

GUITARS, CARS, WATCHES,
WINE & THE DELUXE LIFE

GUITAR

A F I C I O N A D O

MAGAZINE

JERRY GARCIA'S GUITARS

Tales of the
WOLF, ROSEBUD,
TIGER *and* MORE



GRAM PARSONS

THE LIFE AND
TIMES OF A
COUNTRY-ROCK
FIREBRAND

GIPSY KINGS

TONINO BALIARDO'S
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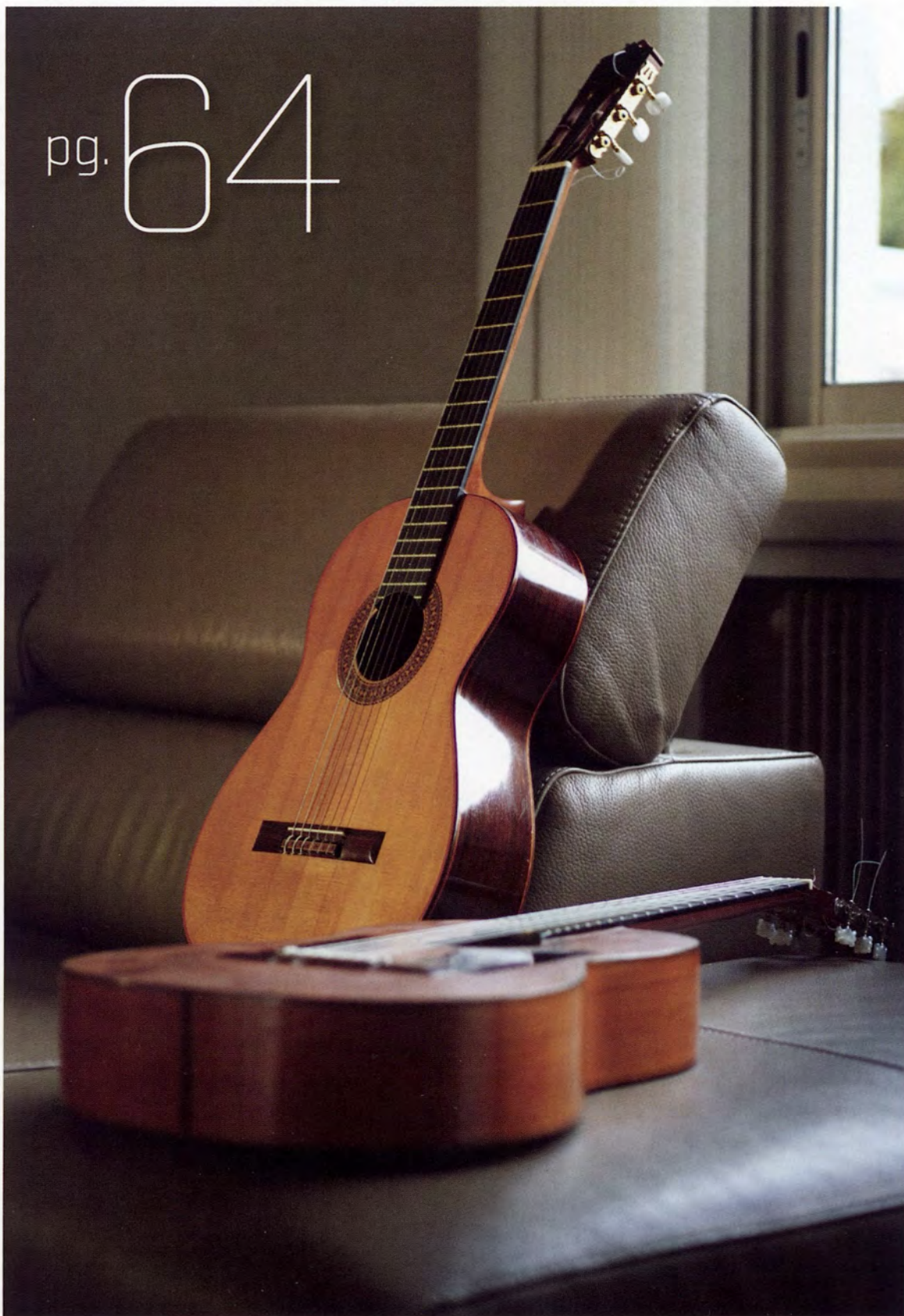
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THE MANDOLIN BROS.

Since 1971, Stan Jay has bought, sold, and restored many of the world's finest vintage stringed instruments from his celebrated store in Staten Island.

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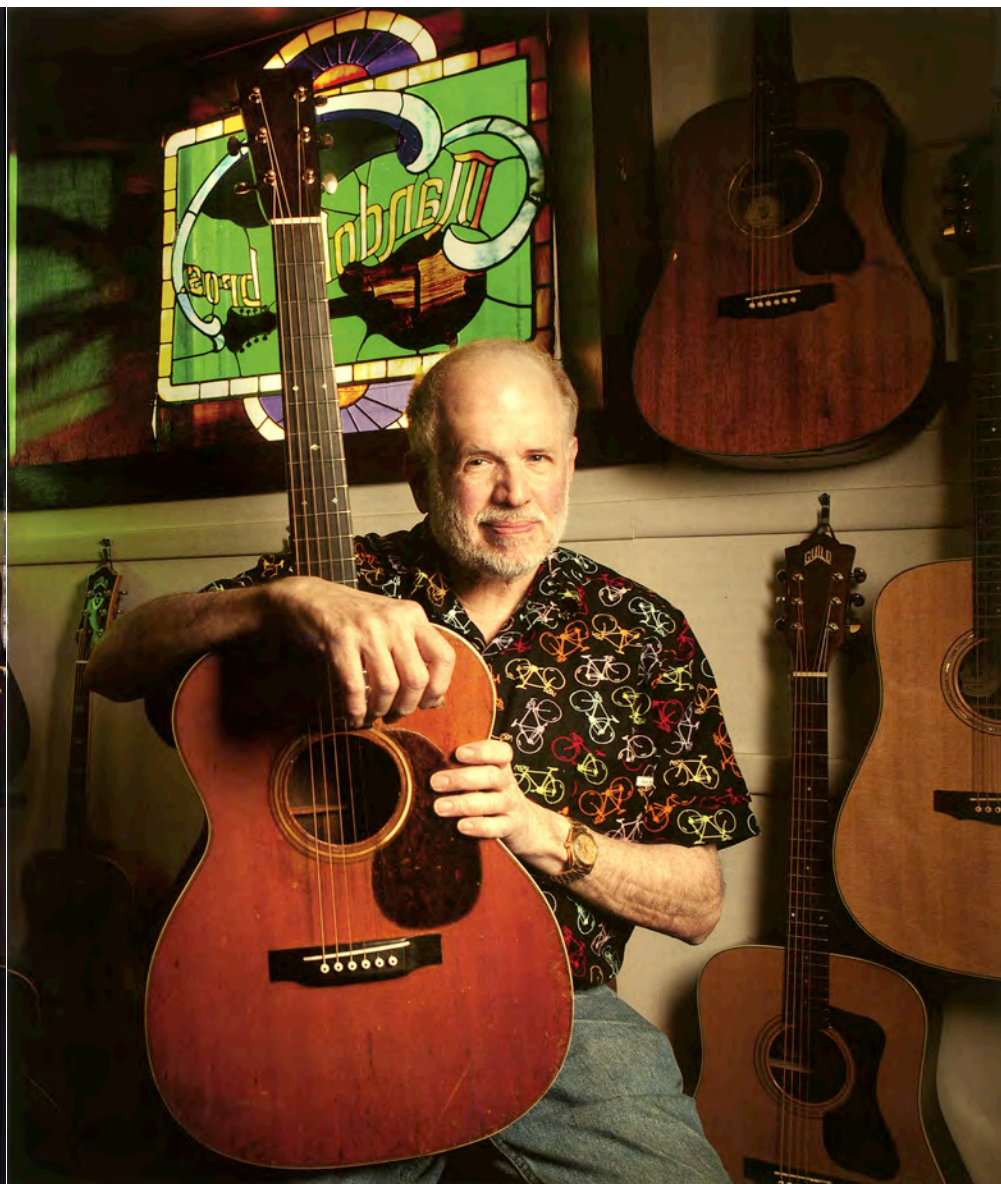


Since 1971, Stan Jay of Mandolin Bros. in Staten Island has bought, sold, and restored many of the world's finest vintage stringed instruments.

LORD OF THE STRINGS

By
HAROLD STEINBLATT

Photos by
JUSTIN BORUCKI





Since 1971, Stan Jay of Mandolin Bros. in Staten Island has bought, sold, and restored many of the world's finest vintage stringed instruments.

L O R D

O F

T H E

S T R I N G S

By
HAROLD STEINBLATT

Photos by
JUSTIN BORUCKI







New York City boasts more than its fair share of vintage guitar dealers, most of which are located in Manhattan or Brooklyn. But for the past 42 years, Mandolin Brothers, one of the city's most famous, esteemed, and oldest vintage instrument stores, has operated in the much quieter and off-the-beaten-path environs of Staten Island. Although the store is located two and a half miles from the nearest public transportation link with Manhattan—the Staten Island Ferry—countless musicians have made the pilgrimage there to see and play a collection of instruments that the *New York Times* has compared to a museum.

The shop's plain, beige exterior, with its small windows and simple "Mandolin Bros." signage, offers little hint of the treasures waiting beyond the doorway. Seemingly every inch of the interior is covered with every conceivable variety of stringed instrument: flattop, archtop, and electric guitars, mandolins, banjos, ukuleles, and more. The "stuff that dreams are made of" is found in a chamber that shop owner and founder Stan Jay calls "The High-End Room," which is filled with stunning vintage D'Angelico, Martin, and Gibson guitars as well as impressive new models from Bourgeois, Huss & Dalton, MacPherson, Santa Cruz, and others. Discriminating ears, eyes, and even sensitive noses are drawn to this magical place, where the finest abalone inlay work and the unmistakable grain patterns of Brazilian rosewood vie for one's attention.

"People regularly come in to sell and buy guitars," says Jay, who opened the shop's doors way back in December 1971. "I never

know what I'll see on any given day. Pretty much every guitar one could imagine has passed through the store."

Now in his late Sixties, Jay is solely responsible for the store's long-term survival. (His founding business partner, Hap Kuffner, left in 1982 to work for Steinberger Sound and formed Kuffner International.) The business opened in a second-floor walkup in Staten Island and soon established a reputation as a go-to place for people searching for vintage stringed instruments. In 1976, Mandolin Bros. moved into its current space and began selling new instruments in addition to its vintage wares.

Today, the store carries a wide variety of acoustic guitars that range from industry leaders like Martin, Guild, and Taylor to handmade instruments by individual luthiers like Kent Chasson, Jamie Kinscherff, and Rod Schenk. Mandolin Bros. also sells an impressive variety of electric guitars—"good quality, American models," Jay says, "including Fenders, Rickens, and Gretsches. We also sell a lot of used Epiphones and Gretsches."

Not surprisingly, Jay is himself a guitarist. Back in 1965, he was a fingerpicking folkie who bought and traded old instruments as a hobby.

He was heading off to spend the summer at the University of California, Berkeley, when he made a purchase that would determine the course of his life.

"I was in Irvington, New Jersey," he recalls. "I stopped by a music store and bought a Thirties Stella mandolin for 10 dollars."

Arriving in Berkeley, he posted a note on a school bulletin board "to announce that I was interested in exchanging the Stella for the use of a car for the summer. A guy called, showed up with a used Saab, and we made the deal. That moment lit a light bulb over my head. I realized that I paid only 10 bucks for a mandolin, and it got me a car! I thought, I could do this for a living!"

At the time, Jay was making his living lecturing on the arts at a local university back home on the East Coast. He spent the next six years engaging in his vintage instrument buying-and-trading hobby before finally opening Mandolin Bros. on December 19, 1971. By early 1973, the store was already known to musicians as a go-to place to buy vintage guitars, mandolins, banjos, and anything else that could be picked, strummed, frailed, or bottlenecked.





Rocco Monterosso,
head of Mandolin Bros.'
repair department,
at work on a Martin neck

In the more than four decades of its existence, the store has sold to—and sometimes repaired instruments for—a hall of fame roster of rock, country, jazz, and singer-songwriter stars, including Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan, John McLaughlin, and Paul Simon, as well as a host of other prominent folk, blues, and bluegrass performers.

"Stephen Stills was a customer way back in 1973," Jay says. "He loved anything that was fancy, Brazilian, and old. Whenever he came by, he bought a bunch of stuff. The purchase that really put us on the broader map came in 1975, when Joni Mitchell bought a circa-1915 Gibson K-4 mandocello and a 1913 Martin 000-28 herringbone acoustic." Mitchell enshrined the experience in "Song for Sharon," a song from her 1976 album, *Hejira*, that begins, "I went to Staten Island, Sharon/to buy myself a mandolin."

But Mandolin Bros.' reputation was not established by its famous clientele alone. Thanks to the lower real estate costs of its Staten Island location, the shop resides in

a far larger building than any independent vintage or new guitar store could afford in the stratospheric rent jungle that is Manhattan. Customers range from amateur players looking to buy their first quality instrument to serious collectors who visit on a regular basis in search of new treasures. All are allowed, and even encouraged, to give the guitars leisurely test runs, without being harassed by the grim-faced, hurry-up-and-finish salesmen too often encountered at other music stores.

Not everyone buys, of course, and a few customers perceive Mandolin Bros. as a free museum where they can reach out trembling hands to play and, unfortunately, occasionally mar the artwork. But in the long run, says Jay, the relaxed vibe makes good economic sense. "Customers who feel relaxed here are more likely to eventually buy here," he says.

Mandolin Bros. has also earned acclaim for its highly regarded repair and restoration department, which over the years has been headed by a succession of top-flight craftsmen. Past employees have included world-renowned

luthier John Monteleone, repairman to the stars (and *GA* columnist) Flip Scipio, and restoration expert Leroy Aiello, who set out on his own in 2010 after working for Mandolin Bros. for 14 years. The shop's current head of repair is Rocco Monterosso, who was trained by Aiello and has worked in Mandolin Bros.' repair/restoration department for 17 years.

"John Monteleone joined us in the spring of 1973," Jay says. "When he arrived for the interview, he brought along a J-200-style guitar he'd built himself. The workmanship was as good as any I'd ever seen on a guitar. I said two words: 'You're hired.' He did brilliant things here, and he's never stopped doing brilliant things.

"Our current head of repair, Rocco Monterosso is considered one of the most competent and qualified guitar repair experts in the United States. After picking up their repairs, customers constantly tell us that Rocco's work is outstanding and far exceeded their expectations. Having someone as skilled and talented as Rocco in our repair department



is truly a valuable asset, and it sets us apart from most other vintage instrument dealers."

Jay acknowledges that many of the most desirable vintage guitar models are harder to find these days. During the Eighties and Nineties, Mandolin Bros. sold a staggering variety of rare and historically important instruments. They include a one-of-a-kind 1957 D'Angelico "teardrop" New Yorker, purchased by the late Scott Chinery, that became the inspiration for similar teardrop archtops made by James D'Aquisto and John Monteleone and was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Guitar Heroes* exhibit in 2011. Other notable past sales include Elvis Presley's 1958 Gibson LG-1, a late-Fifties Gretsch White Penguin, a 1941 Martin D-45, and a pre-war National Style O ukulele that was sold to George Harrison.

"In the early Sixties and before then, old guitars, even the great ones, were simply called

'used,' says Jay. "You could often find them at pawn shops and flea markets. But back then, and all the way to the present, we never bought anything except from an original owner or his descendants. In the past, acquiring inventory was as easy as fishing in a stocked trout stream—and we were pretty much the only ones around with a pole. Thirty, 40 years ago, you could knock on any door in a small town and hear, 'Yes, I do have something, and so does my neighbor.' That doesn't happen anymore."

Even so, Mandolin Bros. has continued to survive and thrive, through the economic crash of 2008 and the present lean years, thanks to the store's "very strict rules of purchase," as Jay puts it. He adds, "We expend a lot of care and discrimination when selecting our inventory." On any given day, visitors to Mandolin Bros. will find incredible examples from the acoustic and electric golden eras of American stringed

instruments on display. During one recent afternoon trek, we spotted a 1903 Martin 00-42, a 1963 Fiesta Red Fender Stratocaster, and a 1909 Gibson Style U harp guitar. The most impressive (and expensive) instrument by far was a 1924 Gibson F-5 "Master Model" mandolin featuring a label signed by Lloyd Loar and dated March 31, 1924.

But perhaps the most important reason for the longevity of Mandolin Bros. is the way it conducts business. "We tell the truth all the time," Jay explains. "If someone brings us a Forties D-28 but they have no idea what it is, we will tell them that it's a Forties D-28 and what it's really worth. Our word-of-mouth reputation began with our very first sale, and it continues through our most recent sale. You can't survive very long in the vintage instrument business if your customers can't trust you, so we work very hard to maintain that trust." **GA**

