

Apitius J-Model Mandolins

Eight Strings That Really Swing

In contrast to its classical European roots, the mandolin has become best known in America for its appearance in bluegrass, country and string-band music. Over the years,

the mandolin has flirted with jazz, and a select few players have attained recognition in the genre, but it has never been widely accepted as a jazz instrument. However, a growing inter-est in jazz mandolin is broadening the instrument's horizons and helping it finally earn its jazz credentials. Taking notice of this trend, luthier Oliver Apitius has introduced his new J-Model mandolins, a departure from tra-ditional design built to meet the needs of the jazz mandolinist.

The mandolin has appeared in various forms throughout the years. Original European bowl-backed designs evolved into the American flat-backed and carved-top instruments pioneered by Orville Gibson and refined by Lloyd Loar. One of the main goals in flattening out the instrument was increased volume, so it could function in ensembles like the man-dolin orchestras popular in the early 20th century. Most mandolins built today still are based on Loar's original designs, and although they're used in numerous styles of music, they're still basically a "classical" instrument.

Since 1982, Apitius' main focus has been the bluegrass market, but he always has held a love for jazz. This started him on a mission to develop an instrument specifically designed for jazz. A chance meeting with mandolinist Don Stiernberg was the final spark of inspiration that put the wheels in motion. Stiernberg, who studied and performed with the legendary jazz mandolinist Jethro Burns, has become one of the world's most respected performers and teachers of jazz mandolin. Apitius drew inspiration from the classic archtops of the 1930s and '40s and utilized a guitar-shaped body instead of the typical A or F mandolin profiles.

Apitius offers two versions of his J-Model: The Club Jazz (\$6,200) and the Yorkville (\$8,200). Both instruments offer the same basic design and sound, but the Yorkville features highly figured woods and fancier appointments. The J-Models are tone bar-braced, and beside the shape, there are several significant variations that set it apart from tradition-al mandolins. The body chamber is 10 percent larger than a standard F5, and it has a larger vibrating surface. This provides the instru-ment with increased warmth and longer sustain, perfect for the jazz idiom. Apitius also uses a proprietary technique to carve his tops. "I call it Apitius Arching, and it compensates for the weakness caused by cutting out the f-holes," he said.

I had the opportunity to play an Apitius J-Model during a visit with Stiernberg, who owns a Yorkville. The instrument is striking in appearance and captures the art deco elegance of historic archtops. "There's an awful lot to love about this instrument," Stiernberg said. "I was first attracted to the beau-tiful appointments, but the real surprise was the increased amount of sustain and great balance across all strings com-pared to more traditional style mandolins." This makes the instrument extremely well-suited to playing chord melo-dy arrangements. However, it also performs wonderfully on single-note passages, rhythm work and even can throw out an impressive bluegrass lick or two. In addition, the J-Model can suggest the tonal characteristics of oval-hole mandolins, making it great for classical and Brazilian choro music.



The Apitius J-Model mandolins are impressive instruments that definitely have something to offer jazz mando-linists, or any player looking for a quality handmade axe. Although they might depart from tradition, the J-Models still retain the soul of a great mandolin. —*Keith B umann*
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