

By Mark Humphrey

MANDOLINIST/fiddler Ben Mink is a case in point proving that "rockers" often bring diverse backgrounds to their three power chords, stacks of Marshall amps, and banks of effects. Mink is one-third of the Canadian heavy-metal trio FM, but his earliest recollections are of eastern European music, and he is as enthusiastic about demonstrating a tune learned from the fiddling of Ojibway Indians or Rumanian gypsies as he is discussing Jeff Beck's solos. Mink plays a souped-up electric mandolin that roars and screeches like a fleet of angry AWACS. He also plays a bizarre reduction of a fiddle — with a strobe-lit bow. "A lot of this is showboating," he admits, "but when you're playing in front of 17,000 people, you have to play to the person way in the back."

Despite the hype-heavy rock milieu he performs in, Mink fondly recalls the ethnic weddings, Canadian folk festivals, Ceilidh bands, and small folk groups in which he cut his musical teeth. "I've got a long background in traditional fiddling, and it's still a very strong part of me," he insists. "I'll go to the library to look at Bartok's transcriptions of Hungarian folk tunes, and I'll try to find a way to sneak some of that into the music I play with FM."

Thirty-year-old Mink was raised in Cleveland, Ohio; but his home for the past 18 years has been Toronto, Ontario. While he was growing up, his Polish and Russian parents exposed him to eastern European music. "My biggest influence is my dad's voice, a deep Russian basso voice," he says. Ben also developed an ear for pop music, hiding a radio under his pillow at night. "I would switch around the dial and get everything from vintage Moondog to early Mel Tillis. Whatever came up, I enjoyed."

Ben took up the guitar at age nine, with visions of rock stardom dancing in his head. But the fiddle was there in the background. "My sister was studying at the conservatory, and I always heard violin at home," he says. With the fiddle, Mink began to explore the ethnic traditions that thrive in Toronto; and with the guitar, he played rock and roll. "Toronto is a very cosmopolitan city," he says, "and my influences were cosmopolitan. I knew everything going on in the mainstream pop world, but in the backyard was this wealth of music — music that probably will never get heard."

"In my teen years I played with a lot of well-known rock bands in Canada, and at the same time I'd play weddings and ethnic

BEN MINK

FM Fiddle Flash



PHOTOS BY JON SIEVERT

functions. The scene in Toronto is pretty small, so everybody knows everybody else. For about four years I played with a folk singer named Murray McLauchlan. I'd play with [guitarists] Bruce Cockburn, Ronnie Prophet, and [folk/rock group] Ian Tyson And The Great Speckled Bird — whatever came up."

In addition to local influences, Mink was exposed to a variety of touring fiddlers from Britain and America — Dave Swarbrick, Aly Bain [see *Boys Of The Lough*, *Frets*, Oct. '80], [Frets advisory board member] Vassar Clements, Doug Kershaw [Frets, Oct. '81], and jazz great Joe Venuti [Frets, Aug. '80]. "Pretty much every fiddler I've ever heard has influenced me to an extent," he says. "Canada has an amazing assortment of fiddlers, like Jean Carignan. I used to work with him all the time at folk festivals. There are some fascinating styles, such as Métis, which is an Indian, Scottish, and French-Canadian blend. There are gorgeous little melodies with choppy rhythms — the Indians' conception of rhythm is very tom-tommy — and Irish and Scottish licks. The patterns don't end where you expect them to at all — it's almost Bulgarian or Yugoslavian, though it doesn't work in odd meters. It's a little-heard tradition."

"The Cape Breton tradition also is fascinating. You'll probably find more fiddlers per square inch on Cape Breton than you will anywhere in the world. It's a strong offshoot of the British Isles, but it's so isolated that it has become its own style, too. You'll find all the Scottish heavy ornamentation — the trebles, the quick wrist snaps — but it gets so obscured in some of the Cape Breton stuff that you can't even find the melodies. Canada is an enormous country with very few people, and there are these little isolated pockets of tradition. There are places in Newfoundland where

people speak with accents that haven't been heard for 300 years. It's like very strong weird Irish."

By his late teens, Mink had absorbed enough of Canada's range of rich traditions (as well as the standard pop influences) to find himself in demand both for performances and session work. "I did a lot of session work from age 19 on," he says, "simply because I could handle most of the stuff that was thrown at me. Toronto has some of the most beautiful studios in the world." Though one might assume that the demands of studio work require a formal classical background, Mink says, "My training is entirely the folk training. I have a good deal of knowledge about the classical methods, though, and I befriended a number of excellent teachers in Toronto. Whenever I needed to know something I'd go to them and say, 'Listen, I don't want to learn the whole repertoire and do boring Kreutzer exercises, but show me how to do this.' I'd have long coffee-drinking and violin sessions with them."

Mink's current association with FM began in 1978. "Their previous violinist had just left," he recalls, "and they had to do a direct-to-disc recording, so they called me. I went and rented a bunch of electronic stuff, because I was doing mainly acoustic work at the time. Four or five days later we went in and recorded. It went well, so they invited me to play with them on some jobs, just to see how it would go. It worked fine, and I'm still with them."

Mink sees his role in the band "primarily as a lead player, simply because that's the nature of the instruments I play. We all contribute pretty well equally to the melodic development. That's a typical sort of interaction. A lot of our songs are based on the things I heard at home as a kid, the odd-meter stuff. Despite our heavy electronic emphasis, there's still a great respect for the acoustic side of things."

Mink does what he can to maintain that respect, though he admits, "The whole rock scene is very different from what I was doing before. It doesn't matter if you're blazing off fast scales, you've got to show the audience what it looks like visually as well. It's a great thrill playing before 17,000 people, because they aren't people anymore; they become a large moving mass. You can hear the crowd go up like giant French fries dropping into oil. You feel them, but you can't really see them. A club is nice, though, because it's much easier to work. You can actually hear each other."

Since he works with a very loud, very electronic band, Mink has radically modified his instruments. "I've got a good collec-

tion of acoustic instruments at home," he says, "but the instruments I'm using with FM are designed to eliminate feedback and function in an arena context. It's really got to cut across everything. I made the 5-string mandolin from dozens of spare parts. It's got a tremolo bar and a Bartolini ES-1 pickup with a high-end overdrive in it, which brings out a lot of the brightness.

"My electric mandolin sounds a lot like lap steel — which, to me, gives so much more expression in a rock context than, say, the Tiny Moore [*Frets*, Feb. '80] style of mandolin playing, which is basically swing. That works off a kind of Barney Kessel tone, which is very round and smooth, but they don't do much bending. I grew up in a different time, and I hope that what I'm doing is appropriate to my era.

"My mandolin's tuned the same as any mandolin, except it has the added 5th string, which is a C. It's about a 17-1/2" scale length, which is quite long. Any longer and it would pop the E string, but I like the depth it gives the low string. I bend strings a lot. I somehow can't imagine music without vibrato. The strings are individually gauged guitar strings [from low to high]: .009", a .012", an unwound .020", a wound .030", and a wound .046".

If Mink's heavy-metal mandolin would cause traditionalists to cringe, it's hard to imagine what the reaction might be to his fiddle. It's lit by batteries, its sides are cut away, and inside the instrument there are miniature beach people having a party with cows — "Beach Blanket Holstein" is Ben's description of it.

Despite this self-conscious silliness, there is method in Mink's madness. "You've got to remember that in a rock context, using a traditional acoustic violin with a Barcus-Berry pickup at the volumes we're playing and with the effects I'm using, is the same as putting a transducer on a Martin D-28 and playing with [rock guitarist Eddie] Van Halen. It's ridiculous. They aren't constructed for that. Transducers don't feed back that much if you're playing at the level that [French fusion violinist] Jean-Luc Ponty would. But our brand of rock is a little different. I got tired of howling and feedback, and realized that what caused it was the box effect. I thought of semi-acoustic guitars like Gibson ES-335s that have a large rod down the center, which lends solidity and basically eliminates feedback. So I just cut the sides off. I needed a way to hold up the top from the bottom so it wouldn't cave in, so I went to the hardware store and bought a bunch of dowels and kept the thing plugged in while I worked on it.

"Every dowel I put in had some effect on the sound. In effect, I have 11 soundposts, and the whole body has been rebuilt. There are a couple of posts in there for EQ that are movable. That affects the bass response — it's like moving a soundpost. Though this is basically a joke as an acoustic instrument, it still has acoustic

properties all its own. I've added the 5th string C. This instrument was smashed a few times at folk festivals, and I just glued it back together again. As an electric instrument, I'm really happy with it. I'm not sure what it was originally — probably a bottom-of-the-line Czech or Taiwanese fiddle."

Mink has further modified his fiddle by adding metal tuners instead of the traditional friction pegs — about which he has strong opinions. "I think friction pegs, as well designed as they are and as perfect as the traditional laws are, are pretty ridiculous," he asserts. "You basically turn them in and hope they hold, which is ludicrous. They could make a gorgeous little Schaller for violin, a machine that didn't weigh anything; but violinists are cursed by tradition. A lot of them are terrified of change. It

would be different if you were using gut strings, where it's the string itself that stretches and not the peg, but I'm using steel strings. The whole set is a bottom-of-the-line Dr. Thomastik package. My fifth string, the C, is a viola string that's been on for seven years. For electric playing, you don't change the strings often, because you don't pick up the richness you get with new strings. Part of the idea is to get rid of all the overtones. If you hit an A on your G string, and the string's too bright, it's going to start whistling on the open A. You don't want that, so you don't need to change strings often. I'm happy with steel strings, despite the nonsense people talk about — the extra pressure on the belly and all that. I'll let the guy in 100 years worry about the belly caving in. I've got to play it now. The

SAGA PRODUCTION REPORT

NO. 2

Gold Star Flat Head Banjo

The Single Piece Flange

In the early 1930's the newly developed die-casting process was applied to banjo making. The single piece resonator flanges of that era were cleanly made but eventually bent and finally disintegrated under tension. The maker did not consider the effects of metal fatigue and deterioration of the "pot-metal" used in construction. Other makers have attempted to solve this problem by using sand-casted brass — the result is invariably a rough unfinished appearance.

The Gold Star is the only production banjo using a die cast BRASS flange. A perfect combination of traditional design and superior materials.

A color catalog is available upon request.
Dealer Inquiries Invited.

SAGA
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
DEPT. F P.O. BOX 2841
SO. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080

MINK

most important thing is that you're comfortable with your instrument.

"The pickup is a standard Barcus-Berry pickup, though the nature of the instrument's design makes it respond fairly differently. I get a lot more gain out of the pickup. I don't really know why — probably the solidity of the whole instrument. There's no vibration lost anywhere going to the different parts of the violin — it's concentrated within the bridge area. I put a quarter-inch jack in there, rather than the tiny Barcus-Berry jacks that break after two weeks. The bridge is heavier than standard. The top of the bridge is close to two millimeters in thickness, but that's pretty normal with 5-string instruments. I'd like to see a lot more done with 5-strings. There are inherent problems in string clearance and spacing, but if it's designed properly, you can get around all that."

As for his bowing, Mink says, "I use a strong bow, I play quite hard, and I hold the bow much closer to a cello grip for rock and roll. I just found that resting the baby finger on the back is fine for the lighter classical stuff and for bluegrass, but not for rock. Actually, you'll find a lot of bluegrass fiddle players who use the overhanging hand grip, too. It depends where [on the bow stick] you rest the knuckle of your first finger. I think that resting it as deep [close to the palm] as possible as Vassar Clements does gives you the most strength, but it's harder to develop a really good

facility. For me, it's more comfortable to play closer to the traditional grip. I like a loose tension on the bow hair because I think it's more 'fiddlistic.' I'll choke up on the bow quite often, up to halfway, where the center of gravity is, when I do what's considered a power chording effect on violin.

"I put foam in front of the frog. It has to do with the old style of designing the frogs, where there was a lump where the thumb now rests. They used to choke up on it a bit; it's originally a French style of holding the bow. At that time, you didn't hold it on the frog. I'm using foam to pad the area.

"As far as bows go, I use anything that's good to hit a cymbal with. Most of my bows are garbage. I made the one that I use onstage, the one with lights. My brother built the circuit."

Anyone who plays a neon-lit fiddle is apt to use lots of electronic effects, and Mink is no exception. "I have probably every effect that you can buy," he says. "Onstage I use an Echoplex, and for my floor pedals I've got a Big Muff, hot tubes overdrive, an Electric Mistress deluxe flanger, an octave divider, and two volume pedals — one that controls my master volume and one that controls the echo volume. Most of them I use on the mandolin, because the Barcus-Berry pickup doesn't have enough output or clarity to handle a lot of that. You need a magnetic pickup."



Mink digs a pick into his mandolin on stage with FM. At left is the band's bassist, Cameron Hawkins.

In keeping with his generally unorthodox approach, Mink has a novel way of dealing with practice. "I turn on the TV, and whatever happens to be playing on the set I'll work off of," he says. "I enjoy doing most of my work, practicing or writing, in front of the TV set. I find I over-concentrate if I don't have something else. It's like doing homework with the radio on. I just need something to make my fingers move. Sometimes a fiddle tune is good, because they're basically just scales played with some rhythm. And if you want to steady your arm, just do some long bows."

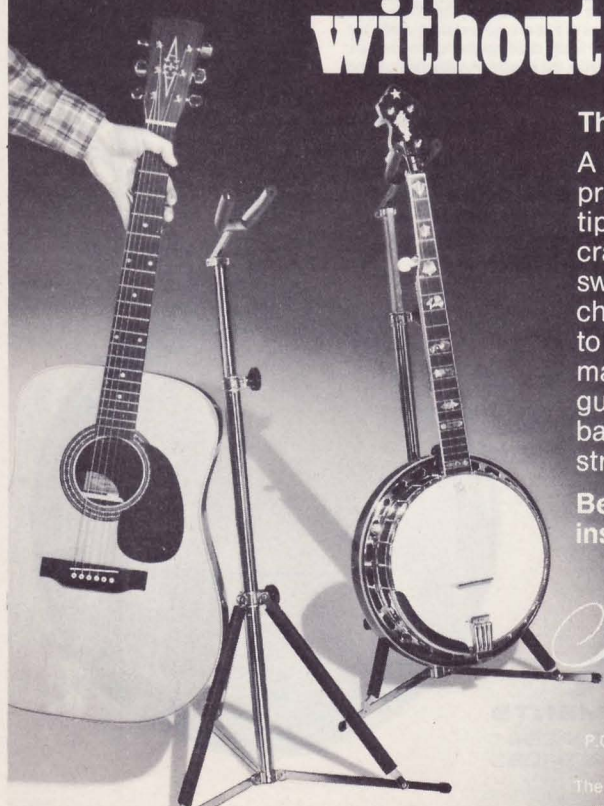
Mink is aware of the problems inherent in taking an instrument largely associated with folk or classical traditions and placing it in a rock context. "I consider the violin my primary instrument," he says, "but it doesn't always work in rock and roll. It hasn't got the bite or attack. There's nothing like a pick attack through a Marshall stack for clarity. The violin is a totally different idea, it works very much like a synthesizer in a legato setting. A lot of people with heavy classical training have everything going against them in rock, because they've got nothing but preconceptions about how to produce tone. The vibratos they use usually aren't wide enough for any kind of real expression cutting above a kit of drums. In one second you can tell the violinist is classically trained, because that vibrato is used for Beethoven concertos, not for Jeff Beck-style music. All I'm striving for is something tasteful, a tone and expression that works in the context of whatever music I'm playing."

Mink plans to continue with FM, though he hopes to find time for more solo projects. No doubt he will brashly climb out on some far-flung limbs while keeping a foot in the traditional camp. His motto: "If somebody asks you to do something, say 'yes' 'til proven wrong." Does he have any advice for aspiring fiddlers? "A few classical violin lessons are very important," he says. "Other than that, listen carefully, and don't exclude anything from the learning experience. It's amazing the way fate can turn trails."

A Selected Ben Mink Discography

Solo album: *Foreign Exchange*, PVC Records (Box 362, South Plainfield, NJ 07080), PVC 7919. **With FM:** *Surveillance*, Passport/Arista AB 4246 [out-of-print]; *City Of Fear*, Passport (Box 362, South Plainfield, NJ 07080), PB 6004.

Quick switching without tipping



The Hamilton Hanger

A unique angled design prevents accidental tipping. Its Y-shaped cradle allows quick switches. Made of sturdy chromed steel, it folds to 25". Great for mandolins, fiddles, guitars, banjos, electric basses . . . almost any stringed instrument!

Behind every great instrument there's a

Hamilton
STAND

Krauth & Benninghofen Co.

A Division of James David, Inc.

P.O. Box 7240 • St. Louis, MO 63177

(314) 576-7001

The Hanger Model Number: KB-38