

# Wyatt Wilkie Northern Flyer Mandolin

## *Tightly Packed Tone*

Wyatt Wilkie has been building instruments for 16 years, and his handcrafted archtops have earned him a stellar reputation among enthusiasts of fine jazz guitars. Interestingly, Wilkie's evolution as a luthier began with mandolins, and his new Northern Flyer model is a stunning instrument as well as a true testament to his commitment to quality and tone.

According to Wilkie, his first instrument was actually a mandocello, the largest member of the mandolin family and a close cousin to the archtop guitar. Wilkie is a mandolin player, as is his father, who had performed in a band named Northern Flyer. "I thought that would be a cool name for an instrument," he said. Wilkie built mandolins for eight years before creating his first guitar, and his offerings now include a Northern Flyer 16-inch archtop guitar model as well.

As a mandolin maker, Wilkie has always taken his own path, choosing not to copy the Gibson Lloyd Loar designs as is typical with so many luthiers. Mandolin construction has a lot in common with archtop guitars, and both are evolved from violin-building techniques. In comparing guitars to mandolins, Wilkie pointed out that mandolins are quite a bit more challenging due to their smaller size and the fact that the slightest variation will have a profound effect on tone. Wyatt also pointed out that his experience with mandolins has definitely benefited his guitar building, and vice versa.

Over the years Wilkie has built 60 to 70 mandolins, and the Northern Flyer model was originally designed while he was apprenticing with luthier Bob Benedetto, whom he cites as his biggest influence. Wilkie currently builds six or seven mandolins per year, which sell for \$5,000 each with an average wait time of six months. As with his guitars, Wilkie always strives for the best acoustic tone first and foremost, as he feels this is the most critical factor for any player in any genre. "Bluegrass and jazz musician actually want similar things," he said. "It is just harder to get those out of mandolins." As with Wilkie's guitars, the Northern Flyer mandolin is entirely hand-carved with no CNC equipment used, and each mandolin takes about one month of labor to complete. According to Wilkie, hand-building allows for a level of intimacy that is not possible with machined instruments.

The Northern Flyer's styling is beautiful and can be described as simple elegance. The body utilizes the teardrop shape commonly referred to as an "A" model design. Wilkie's philosophy is to eliminate all but the essentials and keep it simple. The workmanship is flawless on the mandolin, which is finished in a clear, hand-applied French polish, allowing the beauty of the highly figured tonewoods to show through. The top is solid red spruce and the back, sides and neck are carved from solid big-leaf maple. The binding is maple and really adds that extra touch of class, as does the custom-designed suspended pickguard made from satinwood burl. The tailpiece is custom made by Bill James and fits the overall look of the instrument perfectly. The fingerboard is ebony with an ebony nut, and the instrument features Waverly tuners.

Playing the Northern Flyer is an absolute joy in terms of its tone and feel. This mandolin has plenty of power when you need it but also responds well to a subtle touch, producing beautiful, complex tones with plenty of sustain and clarity. The Northern Flyer's f-hole design is unique and somewhat wider than the standard violin-shaped holes. According to Wilkie, this has evolved from years of experimentation and produces the best tone.

What I really like about this mandolin is its versatility. It can have the mellow open sound of an oval-hole instrument, or deliver the focused punch of an "F" model, resulting in an instrument that's perfect for a wide variety of styles. The intonation is great all the way up the neck and it plays like a dream.



Considering the great guitars he builds, it should come as no surprise that Wilkie also makes a terrific mandolin. The Northern Flyer is a world-class instrument in every detail and can proudly stand alongside mandolins costing four times the price.

—Keith Baumann

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