



# Nugget

The sweetness of bluegrass sound is built with the soul of a mandolin, and the best mandolins in the world are built in the shop of Antrim's Mike Kemnitzer.

BY PATTY LANOUE STEARNS

**Mike Kemnitzer** sits quietly in his cramped shop in Central Lake, near Charlevoix, holding a nearly finished mandolin top to his ear with his left thumb and middle finger. He taps the dinner-plate-sized piece of spruce lightly with the pad of his right index finger. With both hands, he then flexes the amber-colored wood in different directions. Next, he picks up a flat, thin steel scraper, and with a low-angle light illuminating the top, makes gentle swipes across the spruce that remove minuscule amounts of wood from chosen areas. He repeats the tapping, then the flexing, and scrapes some more.

The scent of spruce, maple and lemon oil float in the tool-strewn room, where the usual hum from air conditioner, dehumidifier and radio has been silenced for these crucial adjustments.

Kemnitzer taps again, and listens. The wood rings, pure and clear. The pitch is well-defined. After days of sculpting, pondering and manipulating, he has reached that magical pins-and-needles moment when the tone and flexibility are right. When a mere piece of contoured spruce becomes the top for a Nugget mandolin, one of the most revered instruments among mandolin players around the world.

With a mystical blend of skill and wood intuition, Kemnitzer has drawn many mandolin devotees to his door—you might say too many. He stopped taking orders in February 1997 because he couldn't keep up with the demand and hopes that by the end of 2002 he will finally catch up. If and when that happens, he will be able to charge what his used mandolins are going for on the open market—anywhere between \$6,000 and \$15,000.

Over the last 28 years, Kemnitzer—a soft-spoken 51-year-old known as Nugget himself—has made roughly 250 Nugget instruments. The mandolins, mandolas, octave mandolins and mandocellos come in three styles and in standard and deluxe models. The deluxe backs

**Mike Kemnitzer** hunkers down at his woodcarver's bench in the epicenter of Nugget headquarters, where some of the planet's finest mandolins are made.

are fashioned from brilliantly flamed curly maple. He carves the tops from the finest aged spruce. The fingerboards and overlays feature choice aged black ebony. Simulated ivory binding is used throughout and rims the front, back and

BRIAN CONFER/INSET, JIM RANTALA



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—TIM O'BRIEN, NASHVILLE SINGER-SONGWRITER

### Some Nugget owners

- **David Grisman**, dubbed “the Paganini of the mandolin” by *The New York Times*, praises Kemnitzer’s creations: “Nugget does a fine job,” he says.
- **Chris Hillman**, formerly of the Byrds and now with the Desert Rose Band, owns one. As does Butch Baldassari, internationally known mandolinist and teacher. Other well-known bluegrass-New Grass Nugget owners include **Don Stiernberg**, **Dawn Watson** and **Charlie Provenzo**.
- **Scott Tichener**, a Lawrence, Kansas, musician, waxes poetically about his Nugget on his longstanding Web site, Mandolin Café ([www.mandolincafe.com](http://www.mandolincafe.com)).

The plucky little instrument’s popularity also has crossed over into every contemporary musical arena—classical, jazz, rock—and has even seeped into modern literature and movies, “Captain Corelli’s Mandolin,” for one.

But there’s another reason Kemnitzer’s having so much trouble meeting demand. “Michael makes the best mandolins on planet Earth, bar none,” says Larry Brown, a Los Angeles repairman who restores

high-priced acoustic instruments for recording stars,

San Francisco Bay Area musician Ed Neff owns the first Nugget ever produced. “I bought it in 1974, and I love it—it’s gotten better every year—the tone is still improving on it. A lot of builders try to get an immediate sound out of it by building the top too thin, and then they have to make the braces thicker to hold the top, but he put a good, thick top on it, like it’s supposed to be, with small braces. It’s just improved and improved and gotten better and better.”

Nashville singer-songwriter Tim O’Brien agrees. He owns three Nuggets, including Kemnitzer’s fourth, an A-model bouzouki/octave mandolin—slightly smaller than a guitar, and inspired by another vintage Gibson design. “How did I ever get along without that? It’s become my trademark,” says O’Brien, who writes songs for Kathy Mattea, Garth Brooks and others. He shares a recent airline incident that separated him from his beloved Nugget, which he says is like his right arm.

“There was an accident on a commuter flight. They must have dropped my combo mandolin/fiddle case—this is the only time I can’t take it on board myself—and there was a hole in the side of my mandolin. It’s not a big freak-out, the structural damage was small, but I sent it back to Mike to have him fix it. So I used my backup mando the next weekend—a Nugget F-5 that mostly sits in its case kinda lonesome like. And I forgot how great it is. It has aged much like a fine wine.”

The lead song, “Turning Around,” on O’Brien’s latest CD, *Two Journeys*, features Kemnitzer’s Nugget mandola.

“It looks just like my trusty A-model mandolin, just a little bigger and it sounds a little throatier. It’s got great balance and tone. On the whole CD, if I’m not playing fiddle, I’m playing a Nugget something or other.”

sides of the instruments. Inlays for the headstock range from tastefully understated to intricate and ornate—such as a rose with pale abalone petals, leaves of mother of pearl and dots of green sea snail shells. All Nugget hardware is gold plated. The F-5 Deluxe, handcrafted in the style of the vintage Gibson Lloyd Loar made in the 1920s, is the most popular Nugget model.

Sandy Munro, owner of the Great Divide Music Store in Aspen, Colorado, and the country’s only Nugget mandolin dealer—when they’re available—explains how Kemnitzer produces an instrument with such intrinsic appeal: “He’s really got the artist’s philosophy... it’s a no-compromise instrument all the way, from beginning to end.”

Because the mandolin is a small instrument, it’s easy for a mandolin maker to go for too much bass and lose the treble or vice-versa, Munro says. “But among aficionados of [Nugget] mandolins—which is almost anyone who’s owned one or played one—he is known for getting a great bell tone, a real nice harmonic structure, a lot of power, rich bass, crystalline ringing treble, just a lot of life. Everything a good mandolin should be, his mandolins seem to have in spades.”

**Nugget’s five-year backlog** is due in part to a mandolin resurgence in recent years, thanks to increased interest in bluegrass music, in which the small, eight-stringed relative of the guitar plays a starring role. Consider last year’s bluegrass soundtrack for the movie, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, which topped Billboard’s country music charts—the first time since 1973 that any bluegrass album has done so. Find more evidence of mandolin mania in the popularity of the acoustical quartet Nickel Creek, which features Nashville’s hottest mandolin master, Chris Thiele.

O’Brien, a groundbreaker in the revival of bluegrass—some call it new grass—has known Kemnitzer for all the years he’s been making Nuggets, and remembers how he got his nickname. Kemnitzer was out in California, he was wearing a pair of gold corduroy pants, something a gold prospector might wear, and the name Nugget just seemed to stick.

“He’s named aptly because he’s a little guy and a little piece of gold,” O’Brien says. “Real quiet, gentle soul, mischievous look in his eye. He’s got a lot of artistic sensibility, but he’s also just sort of a regular country guy.”

And, O’Brien adds, “he’s a really fine musician in his own right—he would never brag on himself at all, but he is a great claw-hammer banjo player.”

Kemnitzer occasionally plays at Bayside Travelers country dances around the Traverse City area, but ironically claims he’s a horrible mandolin player.

O’Brien says that may be true. “But I think he can play enough to make them and to know how they should sound.”

Kemnitzer laughs. “Listening skills are much more valuable than playing skills when it comes to building instruments.”

Clearly, he’s a real good listener.

At the maple woodcarver’s bench in the center of his crowded shop, Mike Kemnitzer sits and talks about the art vibe that resounded in his family.

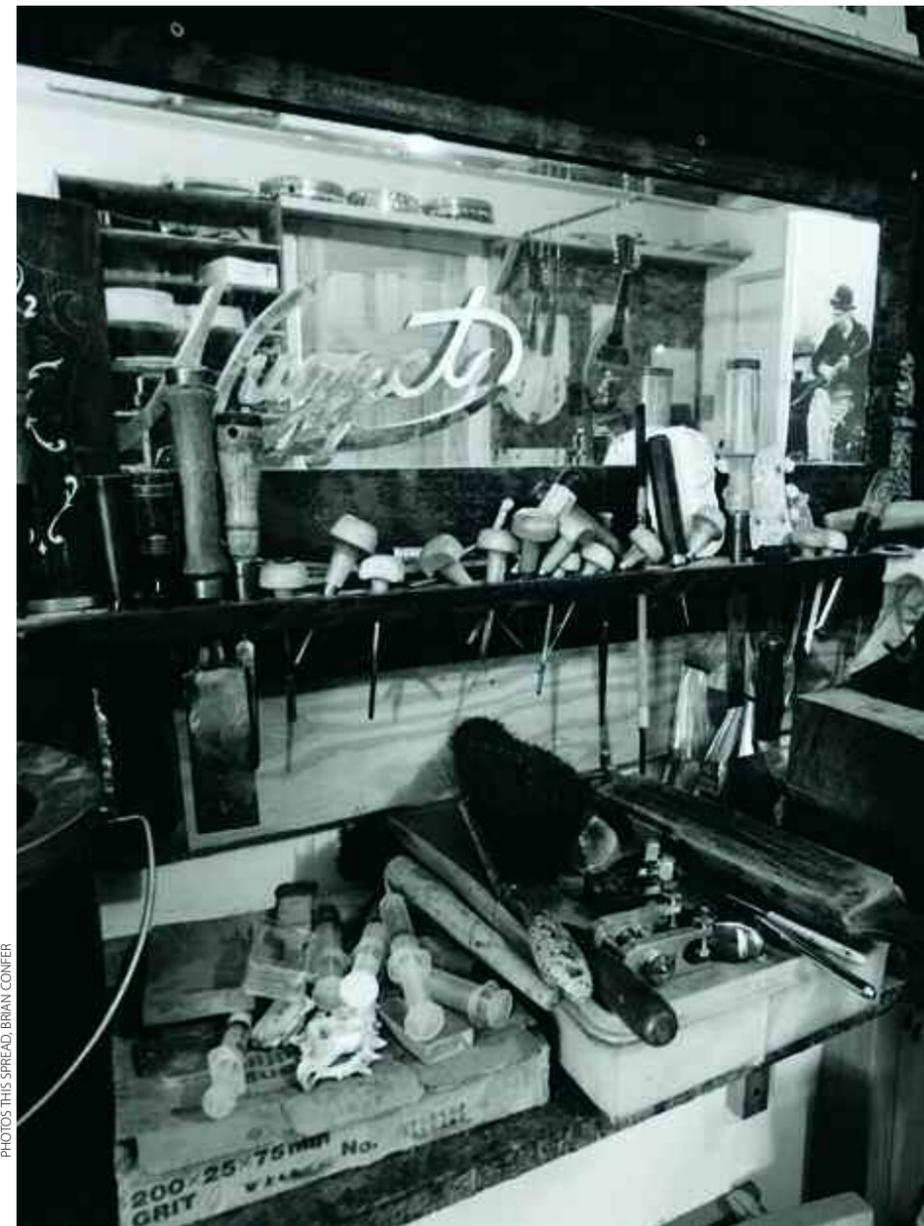
His maternal grandfather, John Steinbaugh, played the mandolin, was a painter, wood-carver and engraver. Paternal grandpa Edward Kemnitzer was a carpenter and outdoorsman. His father George built full-size wood gliders and flew in them. Phyllis, his mother, was a painter and weaver. His sister, Barb Evans, is an art teacher. Brother David’s an architect, Ron’s an industrial designer, John is an avid woodworker and guitar builder, and Chris is a homebuilder and jewelry craftsman.

Kemnitzer seems to have inherited each of the genes. He built most of the interior of the home he shares with wife Carol, a paraprofessional for the Charlevoix-Emmet County Intermediate School District. He loves to hunt and fish with son Bill, 29. And Kemnitzer is drawn to mandolin minutiae, the fine points that make his instruments so sought after.

“I was always attracted to making things,” he says. “I had a strong attraction to processes and things musical.” It was a natural outgrowth of his home environment, then, with all those family discussions of art and light and sound, that he customized his first instrument—a guitar—in 1966.

“It was the first time that I joined my love for drawing with musical instruments,” the Newark, Ohio, native recalls. “It was a Harmony Sovereign. The peg head was damaged, so I glued it up and reshaped it so it looked more like a Martin headstock and inlaid it with a small floral design of shell.”

Left: **Chisels, carvers, gouges and gravers** hang along the Nugget Mandolin studio wall above the other new and antique tools of his profession. The syringes are for precise application of hot hide glue. Below: **An F-style mandolin** in the making.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: BRIAN CONIFER

In his late teens, while attending Ohio University, Kemnitzer made dulcimers and banjos and worked as an instrument repairman at the Blue Eagle music store in Athens. Then he did a year's apprenticeship with Athens mandolin maker Bob White. It was during that time that Kemnitzer met his wife-to-be, Carol Pyles, through her brother-in-law, Robert Hutchison, a banjo player with the Hutchison Brothers, a Southern Ohio bluegrass band. In 1974, Mike and Carol left Ohio to explore life on the West Coast. They joined the Hutchison Brothers in California, where Kemnitzer sold his first two Nuggets.

Not long after, Kemnitzer and Carol moved to Colorado. He landed a job in Boulder with the Ome Banjo factory and built mandolins at home on the side. During and afterward, he worked part-time at Goodrich Violins, also in Boulder. It was there that he adopted owner David Goodrich's attitude: "Do whatever it takes to do the best job possible."

It's been his battle cry ever since, even if that means he'll never get caught up. Still, he's hoping his experience will help him do so. After nearly 30 years of tapping, flexing and listening to pieces of wood, he has the process down to a science. "Kind of a dark science," he laughs, "but I guess I have faith in my intuition, and there're just certain characteristics that the best sound-producing tops and backs have."

Meantime, until he catches up, Kemnitzer is compelled to honor 1997 prices. And, he acknowledges, that's a sticking point. "There's a feeding frenzy for my used instruments," he says. "I'm fortunate and happy there's that demand, and above all, grateful. But it brings out bad things in some people, and that's an unfortunate distraction."

At its root, the "unfortunate distraction" is a collector's market that allows his new customers to profit well from Kemnitzer's labor. "Say I have a customer who has a lot of changes. I finally get his instrument done, and I'm delivering at yesteryear's prices. There have been times, after I go through all that personal stuff with the person, he just goes and sells it—and doubles or triples his money on the used market."

Kemnitzer just shrugs. "That's the game I'm in. I'm just happy and grateful people want my instruments and appreciate my work."

Once he fills the last backlog order, Kemnitzer plans to shift his emphasis from custom production to a model-oriented approach. He bought a computerized router last year that will take over some of the grunt work, which will save time but not shave quality.

"It's very tedious making instruments for individuals, just because so much is involved, from actually choosing the wood to all through the process. Some customers never make changes, and some of them never stop changing their minds. So it's just the tediousness of keeping all that straight, and dealing with certain types of people. And what's really brought this home for me is, I'm trying to get all these orders out—if I could just build the mandolins, I would have been caught up years ago."

Which means the end of Nuggets as we know them?

He thinks about that question for a moment, and flashes a grin. "I still probably will do custom orders—at a greatly inflated price." **T**

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### Anatomy of a Nugget

Mike Kemnitzer travels around the nation to select the finest specimens of wood for his mandolins—figured maple from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Adirondack or red spruce from New England and Engleman spruce from out West. He then ages the wood for at least seven years, although many specimens are 50–100 years old.

Building world-class musical instruments has its moments of glamour, but the process itself is repetitious and tedious. Kemnitzer cuts and steam-bends the maple sides, glues in mahogany blocks where the neck joins the body, carves the tops and backs and tap-tunes them. Then he glues and binds the tops and backs with simulated ivory binding, shapes ebony into fingerboards and slots it for frets, inlays the finger position markers out of abalone, mother of pearl or green sea snail shell, then fashions the peg-head overlay from a thin piece of ebony.

Next, Kemnitzer makes a steel reinforcing rod for the neck. He threads the rod on both ends and silver-solders it to the bottom. The neck blank is glued up, the overlay glued to it and the headstock is bound and inlaid. He attaches the neck to the body with a tapered dovetail joint, then glues on the fingerboard.

The finish—hand-rubbed stain, topped with six thin coats of his own formula of varnish—is applied, then polished. Then the Nugget's German-made tuning machines are reworked for smoother operation. The tailpiece coverplate is fabricated from thin brass sheet, polished, hand-engraved and sent out for plating.

The final test: The bridge, fabricated from ebony, is mounted, strings are strung, and the instrument is tuned and strummed to test playability and tone. All instruments are guaranteed to the original owner for life.

JIM RANTALA, INSET; BRIAN CONFER

