of course, I had no idea that I wasn't the best in the world at 17 years of age. That was a real wake-up call for me. It opened my eyes and made me see there was a whole lot more to playing than just wiggling my fingers and cramming in a bunch of licks, especially as a bass player. 'Oh yeah...*time*...that's where it's at. What a concept.'"

Bales continues, "Audey moved from mandolin to bass and Adam Steffey joined the Boys In The Band on mandolin. As best I recall, Audey was getting busier and busier with building mandolins and instrument repair. As a result, he decided to leave the band. This was about 1987. I don't know if he really thought I could handle the job or if I was just a willing and warm body. Regardless, I jumped at the chance to play with a band that had the stellar musical reputation that the Boys In The Band did."

By this time, Audey was building top-flight mandolins that compared favorably with the best factory-made instruments, as well as those of other independent luthiers. But he had traveled a tough road to even get to this point. "When I had made five or maybe six and sold every one of them—a couple of them before they were built—I said, 'Okay, I'll quit work and build mandolins.' And then the next one that came off the line, I couldn't *give* it away. I was down to nothing. I had an old green Volkswagen, and I loaded it up and

went to Nashville, took that mandolin into George's (Gruhn's Guitars). When I walked through that door, George didn't know it, but he was going to buy that mandolin! He didn't know it, but I did, because I didn't have enough money to get back home. And he did buy it. So, I got back home, but that was pretty spooky."

Ratliff is very straightforward when asked what made him stick with it through the hard times. "Stupidity, I think. Really and truly, just plain old ignorance was probably the biggest thing—ignorance of what I was getting into. I just didn't have any idea. When I first started, I didn't have nothing but a bandsaw. I made my first set of chisels out of a set of screwdrivers. I didn't know how to use a chisel or anything, just learned through dogged determination. Let's face it, anybody with half a brain would have quit this business a long time ago and got a job."

To others, like Lee Olsen, Audey's perseverance is indicative of another character trait. "He's a practical man, who always wants to know how things work," Olsen says. "He's been through a car wreck that almost killed him, fires, a theft of his shop, and other troubles. He does not know the meaning of the word quit. All I can say is the man has sand."

Of course, there are advantages to learning things the hard way, on your own. For one thing, "Lessons stick," Audey says. And he has the scars to prove it. He once ripped off the end of his finger on a belt pulley (he was able to get it re-attached). But you also learn how to do things your way, and you develop a unique style in whatever you do. By the mid-'90s, Ratliff was gaining such a reputation with his mandolins that he moved to a new shop and hired employees. At one time, he ran an efficient factory-style shop, with seven employees and new responsibilities. Up until recently, he was making custom-built instruments for individual orders, but with a work force and a collection of standardized machinery, he began to pick up store clients.

Business was booming, but Audey eventually decided he didn't like the hands-off approach. "With seven employees, I had to be the secretary and quality-control guy and actually try to work and build a few mandolins when I could squeeze it in. And I just didn't like doing it that way." He no longer has the employees, but store clients make up ninety-five percent of his business now. He does very little custom work. "I let one or two come through just to break the monotony, something different, you know. But for the most part, I build what I build and it goes out to a music store and hangs on their wall and they do their business. So I kind of have this curious blend of luthiery and factory."

Audey will use wood from anywhere he can get it, including professional companies like Luthier's Mercantile, but the majority has come from the ample stores of locally-grown southern Appalachian timber. "Actually, I've been pretty fortunate to be able to use local woods—local maples and actually some local spruces that have grown within a couple of hundred miles from here. There's a guy down here in Rogersville who does a lot of hardwood flooring and he owns a kiln and all the machines and the sawmill. So if I get low, I go down there. He's usually got a stack that he's laid back."

To Ratliff, however, the key to making a good-sounding mandolin isn't necessarily just the wood. "Well, there are so many variables. The wood density, growth ring spacing, and just the job that you do...how well you take off that last little thickness that makes it work right or doesn't. The key is to make all the variables work together and it's almost impossible to tell before you tune it up and play the thing for six months whether you've got a good one

or not. I think good wood, carved right, makes a great-sounding mandolin, but the big key is to get everything just right so that it all comes together. Ninety-nine percent of it is making sure that the wood plates work together and the thing's carved and tuned the way it's supposed to be."

The result is not only one of the finest mandolins available, but, without a doubt, the best value on the market today. Mike Morgan of Morgan Music (a Ratliff dealer) in Missouri agrees. "A Ratliff mandolin features cosmetic appointments and a level of workmanship that is 'A' quality, but at a very reasonable price. It is truly a great mandolin value," says Mike. Morgan also has a theory as to why Ratliff mandolins cost less. It has to do with "how much 'from scratch' Audey does his building. One time, I asked where he got his inlays from. They were so good, I thought they were laser cut, and he replied, 'I cut them.' Another time, I asked who did the ornate engraving on his tailpieces and he said 'I do that.' Perhaps his level of 'vertical integration' is a reason that his mandolins are an outstanding value!"

According to Ratliff, though, part of the reason is his early experience. "Life was really hard at first, and I think I'm going to live my entire adult life and never get over that. I still have that young and hungry mentality." (But, get them while you can—Ratliff is overdue for a price hike since his mandolins haven't gone up for three or four years.)

Sometime in 2007, working by himself in his shop, Ratliff expects to make his one thousandth mandolin, a true feat in this age of Chinese imports and factory instruments. He plans to mark the occasion with a special edition instrument. "We're real excited about that and we're going to try to do a really nice presentation model, probably some special pearl, triple-ply bindings, the best woods I can lay my hands on. Although I had employees who helped me get here, not too many single luthiers actually make a thousand instruments. So we're going to try to do something a little special with it." Ratliff mandolins can be found in a number of stores across the country and on the web at <www.ratliffmandolins.com>.

Tim Stafford is a writer, session musician, songwriter, and music producer. He is guitarist and co-founder of the band Blue Highway and also serves on the IBMA's board of directors.