Chapter 1

Becoming Acquainted with Your Mandolin

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In This Chapter

- Discovering the mandolin
- Bringing the family
- Exploring the mandolin's anatomy

In March 1979, I was fresh out of high school — wondering what my future would be — when I met my first mandolin. The event changed my life and sent me on an amazing mandolin journey. Since then I've been playing, composing, travelling, teaching, recording and now writing about mandolins – because the mandolin is such a wonderful instrument.

In this chapter, I show you just why the mandolin is such a wonderful instrument (as if you didn't already know), describing among other things its great sound, sexy looks (steady, Don!), friendly extended family and musical flexibility.

Riding the Mandolin Wave

In today's world of synthesised pop music, smartphone apps and video games, the mandolin is an oasis of low-tech, organic simplicity. Made of wood and strung with steel strings, the mandolin can bring players and listeners enjoyment without the use of the Internet or even electricity. The mandolin is the perfect desert-island instrument as well as one that city-dwellers can use to (re)discover a simpler time with simpler pleasures.

Mandolins have some great advantages, not least of which is that they're small enough to fit in an overhead compartment in a plane. What better way to unwind after a stressful business meeting than to go back to your hotel room and play some mandolin music (quietly, of course, unless you're sure the adjoining rooms are also occupied by mandolin fans!). Try doing that with your piano or cello.

Loving the mandolin sound

For one small instrument, the mandolin can certainly create a number of different but beautiful sounds across a wealth of musical genres:

- **Old world:** Rapid back-and-forth picking (called *tremolo*) is the signature sound of the mandolin. This romantic sound dates back to nineteenth-century Italy, where mandolin players serenaded wealthy Venetians as they travelled by gondola (check out Chapter 12).
- **Country:** Some people associate the mandolin with the high lonesome sound of bluegrass. In the 1940s, Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys came out of the hills of Kentucky playing a new form of country music featuring mandolin that helped to shape the course of American music. I describe bluegrass in Chapter 10 and take you on a pre-bluegrass American mandolin adventure of old-time tunes, ragtime and blues in Chapter 9.
- **Rock:** Many people (including me) were drawn to the amazing mandolin sound through its use in pop or rock settings via tracks by Led Zeppelin, Rod Stewart or R.E.M.

But, however you got here and wherever you want to take your playing — such as to an Irish pub session (see Chapter 11) or a New York jazz club (check out Chapter 13), or deep into the hybrid style of modern-day master David Grisman and his 'Dawg' music (see Chapter 14) — the important thing to know is you're welcome to hang out as long as you like in the wonderful world of mandolins.

To help you on your musical journey, you need to get to grips with the basics of mandolin playing (see Chapter 4). After all, you need to lay the foundations before you can start to build your repertoire! Mastering the essential right- and left-hand playing techniques is also a key milestone (Chapters 5 and 6 enable you to get there) to aim for before you start to tackle chording methods (see Chapter 7), scales and more advanced techniques (see Chapter 8).

Joining a vibrant community

When you begin to look around, you find that you aren't alone and that more mandolin players are out there than you may have thought. Look around your own town or city for mandolin activity, whether it's a local bluegrass band performance, or a mandolin club or orchestra.

If you live somewhere that has little or no mandolin activity, you can become part of the growing online mandolin community. Websites such as `www.mandolincafe.com` offer lessons, stories and links to just about anything to do with the mandolin. YouTube is another way to see some great performances, get some free lessons or just discover who's who in the mandolin world. You

can't possibly feel alone amid the huge number of people posting videos of themselves playing the mandolin.

I designed *Mandolin For Dummies* to get you playing the instrument, so that you too can become part of a worldwide community of mandolin players. To gain some inspiration, flip to Chapter 20 to read about a few mandolin greats, and check out Chapter 21 for tips on entering the buzzing mandolin subculture.

Enjoying a great choice of mandolins

Purchasing a mandolin today is easier than ever before. Gone are the days when the only way to get a mandolin was for you to travel great distances to get to a music shop only to discover that it had only two mandolins to choose from. Along with old-school bricks and mortar shops, today you have lots of online dealers of mandolins with great selections and reputations of having many satisfied customers.

Pacific-rim manufacturing costs have made new high-quality mandolins more affordable than ever before. A quality solid-wood mandolin can cost far less today than a similar instrument did when I was looking for my first mandolin in 1979.

If a well-worn vintage mandolin is your preference, loads of dealers display their inventories online and are willing to ship (properly) a mandolin to you wherever you live. If you're a bit braver, you may even want to find the vintage mandolin of your dreams on eBay.

Today is truly a renaissance period of mandolin builders, with hundreds and even thousands of independent one-person shops turning out both traditional and daring new designs of mandolins of all price ranges. If knowing the person who built your mandolin is something that appeals to you, you're in luck today with lots of options.

Turn to Chapter 15 for loads more on buying mandolins.

Meeting the Mandolin Family

Every relationship comes to the point where you need to meet the family. The mandolin family is very friendly, and unlike your in-laws, mandolins don't whisper behind your back while you're in the other room.

The mandolin family is related to the violin family with basically the same assortment of various-sized instruments intended to be played together to form a single harmonious sound. Figure 1-1 shows a family portrait including the mandolin, the mandola and the mando-cello.

Figure 1-1: The Mandolin family: two mandolins, a mandola and a mando-cello.

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Reaching the highest notes: Mandolin

Mandolins come in many varieties, but in all cases they're the soprano voice of the mandolin family. The strings are tuned to the notes G, D, A and E (the same as a violin), and mandolins have pairs of strings for each note. The mandolin is primarily responsible for melody and can be thought of as the child in the family. Mandolins like to play in harmony with other mandolins, like children (well, like some children) like to play in harmony with other children. Figure 1-2 shows two mandolins.

Playing with an alto voice: Mandola

The *mandola* (see Figure 1-3) is a sister to the viola from the violin family. Think of the mandola as the mother of the family in that it can play melody but chooses to shine the spotlight on the children, supplying support and at times going unnoticed. It has a rich voice and is tuned to the notes C, G, D and A, placing it in the alto range of the ensemble.

Figure 1-2: Two mandolins: (a) Gibson F4 model; (b) Gibson A4 model.

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Figure 1-3: A Gibson H4 mandola.

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Lowering the tone: Mando-cello

The *mando-cello* (see Figure 1-4), much like its cousin the violin-cello, can provide rich low notes to fill out the bottom register of the family. You can think of the mando-cello like the deep-voiced father of the family, providing a strong foundation for other mandolins and rarely needing to be in the spotlight. The mando-cello is tuned to C, G, D and A like the mandola, but one complete octave lower.

Figure 1-4: A Gibson K4 mando-cello.

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Spotting the rarely seen mando-bass

Every once in a while at family gatherings, a strange old gent turns up whom you're supposed to call Uncle George. As far as you can figure out, he's not really part of the family, but everyone still seems to get along. This strange old man is the mando-bass (see Figure 1-5) and isn't included in many of the family photos.

These instruments are very rare and for the most part have gone the way of the dinosaur. The role of the *mando-bass* is like other bass instruments, although most people today use a string bass or even an electric bass guitar for this role. The mando-bass has only four strings and is tuned E, A, D and G (like a stand-up or electric bass).

Figure 1-5: A Kalamazoo mando-bass.

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Accompanying the family: Octave mandolin

You can think of the octave mandolin in Figure 1-6 as the stepchild or adopted child. Although octave mandolins fit into the family, they don't share the genetic lineage that the other members of the family enjoy. The *octave mandolin* (or the octave mandola as it's sometimes called) is tuned G, D, A and E, one full octave lower than the mandolin, placing it somewhere between the mandola and the mando-cello.

These instruments are popular in Irish music and are used primarily to provide accompaniment, although some large-handed individuals may explore them as a melody instrument.

Figure 1-6: A Trinity College (flat top) octave mandolin.

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Getting to Know Your Mandolin's Anatomy

Mandolins come in many shapes and sizes but share enough anatomical similarities to be considered mandolins. Here, I look at a modern F5-style mandolin because it's the most popular mandolin around today.

The F5 has some cosmetic features that other models don't have, making it more decorative. Check out the photo in Figure 1-7 to see the full anatomy of the mandolin.

Flip to Chapter 3 to discover the proper ways to hold the mandolin.

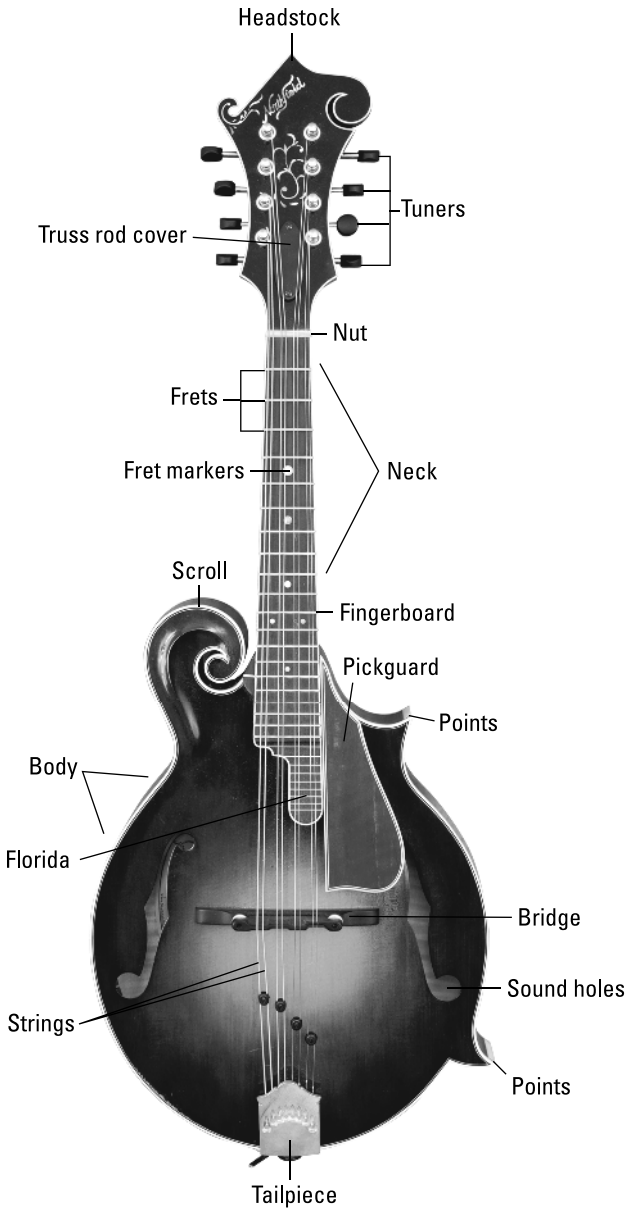

Figure 1-7: The mandolin's anatomy.

Looking at the body

The mandolin body is the hollow wooden chamber where the sound is produced. The type of wood used in the body is a determining factor in how a particular instrument is going to sound. The mandolin body is divided into three parts:

- The top (or *soundboard*) is usually made of spruce.
- The back is usually constructed from a harder wood; maple is the most popular, but birch, mahogany or rosewood are also used.
- The sides are also made from a hardwood, with maple being used most often.

Strings

Mandolin strings are made of steel and come in sets of eight. Chapter 2 shows you how to tune up your mandolin's strings.

Many older mandolins need to be strung with light-gauge strings, and bowl-back mandolins should only be strung with ultra-light strings.

Soundholes

The *soundholes* in the top allow the sound to come out (not surprisingly). Mandolins come with two different types of soundholes:

- Round hole, like a soundhole on an acoustic guitar
- F-shaped holes, similar to the soundholes on a violin

Check out Chapter 15 for photographs of different mandolin models.

Bridge

The *bridge* is the wooden piece that sits approximately in the middle of the body and functions as a guide to line up the strings and transfer vibrations from the string to the top. The bridge is only held on with string pressure.

If you take off all the strings, the bridge falls off. Read Chapter 17 for the complete lowdown on changing mandolin strings.

Tailpiece

The *tailpiece* is a stamped or cast piece of metal that serves as a place to anchor or attach the strings. It's attached to the side of the mandolin body and, unlike the bridge, doesn't fall off when you are changing strings. Tailpieces are functional but they can also be decorative, as I describe in Chapter 16 on building your mandolin accessories kit.

Scroll

Not all mandolins have scrolls. In general, if the mandolin has a scroll, the model begins with the letter F, as in F5- or F4-model mandolins. Musicians and manufacturers may argue over whether the scroll makes any sound difference, but what's clear is that these models are harder to build and so more expensive.

Points

Points are another cosmetic appointment that not all mandolins have. The typical F5 mandolin has two points coming off the bottom of the body. The bottom points are handy to rest on your leg when you are playing while seated, to keep the instrument from moving. Some mandolins have two points: one where the scroll would be and one opposite that location.

Pick guard

A *pick guard* (sometimes called a finger rest) is a protective piece made of wood or plastic that can serve as a place to rest your third and fourth fingers as a reference guide or to keep the mandolin from getting scratched up.

Not all mandolins have pick guards, and some people (including myself) remove them to allow more sound to come out of the soundhole.

Introducing the neck

The neck is the long, slender part attached to the body and runs parallel to the strings. Your left hand is going to spend a lot of time on the neck, and so get familiar with the different parts.

Fingerboard

The fingerboard, or *fretboard,* is a thin piece of hardwood with very precise grooves or channels cut in it, into which the frets (see the next section) are hammered or pressed. The fingerboard is glued to the neck.

Frets

Frets are the strips of metal that are vertical on the fingerboard. In effect, these metal strips shorten the length of the string when you hold them down with your finger, adjusting the pitch of the string. As you fret closer to the mandolin's body, the pitches or notes get higher. Each of these pitches has a letter name, and together the letters make up the musical alphabet. For a complete fingering chart, see Chapter 6.

Fret markers

The *fret markers* are little pearl dots placed in the fingerboard at frets 5, 7, 10 and 12. Often, these markers are also placed on the side of the neck facing up, so the player can see the dots too.

If you're coming to mandolin from playing guitar, the fret markers are a little different. The guitar fingerboard is marked at the ninth instead of the tenth fret.

Florida

A *Florida* is the fingerboard extension, named because of its resemblance to the shape of the state of Florida. The extra frets it provides were added to the mandolin to give the player access to notes that are even higher, as if the mandolin notes aren't high enough already. Very few mandolin players ever play these notes.

Headstock

The *headstock* is the piece at the end of the neck that supplies a place to fasten the tuners. The mandolin maker usually puts the brand name on the headstock.

Nut

The *nut* is the slotted piece located at the end of the fingerboard that acts as a guide for the strings. They pass over the nut on the way to the tuners.

Tuners

Since you asked, the *tuners* are the gear-driven pegs to which the strings are attached. The tuning of each string is achieved by turning the knob on the end of each tuner.

Truss-rod cover

The *truss-rod cover* is a plate mounted on the headstock that's removed when you want to adjust the truss rod. The truss rod itself is a steel rod that runs the length of the mandolin's neck and which you can use to straighten a bowed neck. Not all mandolins have this feature.

Some of the aforementioned parts of your mandolin are repairable, and so if you're 'handy' and want to solve a problem yourself, Chapter 18 may well be able to help.

Using string vibrations to produce sound

When the mandolin is strung and tuned up, the strings create a downward pressure on the top. When you pluck the strings, they vibrate at specific pitches, transferring these vibrations to the top. In turn the top vibrates, turning the vibrations into sound.