

## Stan Jay President of Mandolin Brothers Ltd.

**IN STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK, A SHORT FERRY RIDE FROM MANHATTAN,** is an amazing musical instrument shop—sort of a toy store for players—called Mandolin Brothers Ltd. Upon entering, you immediately see hundreds of really cool guitars, mandolins, banjos, ukuleles, and more, hung from floor to ceiling—from old and valuable ones that would be at home in a museum to new and practical ones, more suited for a student. Not just a store, Mandolin Brothers acts as a dealer for instrument collectors *and* houses a world-renowned repair shop. No wonder their Web site welcomes you to the “center of the acoustic universe.” The president of the business, Stan Jay, had lots to say about how he got started and how he became one of the world’s leading fretted-instrument experts.



BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

### How did you learn so much about fretted instruments?

Mostly by being in the right place at the right time and getting to see every instrument imaginable. I co-founded Mandolin Brothers in 1971 with my first-decade partner, Hap Kuffner, on a night when we bought—from a homeowner in Linden, New Jersey—two unassembled tenor banjos, each of whose hundreds of components were housed in large paper bags!

### How did those unassembled banjos turn into a world-renowned business?

We hung a shingle that said “Mandolin Bros.” out of a second-floor window in a rough area of Staten Island and placed ads in bluegrass and tenor banjo magazines. People started phoning us and asking questions about vintage fretted instruments that they either owned or wanted to own. I became the research partner who developed a mailing list, documented the inventory, sent out newsletters, and followed up on inquiries. Soon, every vintage fretted instrument you could imagine came to us in multiples.

[In addition to selling instruments to be played] I always encouraged

customers to buy instruments as investments. Around 1974, we were interviewed by a magazine that ran a photo of some of our inventory. The caption read: “This year, instruments in this picture would cost you \$30,000.” In 2005, those pieces were worth \$425,000!

### What makes an instrument valuable?

It has to be from a vintage period to have merit beyond its value as an instrument to play. It will be worth more if it’s made using materials or production techniques that were no longer utilized after a particular time, or from a period when the work was supervised or executed by an individual of worldwide reputation. Naturally, all market value springs from supply and demand. Even an old instrument that was made in exceptionally small numbers will have little market value if there’s no demand for it.

### Are you musically trained?


I took three years of piano lessons as a kid; later, I learned to play guitar by ear in college at Penn State University and found that I could work out complete solo arrangements by listen-

ing to records by Chet Atkins, Merle Travis, and Dave Van Ronk. After that, I was a record producer and accompanying guitarist, and for six years I taught guitar at Staten Island Community College.

### Do you ever demonstrate instruments for customers?

Yes, all the time. In order to demonstrate that a musical instrument is worthy of consideration, it has to sound great when played in front of the potential owner. He or she has to experience the sound capabilities, the range of tone, and sensitivity. My being a pretty decent fingerpicker who can turn six strings into a portable orchestra has always been useful.

### What’s the most special instrument you’ve worked with?

We repaired Sir Paul McCartney’s Hofner Violin Bass—the one he used on most of the Beatles recordings and shows. This bass has become so closely aligned with his group that it is known as a “Hofner Beatle Bass!” In a subsequent interview in *Bass Player* magazine, Sir Paul said that we had “put it in tune for the first time in its life.” 

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