

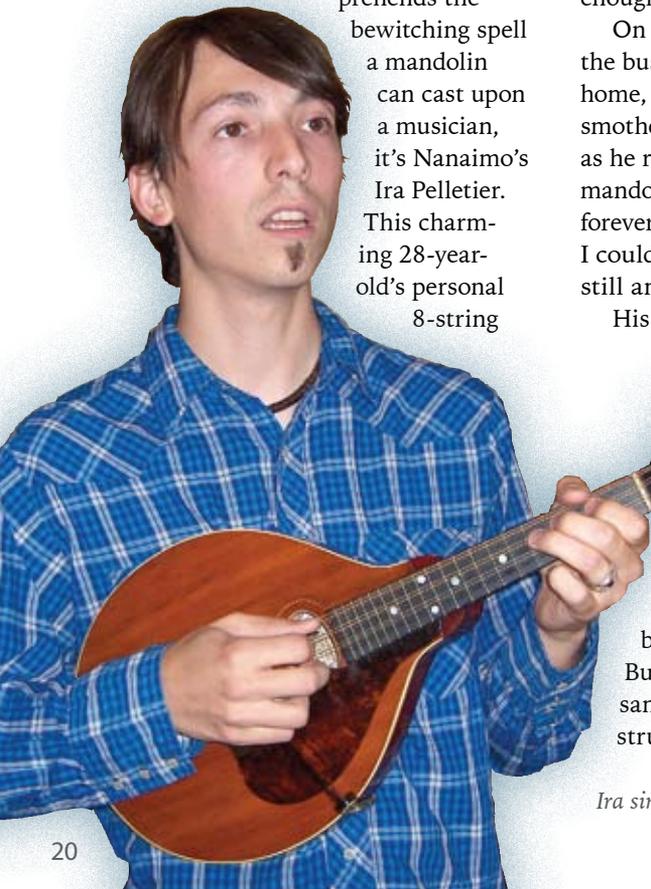
IRA PELLETIER

THE MANDOLIN MAN

What Goes On?
by David Morrison

Around 1987, R.E.M. guitar hero Peter Buck became rather bored with his instrument, so decided to teach himself some new moves. No big deal in itself, but after picking up a mandolin for the first time, putting it down presented a problem. It's claimed he became utterly obsessed with it, playing nothing else for over a year as he seriously contemplated abandoning guitars altogether. And let's not forget that this *idée fixe* led straight to the most recognizable mandolin riff in contemporary rock: *Losing My Religion*.

If there's someone that fully comprehends the bewitching spell a mandolin can cast upon a musician, it's Nanaimo's Ira Pelletier. This charming 28-year-old's personal 8-string



The electric mandolin made by Ira's brother Arlen Pelletier.

awakening came following the repair of a broken mandolin that belonged to his father. When initially tinkering with the rebuilt instrument, he realized soon enough there was no going back.

On a peaceful Sunday morning in the busy living room of his farmhouse home, Pelletier's two indefatigable dogs smothered us with slobbering affection as he recalled the moment the rescued mandolin changed his musical outlook forever. "It was just... all of a sudden, I could play," he told me, seemingly still amazed at the event.

His early musical education took in piano, which he hated, before moving onto guitar and bass, which he didn't. Even so, the mandolin swept them all aside: "I don't think I've touched the bass since," he continued, echoing Buck's emotional response to the same instrument. "I felt like I was struggling so hard up to the point I

played this mandolin."

Since that day, Pelletier has developed into a self-confessed "mandolin freak," so I asked him what it is about this instrument that so firmly gripped him then and continues to hold him entranced. "I don't know if it's because it was tuning fifths, or because it was smaller, or just because I like the sound of it, but it became all encompassing. And you know... the history of them... and they're beautiful."

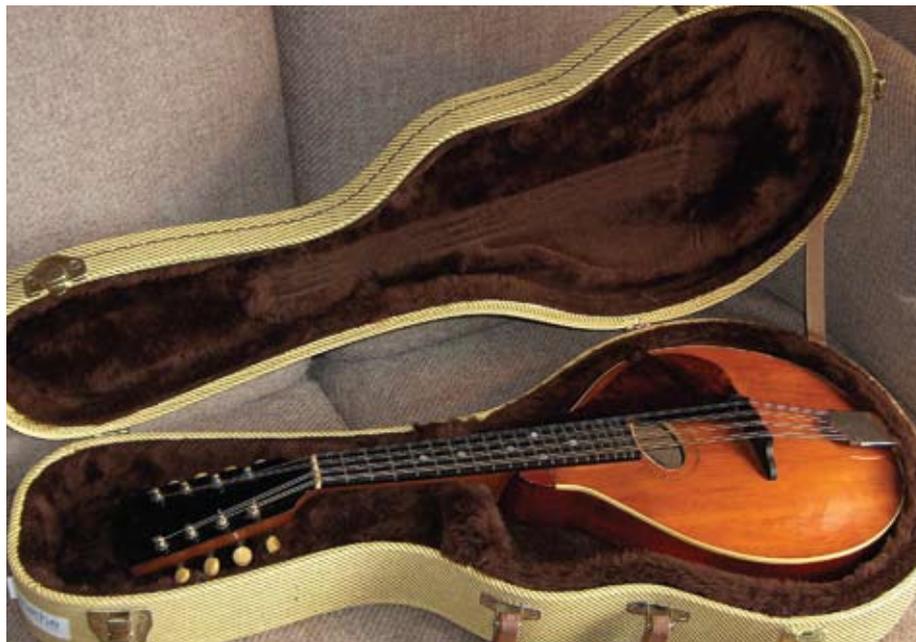
When Pelletier opened its case to display his favourite of an expanding collection, I found it impossible to dispute that a vintage mandolin is indeed an elegant and sexy piece of kit. A 1914 Gibson A he bought from Canadian roots legend Ken Hamm, it's gorgeous. Pelletier scooped it up and began coaxing out a tune. Within seconds, his head tilted to one side and his eyes closed in rapture as the intensity of his relationship with the antique instrument became immediately evident. Phew.

Anyone who has seen Pelletier play will know this and, fortunately, he offers ample opportunities to witness his skills. It was in fact his hard-gigging

Ira singing and playing the 1914 Gibson A.



Ira and yet another of his mandolins.



Ira's favourite mandolin: the 1914 Gibson A originally owned by Ken Hamm.

work ethic that first drew me to Pelletier, his name appearing with marked regularity in local live music listings. Yet the first time I saw him perform – topping the bill of a Shack Records night at The Mermaid's Mug - he didn't play his beloved mandolin, but acoustic guitar. Delivering a clutch of irresistible originals, he was delightful, effortlessly winning over the audience with his chilled demeanour and engaging style.

Shows where he returns to the guitar are rare, but across numerous diverse projects, Pelletier is never idle. He plays in The Cherry Bridge String Trio/ Quartet (depending on who's available), bar band 8th & Main, acoustically with

guitarist Edward Lee and also with "bad boy" bluegrass combo Vincent 45. As a bluegrass nut, the latter is his preferred avenue of musical expression: "That's where my heart is," he revealed.

Determined to experiment with his instrument, Pelletier takes every opportunity to progress his technique. Considering the likes of prog-metal outfits Mastodon and Tool as valid in influence as his mandolin idol David Grisman, it's no wonder he looks to "take the mandolin into uncharted territories." This is reflected in the material of the rock-jazz-metal-folk-whatever fusion band Pelletier formed with the brilliant Lee, in which he uses an extraordinary elec-

tric mandolin built by his brother Arlen. Pelletier is exploring its capabilities by upending expectation and tradition: "I've been using effects pedals and stuff like that to go out in a psychedelic jam band kind of area," he explained.

Who knows, with his passion for the mandolin and bold approach to its sonic possibilities, the eminently likeable Pelletier may one day become as widely associated with the instrument as Grisman. I'll sure be keeping a keen eye on his development ... if I can keep up with his activities! ■

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