

The Mandolin Handbook

An Owner's Manual



Written & Illustrated by Bradley Laird

A Note to the Reader...



Throughout this book you will see two emblems at the start of each "how-to" procedure. The round emblem means that almost any mandolin player should reasonably be able to perform this operation. You should definitely learn to do these things. The octagon "stop sign" emblem is a warning to consider having this operation done by an experienced luthier. This doesn't mean that you cannot learn how to do these jobs, but you will need training, experience and specialized tools before you become proficient at them.

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MandoUniversity

5856 Foxfield Trail

Rex, Georgia 30273

(770) 507-2753

www.mandouniversity.com

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Foreword

I first met Brad in 1983, when he joined the bluegrass band of which I was a member. The ensuing twenty-three years have allowed me to be continually amazed at the depth of his talent and knowledge. An accomplished graphic artist and designer, multi-instrumentalist (mandolin, guitar, banjo, bass, percussion), songwriter, flintknapper, homebrewer and piano technician, he is truly a renaissance man.

He has now added the title of author to that impressive list. This book, the fourth in a series from Brad's MandoUniversity, is chock full of useful information. There is something here for everyone, from the neophyte player to the veteran with 20+ years under his or her belt. Even I, with 25 years as a luthier/repairman behind me, learned a few things.

After reading this book, you will have a much greater understanding of how your mandolin functions and how to keep it safe and secure for years of trouble free playing. The section on tuning is the most comprehensive treatment of this subject that I have seen. It, alone, is worth the price of admission.

So sit back, adjust your reading light, and enter the wonderful world of the mandolin. You won't be disappointed.

Enjoy.

Bob MacIsaac

Bob MacIsaac is a professional luthier with more than twenty-five of experience in repair, restoration and setup of fretted instruments. After beginning his training in the early 1980's at The Apprentice Shop in Springhill, Tennessee, Bob studied the craft under the guidance of master luthier Devon Bogue. Bob now operates his own fretted instrument repair shop and has for many years been an authorized Martin repairperson serving the needs of musicians in the Atlanta area.

Preface to the First Edition

I wish that I found a book like this when I first started playing mandolin back in the 1970's. In those days you had to just ask around or fool around until you figured out something. More recently, after repeatedly answering the same basic questions over and over with my students I decided that I would sit down and compile a basic owner's manual for the mandolin. What I envisioned as a small pamphlet grew into the book you are now holding. My wife Darlene often wondered if I was ever going to come upstairs during my extended writing, illustration, and editing sessions. Her patience and encouragement was vital to the completion of this project. Bob MacIsaac, who I have always trusted with my mandolin when it needs service, helped me a great deal by reading drafts of the book and offering his suggestions and clarifications. Thank you, Wild Bob. Thanks also to Orville Gibson, Lloyd Loar, Guy Hart and the nameless craftsmen who led to the creation of the mandolin as we know it in America. Thank you to Steve Carlson for making Flatiron F-5 Artist #85100109, my loyal, patient and sonorous friend! And of course, thanks to Bill Monroe for showing us the tremendous power and heart-touching soul that could be brought forth from a mandolin. We may have forgotten the mandolin entirely had he not chosen it as his means of instrumental communication. And thank you for buying this book.

B.L.

The Mandolin Handbook

by Bradley Laird

Introduction

By owning and playing a mandolin you develop a close relationship with your instrument. Learning to play the instrument is a challenge that is achieved in small steps over many years of study, practice and experience. Learning how to maintain and care for your mandolin can make the playing experience better for you and for your instrument.

Accomplished piano players rarely, if ever, know how to tune a single string on their own instrument. You could say that the strings of the piano are played by remote control since the player never touches the strings. Yes, the pianist learns the subtle touch of the keys and damper pedals and the sounds that are produced by their manipulation. But what happens inside the piano case remains a mystery to nearly every piano player.

The mandolin player, on the other hand, is in even more intimate contact with his or her instrument. You hold it in your hands, much like a mother holds a child. Fingertips touch the strings to produce sounds. The hand, holding a small pick, delivers the force to the strings without the mechanical advantage or the leverage of keys, hammers and the other workings of a piano action. Short of the tiny pick held between the fingertips, the mandolin player IS the action of a mandolin.

The workings of a piano are so elaborate and complex that one must call upon a seasoned, trained technician for adjustments to tuning and response. Not so with the mandolin player. Every mandolin player in time learns to tune and replace strings. Yes, you may turn to a professional luthier* for refretting, finish work, and repairs to your mandolin, but a great many of the tasks which keep a mandolin performing at its best can easily be understood and learned by the average player.

This book is not designed to turn you into a mandolin repairperson, but it will help you understand how the instrument functions and what you can do yourself to take better care of and enjoy the instrument more. You will also learn about certain intricate tasks that are better left to the most experienced experts. With a better understanding of these topics, you will be in a better position to find qualified experts, judge their work, and have a greater appreciation for the skills they possess.

You will learn how to make adjustments, select accessories, and many other things which will make you more conversant and knowledgeable about mandolins. You will learn how to keep your instrument protected from damage. You will learn ways to bring out the most from your instrument and it is my belief that a deeper understanding and appreciation of the instrument will produce better and more fulfilling music.

**A luthier is a fretted instrument builder or repairman and is based on the word "lute", an early fretted stringed instrument.*