

# The Mandolin Man:

## Don Julin Pulls All the Right Strings

By Robert Downes

In this great age of the guitar and the electronic keyboard, chances are the humble mandolin doesn't spring to mind when most people think of cutting edge music. But then, perhaps they haven't heard the mandolin in the knowing hands of Don Julin, who's revitalized the instrument through a series of widely acclaimed CDs and performances in Northern Michigan over the past two years - acclaim which is spreading throughout the Midwest and the world at large as Julin brings his jazz, funk and gypsy-flavored string music to new ears. It's always been the mandolin for Julin. While other kids were banging on drums, guitar and bass in high school garage bands, Julin went down the road not taken to pursue the heart-plucking tones of an instrument which is a cross between a guitar and a violin.

A veteran of Northern Michigan's music scene and the leader of numerous bands, including the Microtones and Big Swifty, Julin hit the right chord last year with the release of his CD, "Bright Lites, Big Insects," an instrumental effort recorded with bassist Glenn Wolff and accordionist Tom Bourcier. He followed up that highly-acclaimed CD with the release of "Mr. Natural" this summer, a jazz/blues-flavored disc recorded with guitarist Ron Getz, Wolff, pianist Dave Hay and drummer Dave Wall.

But, why the mandolin?

"I was 19 when I started playing mandolin," Julin recalls. "I started listening to bluegrass music in the late '70s and liked a lot of groups like the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. I plunked around on banjo and guitar for awhile but wasn't getting anywhere. Then I got interested in jazz a couple of years after I started playing and the mandolin made the most sense to me."

Julin notes that the plucky mandolin combines the best properties of other stringed instruments. "If you combine a violin and a guitar, you get a mandolin. The mandolin uses a pick rather than a bow, but the notes are exactly the same. Plus, the mandolin has a real cool history. It was invented in Italy in the 1700s and started out as a classical instrument, used in the works of composers such as Beethoven and Vivaldi."

Mandolins were popular as orchestral instruments up until the early 1900s when they began to disappear. "The mandolin faded during the Big Band era because the instrument wasn't loud enough," Julin says. "It was reintroduced to Americans in the bluegrass world. Today, something like 95 percent of mandolin players perform bluegrass."

But that's changing: on Julin's "Mr. Natural" CD, for instance, he uses the mandolin as a jazz instrument, with a touch of gypsy stylings. And Julin has been making headlines in the national music press for his role in jazzing up the mainstay instrument of bluegrass.

Julin, whose day job is manufacturing CDs for grassroots musicians at his Cloning Lab company, says his experimentation

with the mandolin comes from his love of "many, many different types of music."

Although he appreciates the mass communication-inspired trend to craft worldbeat sounds from sources as diverse as Africa, Brazil and Eastern Europe, he's especially enamored with the tradition of American sounds. His own music can sound Disneyesque at times, or laid back in the tradition of the Deep South, or flavored with a fluttering jazz.

"I think a lot of my songwriting springs from sounds I've heard. The Disney influences would be from cartoon music I heard growing up - it's great music that's stuck with me, like from the old Hanna-Barbera cartoons. As goofy as they were, they had pretty amazing music."

Julin also likes to keep listeners guessing by showing up in a wide range of musical incarnations. Old fans recall his '80s days when he played reggae guitar with the Microtones. He played contemporary string music with the multi-instrumental Big Swifty band in the early '90s, and is currently performing with an ever-changing cadre of musicians interested in exploring different styles.

"I like to move around because it's difficult for musicians to last in this small of a market," he says. "You can't play the same place every Friday night and expect people to keep coming to see you. By working with different people, I can reach totally different crowds."

At this summer's Blissfest, for instance, he performed with the trio Bourcier, Julin & Wolff and also joined songwriter Claudia Schmidt for her set. In the spring of 2000, Don was in Italy, where he played in and around Florence.

Currently, he's performing on electric mandolin each Tuesday at GT's with a jazz fusion band.

Other projects include a planned release of a compilation album of songs from past bands such as Big Swifty and the Microtones. "It will be all original music, rerecorded in more of an acoustic jazz fashion." He's also working on an album of unreleased songs called "Live at St. Andrews," referring to a church in the region, rather than the Detroit rock hall.

Julin, who has a wife, Jennifer, and 13-year-old daughter, Zara, isn't interested in trying to land a major recording contract or hitting the road for extended tours. He notes that mandolin music isn't likely to be profit bait for the big CD companies anytime soon. Besides, he's had better luck marketing his own music via good reviews in specialty music publications, or through his own website.

"If I can create a cult following of people who enjoy mandolin music and tap into that, then I'll be doing just fine."

