



Darol Anger

Hey Kid! Wanna Buy a Cheap Mandolin?

What can you buy for \$299? If you crave vintage Gibson electrics, it could net you a couple of authentic hat knobs or a replacement Kluson tuner (yes, that's singular!). • If your luthier owes you a couple of favors, you might get a complete mandolin setup or guitar re-fret for \$299. But if you are looking for a complete, playable, decently made mandolin for \$299, you might as well just petition the Lord with prayer. At least until now.

Eastwood, which has developed a solid reputation for producing cool retro-looking electric guitars based on designs from companies like Airline, Mosrite, and Supro, now has an electric mandolin. Called the Mandocaster, it is *not*, as the name might imply, a copy of any Fender electric mandolin. All the Fender electrics were four-string designs. This electric mandolin is twice as good because it has *eight strings!* Now if you are the kind of person who just can't cope with eight strings, you could remove four, but real men (and women) play eight-string mandolins.

Made in China, but set up in the U.S.A., the Mandocaster features a bound top and back, solid alder body finished in antique sunburst or black, a maple bolt-on neck, rosewood fingerboard with dot markers, two single-coil pickups, a three-way selector switch, a fully adjustable bridge, Gotoh nickel-chrome tuners, and treble and volume controls. The body shape closely resembles a Fender Telecaster, with a single cutaway and flat top and back. But instead of a Fender headstock shape, it uses a modern snakehead design similar to a Collings A-style mando, with four tuners on either side.

The Mandocaster comes set up with fairly light strings – .10 for the high Es and .34 for the low Gs. Some early adopters felt the need to put on more “manly” strings (.11 Es and .41 Gs) but doing so necessitates a new set up, requiring not only bridge modifications, but also removing and re-shimming the neck. My advice to any guitarist who wants to try a Mandocaster is, “Lighten up!” If you merely ease off on your right hand, you won't need to make any string changes. If you want to be louder all you have to do is turn up the volume on your amp. Simple, yes?

My sample Mandocaster has been living on a guitar stand, where it has collected a healthy dose of lint and cat hair in the last two months. I call that *mojo*.

Surprising Sound

Being a typical vintage-instrument snob, I wasn't expecting much from the Mandocaster. I was merely hoping the neck wouldn't give me splinters and the strings wouldn't give me lockjaw. If only I'd known how well-built and carefully finished the Mandocaster is, I could have forgone that tetanus booster! Not only is the high-gloss finish on the body first-rate, but the satin finish on the neck makes it easy to slide through double stops. The neck shape is beefier than most acoustic mandolins, but not so big as to be awkward or difficult to play. The electronics worked flawlessly, with no shorts or buzzes. Because the tone control range is much narrower than you'll find on most electric guitars, you have to

listen very carefully to tell if it's doing much. It does change the tone slightly, but not as much as switching pickups. Surprisingly, the Mandocaster has a fairly dark native timbre, even on the bridge pickup. Its overall tonality is more like the neck pickup on the Kevin Schwab five-string electric mandolin I used to own. If you want a jangly or trebly sound, you're going to have to kick up the treble response on your amp or signal processor to maximum stun.

The Mandocaster has one particularly pleasant sonic attribute – sustain. Even when it isn't plugged into an amp, the instrument produces remarkably little decay after a pick strike. First-position chords turn into power drones. It's not hard to envision a hardcore rock player using this mandolin for rhythm parts onstage. Country players will find the Mandocaster's tone very different from any acoustic mandolin with a pickup. Obviously, the Mandocaster is far less prone to feedback issues, but it also has a uniquely electric signature that blends better with other electric instruments.

Inexpensive Asian-made instruments usually have playability issues. But the Mandocaster

avoids this pit-

The Eastwood Mandocaster

fall; the factory setup is very close to ideal. Sure, if you have a light touch, you could lower it a bit at the nut, but not much. I lowered the action at the bridge as low as it would go, which wound up being nearly perfect with the original strings. If I had wanted to further lower the bridge height,

I'd have had to disassemble the bridge and plane down the metal crossbar (not an easy job). I don't recommend heavier strings, since the main reason for using them – further

sustain – isn't necessary.

Buy Yourself a Toy

You should first be reading this in early January, which is the perfect time to buy yourself a post-holiday toy. You were good; you didn't blow all your gift money on a '59 Les Paul, so you deserve a treat for exercising superb self-control. The Eastwood Mandocaster would make an excellent addition to your instrumental arsenal. It's inexpensive, well-made, sounds good, and is easy to play. Give yourself a couple months on a mandolin and you just might not go back to guitar. Don't say I didn't warn you!

Prayers, Plus!

Last Saturday night, I went to church for the first time in a while. No, it wasn't for an evening service, but for a concert. Churches, especially older ones, are often ideal for purely acoustic concerts because they were made for unamplified sermons and such. This particular church is about three miles from my home, up a winding mountain road that was made more interesting by the previous day's snowfall. The church was built in 1908, which by New England or European standards isn't very old, but in Colorado, that's ancient. It's listed in the National Registry because it's one of the only original buildings remaining from the Salina mining boom of the late 1800s.

The concert featured fiddler and multi-instrumentalist Darol Anger, who has played with acoustic jazz pioneers David Grisman, Tony Rice, Bela Fleck, and Mike Marshall. Anger is known for his free-improvisational style and unique ability to combine traditional techniques and tunes with modern jazz sensibilities. Colorado musicians, including Ross Martin on guitar, K.C. Groves on vocals, guitar, and mandolin, and several others, joined him. The atmosphere was very informal, with only two floodlights for stage effects and a potluck desert intermission. The whole affair felt very much like a house concert.

Although this little church has fine acoustics, older churches, including this one, weren't designed to give everyone good sight lines to the front of the room. After all who needed to look at the pastor? You only needed to hear and have enough light to read your hymnal. Since I wanted to be able to take some photographs with my new Pentax K-10, I had to do a bit of wrangling to locate myself on the aisle so I could lean to my right for a clear sight line. This can get old after the first 15 minutes.

The concert was just shy of a religious experience. Anger can play anything, and during the concert he went from Tin Pan Alley classics to Appalachian fiddle tunes to bluegrass ballads, all with his own special signature. His musical twists and turns make Anger a challenging bandleader to follow, but Martin contributed his share of interesting chord inversions and wonderful leads on his Collings dreadnought. New Yorkers may want to keep his name in mind, as he's moving to try his hand in the Big Apple. He's a fine player, worth going across town to hear.

After two-plus hours of innovative music I was ready to brave the cold for the twisty ride home. While Colorado may be part wilderness with bears, mountain lions, and more deer than any human needs to see in a lifetime, it does occasionally offer cultural perks that equal any megalopolis.

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