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The 'Master Model'

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On Saturday nights at six o'clock, my father and I sit in cool, leather chairs around an antique side table whose chestnut top wears round and ringed stains from years of hot mugs and dark pints upon it. Chris Thile's voice spills from hung speakers and sweetens the room as he narrates this week's sponsors: "This portion of our show is brought to you, as always, by Fast AF. Fiddle tunes are safe, therapeutic, and *fun*."

Thile is the host of American Public Radio's *Live From Here*, a show where musicians from all different backgrounds rendezvous to explore the depths of Folk and Bluegrass. Now 37, Thile made his first appearance on the show, then titled *A Prairie Home Companion*, when he was only 15 and already well on his way to becoming a mandolin virtuoso (Streep). He, like I, was inspired at a young age by Saturday nights with Garrison Keillor.

Growing up in a musical family, Chris Thile picked up his first mandolin at age four. By 13, he was touring in his band Nickel Creek and had already released his first solo album (Stone). In recent years, when not hosting *Live From Here*, Thile plays with his band, Punch Brothers, an incredibly talented Bluegrass, and yet not Bluegrass, quintet. His tunes are plucked on the stretched strings of his Gibson Loar F5 Mandolin, which Thile refers to as "The Bank of Thile," for it cost him his entire savings (Stone). This mandolin is one of only 330 identified and documented Gibson

Loar F5 Mandolins (Wolfe). Designed by acoustical engineer Lloyd Loar, in the world of mandolins, Thile's is one of the very best.

If not in our music room on Saturday nights at six o'clock, Dad and I are in a theater to see Chris Thile in person. Near the end of a Punch Brothers show, Thile will unplug, step forward, and play Bach's Sonata No.1 in G minor on his Loar F5. He cradles the small and sunburst body of his Loar as the crisp and spiraled edges brush against his arms. Eight thin strings stretch across a peculiarly long neck, where they meet at the instrument's head on either side of a pearly torch inlay. The Loar F5 features two thin and curved f-holes, designed to create resonance within the body. A peek inside one of these holes reveals the instrument's serial number, date of creation, and the signature of Lloyd Loar himself. These are the marks of the "Master Model" mandolin, and anyone with the good fortune of owning one has their instrument's number and data memorized. The 'Bank of Thile' is number 75316, signed Feb. 18, 1924.

Known for its particularly long neck, widespread f-holes, and raised fingerboard, the Loar F5 transformed the creation of mandolins. Lloyd Loar designed this instrument when he worked for Gibson as an acoustical engineer, a job which perfectly combined his childhood passions of physics and music (Siminoff). From a young age, Loar was curious about the construction of mandolins (Siminoff). When he began at Gibson, without much experience, he was quick to test new ideas for mandolin design. To create this revolutionary instrument, Loar began with the

existing Gibson F4 and then incorporated structures found in Stradivari violin principal. The blending of guitar and violin through the f-holes, long neck, and raised fingerboard created a distinguished look and tone in Loar's instrument, which became known as the 'Master Model' mandolin (Siminoff).

As the popularity and prestige of Loar's instruments grew in the 1950s, mostly due to "The Father of Bluegrass" Bill Monroe, mandolinists began to track and document the hands which held these 'Master Models.' One such musician was Darryl Wolfe, mandolinist of The Knoxville Grass. In an interview with Wolfe, he confessed that his interest in Lloyd Loar began when he was only 15 years old, and in the years following, Wolfe began to search for Loar creations. Out of curiosity, he would write down the serial numbers and descriptions of the mandolins he found. Over time, his hobby turned into the *F5 Journal*, the most robust and accurate archive of all located Loar instruments.

Following the *F5 Journal*, Darryl Wolfe planned Loarfests, where musicians who owned Gibson Loar F5 mandolins could come together and share in their appreciation for Lloyd Loar's designs. Wolfe remembers fondly these gatherings of 15-20 mandolinists, all sitting around a stage and playing each other's instruments.

"It's been a great journey," he recalls as he lists off name after name of famous mandolinists he has befriended through these festivals.

Wolfe purchased his first Loar mandolin back in 1976. Then only 23, Wolfe drove from North Carolina to New Hampshire with his father and wife. Wolfe noted

that, back then, there was no internet nor immediate way to communicate, so he had planned in advance, over the phone and through letters, the exact details of this mandolin exchange. Wolfe was adamant to pick up the Loar in person for he wanted to ensure it was the right instrument for him. If the neck of a mandolin does not fit the shape of your hand or the tone does not match the sound you desire, there is very little that can be done to change it. However, for Darryl, it was a match, and he purchased the mandolin and drove right back to North Carolina. He arrived home just in time to walk on stage and play a show with The Knoxville Grass. Later on, Wolfe discovered that the man who sold him that Loar was a con man and, had Wolfe not insisted upon buying it in person rather than having it shipped, the instrument very well could have never been sent to him.

Beyond the stories and tunes which often bring these music makers together, they are connected by the numbers recorded inside each of their Loars. When speaking with Darryl Wolfe and listening to interviews with famous mandolinists, I noticed that many are quick to recite their mandolin's serial number. It seems to be a point of pride which exact Loar they own and who their neighboring owners are. In an interview with *Fretboard Journal*, as John Reischman shares about his Loar, he recites the serial number, 75327, without a second thought (Verlinde). He recalls that his mandolin is only one number away from David Grisman's, who once lost his Loar but stumbled upon the exact same one many years later (Verlinde). Similarly, Darryl Wolfe made certain that I understood his Loar is only five numbers away from Bill

Monroe's "Million Dollar Mandolin," which is arguably the most famous Gibson Loar F5 mandolin and now sits in the Country Music Hall of Fame (Rudder).

Perhaps most impressive of all is the mandolin held on stage before Dad and me. Thile, a world-renowned mandolinist, Grammy winner, MacArthur Genius, and my first crush, plays the mandolin which is only one digit away from Lloyd Loar's personal Gibson Loar F5. Thile plucks a melody which dances about the room with sharp, woody steps. As the final notes of Bach's Sonata fade into the farthest corners of the silent theater, the Punch Brothers step forward and join Thile at the edge of a dark stage. With all instruments unplugged, Thile begins one final song with a slow and scraping strum on his mandolin strings. One by one, the others join in, not fighting to be heard but to tune into the present dance which carries on the legendary work of Lloyd Loar and his 'Master Model' mandolin.

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