

A DAY WITH DISANTO

Jerry Audet



"A look into the world of Mike's Custom Plugs..."

The first time I met Mike DiSanto, the owner and builder of Mike's Custom Plugs, he pulled me into a big bear hug which lasted at least 15 seconds. He just slapped my back repeatedly and told me how great it was to finally greet me in person. I think he might have broke a rib or two squeezing me.

All I had ever done was email him that I loved his plugs. That's it.

I knew right there and then, I had to get an interview with this enthusiastic and hard-core surf angler. This past March I talked Dave Anderson, editor of Surfcasters Journal, into going with me and visiting Mike at his shop outside of Springfield, Massachusetts.

It was the best day of fishing-related talk I have had in some time.

The Man

"I have to hug these guys. I absolutely love these guys," As we stand in his shop above the garage, Mike is telling me about running into a few of the anglers that fish his plugs regularly. I can't wait to see them and I love to talk to them." He throws up his hands in exultation.

This sets the tone for the whole day with Mike, and about sums him up as a person. He's all passion and enthusiasm. It's easy to see this in every plug he makes. The care, precision, and craftsmanship is at a level few others can match. They're truly works of art- but I don't mean just their finish. The way they swim and their ability to catch fish is incredible. This is all due to Mike's genuine adoration of both the fish, and his craft.

Mike is in his late 60's and has been fishing his entire life. He was born in 1951.

"My daily life is not about fishing at all, but my mind is: totally. We're all more or less involved [in our everyday lives]. It's all about balance, no matter what you do." He is leaning against the table saw in his shop, the sun coming in the single window behind him. He uncrosses his arms to point at me. "Fishing just happens to be our thing, but it could be anything."

Mike has had a very interesting life, with a trajectory you may not expect.

"For the first part of my life I was a musician. When I went in the Navy I was a musician, and when I got out I went on the road." Mike worked in the Navy on a Nuclear Destroyer Tender based out of Newport, RI. They were responsible for servicing and supplying the smaller vessels. After his four years of service, Mike hit the road with his bands—Rocky and the Darvons and Raising Cane—as a lead guitar player-playing music, traveling and fishing from Maine to Florida – for nearly twenty years! "We played every friggin' Sheraton Hotel from here to Timbukto!" I'm not sure if he says that with nostalgic happiness, or an old frustration.

Fishing

"I caught my first [striper] at the Charlestown Breachway when I was 18 years old on a Kastmaster. I had been fishing for a while, but it took until then to get a striped bass. I was with my Dad, and he told me to use a Kastmaster, and now I always keep one in my bag." Up to that point Mike fished the brooks, rivers, and lakes of Western Massachusetts, but that schoolie changed everything!

Mike tells us that there just weren't any striped bass to catch back then, and it wasn't until the fish started to come back from the moratorium that he started to really get into catching stripers in earnest.

"I used to be a herring and eel guy. I'd fish the Connecticut River a lot. Back then, there'd be three of us in a boat, all tight to 30-pound fish at the same time. This was probably about...1989? 1991? Just as the fish started to come back." He throws his hands up again. "Middle of the day, bright sunshine. It was sick!" Mike was happy to tell us about all the stripers he saw spawning in the river, and observing their habits every spring and witnessing their tremendous comeback.

He continues to give us more details of his past. "Then I started going to the Cape and the Canal again. Actually, I've been fishing the Cape since I was a kid." By kid, he means his early 20's, when his family was young. "Back then, there weren't any stripers to catch. We were happy to just catch blues and flounder, right from shore- right from Race Point, Head of the Meadow, Ballston Beach all those spots. We'd spend our summer vacations there, every year. Even when my daughters were growing up, we'd spend all our time fishing out there. Bait fishing, back then. It's what we did, not much use of plugs except for tins (for blues). My family loved it. My wife fished too, and we just loved it. We'd leave here [his house] at 1 in the morning, and we'd pick up eels at the back door of McSquids (long since closed) and head right to the beach - straight from here - and just start fishing. This was back before the cut at Nausset, and we'd drive 11 miles of beach and just fish all day and all night. Eleven freaking miles!" For Mike, fishing is so much more than catching a trophy. It's a way of life, and it's everything to him.



"We used to fish everywhere. In the travel vans, we had all of our fishing stuff. [We fished] all over! Especially in Florida. We spent every winter in Florida, just playing and fishing. For 10 years, probably more. My kids were born on the road! From [when I was] about 24 years old to about 35 years old, I really wanted to make it work. I really struggled and tried to make it. We lived on the road, us and a bunch of hippy musicians. My wife was with me, and she worked on and off the whole time doing what she could. My two girls grew up on the road."

I asked what music he played, totally floored by him sharing this personal bit of information with us. "A few originals, rock and roll stuff. Lots of covers. There was a good period of time where we were a show band, a 50's show band." He throws his arms up and is practically yelling at us now. Mike gets quieter again, and looks distant, staring at the floor. I don't know how many bands there were, it's all a blur. I must have done it, because I have scrap books of it, but I don't remember a lot of it. There's photos of it all, but it doesn't seem real to me."



“For me, the older I get the more fishing is about the social aspect now than even catching. I just love talking with other guys that are into it. I love discussing it, and getting into all aspects of this [thing we do]. I met Al Gag down there (at the Cape), and we really hit it off. We were only kids, maybe 25 years old, at the time. Fishing relationships can last a lifetime. We’re still friends to this day”

Mike doesn’t do shows, and he doesn’t care about advertising. He builds plugs the way he wants, not to make money. It’s why they are as good as they are; why they catch so many fish. “Not many guys know I’m out here [in Western Massachusetts] building these plugs. I don’t advertise, and I don’t do the shows.” I interrupt him to ask why not. Why not sell more? Isn’t there money being left on the table? Rarely is there even a week he isn’t sold out, so it’s not like people aren’t scrambling to get his plugs.

He tells me social media was the game changer after nearly quitting the business due to slow sales. “I don’t want any more business. I don’t need any more business. Not to sound like a...” he pauses, suddenly seeming a little embarrassed. “I want to build plugs the way I want, when I want”. I get the insinuation from him that he truly doesn’t care about the money. It’s the craft that he loves. “This is something I built from scratch, it’s my way, and it’s the way I want to do it. I don’t care how others do it.”



The Plugs

Mike has always been a carpenter, but came to making plugs later in life. To put it in his words "I had a hammer, and some tools, but...I was like, 'a lathe' what the hell is that?" It wasn't until there was an article in *The Fisherman* in 2004, written by Dave Pickering, that Mike really got the plug building bug. He was also strongly influenced by a fisherman and friend from Windsor Locks, Connecticut (Bill Stratton) who suggested the idea that he build the plug now known as the Commander- his most popular plug named after a South County Rhode Island legend, Peter Kernicki, who doesn't fish much these days but showed Mike what surf fishing the beaches of Rhode Island was all about.

A group of anglers he calls the "Windsor Locks Warriors" actually pushed him to finally build commercially. After a few attempts he finally made one that worked well enough to market. Mike tells me "bigger is better, [Bill] used to say. Now I can't keep them in stock." This concept of "bigger is better" can be seen throughout his line-up today, including his massive Big Ben at 15 inches overall length.

"When I saw that article...it was about a fat needlefish, which was really simple, and it really freaked me out," Mike excitedly tells me as we're standing at the door of his shop above the garage- which he also built himself. He said the article seemed pretty straightforward, and he thought he could probably build a few "I knew I just had to do that, and that's what got me started. It was amazing to think I could make something myself that could catch fish".



Sometimes the universe just pushes us to do something, and it just so happens around this same time his wife was working for a wood-working tool company, and she got him great deals on some of the tools. The rest is history.

“For years I worked out of my basement, with what I had...I used a ShopVac to collect the dust from the lathe.” Like with fishing, plug-making was a progression for Mike, “My philosophy for everything in life is to use what you have, and don’t just run out and buy something”. He spent years perfecting his building before he ever sold a plug. He carefully tests every plug in real conditions, for years, before he brings it to market.

The first plug Mike ever actually made money on was a stubby-needlefish he no longer makes. “Those first ones I made and sold all went to a guy fishing South County Rhode Island. They caught a lot of fish. But, nowadays I have so many options, I know needlefish catch fish, but I’d rather fish other designs. So I just don’t make any needlefish all anymore. I only make plugs I want to fish.”

While Mike’s high-quality finishes and diverse plug lineup would likely be enough to set him apart from many other plug builders, he has one very unique technique which results in extremely consistent build and swimming action. Mike’s plugs are made from two perfectly split pieces of wood that are glued back together.

“It was actually my dad Ben’s idea,” he tells me, as he digs through a box of blanks. Mike’s father is 92 and lives just down the street from him. He credits his father for helping him with a few of the designs and the process of getting to where he is today. “We did this (cutting the blanks in half) because using a lathe to drill a long hole for the through wire proved to be difficult. The needle fish was the first plug I ever built, so that was what got us started. We thought there must be another way to do this.”

He points out an obvious problem that any plug builder faces, "I had some big needle fish, 10, 12 inches long. How do you get a drill bit to drill that straight without popping out the side? It's very difficult if you use hardwood. You drill from each end, and compensate with a larger bit on one end to hope they meet in the middle." Mike's father 'jumped in with both feet' when he saw what the plugs Mike was building, and they built together for years. It was a team effort, which Mike is very proud of- as he should be. It's pretty simple idea conceptually, cutting the blank and then gluing it back together, and yet as Dave tells us, it's not as simple in practice. "I tried it," Dave tells Mike and I, "and I just could never get it quite right. I have a lot of respect for that process. It really does make the plugs special. Also the fact you can't tell at all, it just makes the plug so clean."



Mike uses a table saw to make the cut, and has a matrix spreadsheet that tells him for each plug how wide the wood should be, and where the cut has to be. If a plug has a high eye, or low, it all affects the way the plug is cut. This unique process allows him to place the through-wire perfectly in the center of the plug. This results in an extreme level of precision, and makes the plug swim perfectly straight every single time. He does this prior to shaping the plug; ripping (cutting) the blank (unshaped) piece of wood and then using high-quality wood glue and A LOT of clamps to put it back together. This also allows him to hide all the balance weights which results in a beautiful plug- but it's more than that. Once the wood is cut in half, and you can put the weights inside the plug, you can play with the action.

Mike raises his eyebrows, and his eyes twinkle as he's explaining all this. "Once inside, you can really play with the action, balance, and weight of the plug." I can tell he has about a thousand ideas in his head as he smiles at me. "I played with rattles for a few years inside, but ultimately I decided I didn't care for that." I have to agree with him, as I actually think in most cases for trophy fish I want the plug to be quiet and blend in with the surroundings. He then tells me, "Also, the central cut allows you put the eyes dead center on the glue line every time, which really helps with the look of the plug. It makes it look real." As for how many plugs he makes a year, he tells me it's roughly 1000. But he's planning on cutting back, he's retired from carpentry now and ready to fish more and work less.

"I make 24 different plugs in 35 colors, and I have to cut back. The thing is, I love every single one of them and I just can't decide which six or eight to stop making!" I quickly point out that's not really much of a reduction, and that 18 different kinds of plugs is still a lot, to which he replies "Hell yeah it is! I just don't know what to do; I got so sick of looking at the list and trying to decide which to stop making, I just threw it away."



Mike can finish about 25 to 30 plugs at a time. He moves them from the shop to his basement for the final epoxy coating, and he controls his humidity and heat very carefully. From set-up to finish, it takes him about three hours to just brush the epoxy on. The number of plastic gloves and paper towels he goes through are staggering. The amount of work it takes for this seemingly small step was really surprising to me, since I have no plug building experience. He also tells me that he double seals his plugs for up to four hours to prevent cracking, prior to all this painting and epoxying. This is an extra-long sealing step, which also explains why his plugs hold up so well.

I asked how long it takes him to finish a series of plugs like he shows me on the drying rack. "I don't care if I fast-track them, if I go my normal pace, if I focus on one specific kind, or if I jump around. It takes me two months," he stops and holds up two fingers, waving them at me and repeating himself for emphasis, "TWO MONTHS, to finish a [series] of plugs from start to finish! Because of this, I can only, will only, make approximately 900 to 1000 plugs a year." Mike tells me he has created more demand than supply; but again, he really does it simply because he loves it.

"My plug building and my family keep me plenty busy now that I am retired. My plug business is, and was, made possible because of my wife Jen's web-designing knowledge and a never ending support of this addiction of mine. She also helps me with field testing plugs, inventory control, quarterly taxes and a million other little things to keep my business thriving and on-track. It's a real partnership."

I asked Mike about collectors, about the insane prices some guys are willing to pay for plugs- and if he thinks his plugs will ever make it into that category. He was quick to dismiss me. Out of modesty or disinterest, I'm not sure. But one thing is obvious to me, even before he says it. "I don't want guys to buy my stuff and put it in a bin somewhere," Mike implores me. "There is nothing better than knowing guys are out catching fish on my plugs, it's why I do it. I'd rather a few good guys get my plugs [and fish them]. You understand what I'm saying? If one good guy gets my plug, who appreciates it, that's what I want. I'd rather that then sell to all the 'experts' out there. I don't want to do that. That's why I don't have any help, why I only make as many as I do, that's why I only sell what I personally fish. I'd rather get one email from someone who has caught one good fish and is beside himself [then sell more plugs]. It kills me every time, it's the best feeling in the world. I feel so privileged to have made many new friends and look forward to making many more."

Mike only fishes his own stuff these days. I ask him what his favorite plug is that he makes, knowing that it's hard for a builder to choose. His answer surprised me, simply because it's not one that I fish regularly. "Actually, my favorite plug I make is the Baby Beast [darter]. It's just a real versatile plug, that you can swim in the surf or heavy current. It'll go down four or five feet, or just below the surface. You can do a lot with it, even kayak guys troll them."

"But really, I'm totally into metal lips. I have been for a long time. I used to be a Bomber and Rapala guy, but after I made the needle fish from that *On The Water* article, I started thinking, if they hit these, what else will they hit? And so I started making an Atom 40 style plug. I love the sub-surface metal lips. Yeah it's great (he makes several that are surface that I love), but if you want good fish you generally have to get subsurface."

I ask what his biggest fish on his own plugs is next. "Not very big," he says, pausing to think about it, "50.5-inches I think?" I laugh and quickly tell him that most guys will never see a fish that big. "Yeah, I guess. It wasn't 50-pounds though, that's for sure." I point out again, that despite it not being 50-pounds, it is still a very high quality fish. He then tells me he caught two fish that were within a half-inch of each other that were also just about 50-inches, in the Canal. Both were caught on the same day, just three years ago, and both on his own pencil popper, which he calls the "Ditch Witch".



Canal or not, those are awesome fish on something you built yourself.

I then asked him who he really respects today, he was quick to answer Stan Gibbs, Stan Gibbs, Stan Gibbs!!! (a wooden plug genius) And if I didn't make plugs, I would only be using Super Strike darters and poppers. Period. Just swim the popper, like a Danny, day or night it's disgusting how well it works. It's just sick. However, I fish my own stuff 99% of the time. This is why Mike and I have the mutual respect for each other that we do. He has created every plug to be used. He fishes them himself, hard. He designs every plug to be beat up, chewed up, and destroyed. He makes them for the fish; not the fisherman. I would never buy his plugs if this wasn't the case; I have no interest in collecting. I fish. I destroy his plugs, and he loves that. Essentially, Mike builds beautiful tools, functional art, which he wants fisherman, like Dave and I, to use up.

"I also have a great deal of respect for builders who have actual web sites – building is more than putting up a pretty paint job on Facebook. Much, much more. Through the taxes we pay we are helping to improve our beloved sport for future generations of fishermen."

Mistakes: The Mother Of Invention

In the midst of telling me about the intricacies of the finishing process, Mike stops, throws his hand up mid-sentence, and proclaims: "Hey! Let me show you the most amazing thing I've seen in 15 years of plug building. I mean, man, this really freaked me out." He instantly had me hooked. He walked off to the back of his shop, and came back with a popper. "These are my small poppers, about 5.5". He hands me this weird plug, with a strange face on it.

"So I'm making all these plugs, I've got all the belly holes drilled. Then, like an idiot, I cut the head wrong! I cut the head upside down by accident, so now instead of a popper, I have almost a darter face. I thought for sure, shit, I'm done! But I decided to finish a few anyways." He takes it back from me, and starts mimicking the swimming motion in front of my face. "Let me tell you, these things were the most amazing plugs EVER! They dart, and swim, and pop, and they cast a mile. That was a long time ago, years and years ago. It was amazing though. I mean, a mistake! I couldn't believe it. That plug was amazing. I never did anything with it [never sold it], but maybe I should." The lesson learned: mistakes sometimes can pay off!



Single Hooks

Despite Mike talking about cutting back, he's actually continually adding ideas and modifications to his plugs. He's started making some of his darters with metal lips, and will offer all of them with the option in the future. He calls them the "head bangers" because they save the lips from being destroyed when you fish them in heavy structure. He is also extremely excited to show us that he's come out with a new small glider (Junior Z-glide) and will soon have a huge spook. Actually, the spook has been in the process for over half a decade.

But when I asked him what he's most excited about for the future? Without hesitation he said moving his plugs to single treble hooks.

"I've got six or seven plugs ready to go [to single treble hooks]. This excites me. It's all about protecting the stripers. I want my grandkids to be able to catch stripers. The one hook idea is really catching on. I've been using one treble hook and a rear flag for over a decade. It's common sense!" He proclaims this point while pounding his fist.

"I see these plugs out now with three or even more sets of hooks on them- what is the point of that!? I mean, jeeze! It makes no sense, yet guys are buying them! And now with the news of the striper being overfished, I mean, we have to do something! I just don't understand the polarization. We need to do something. I'll go so far to say that soon all my plugs will have one treble hook. All of them, even the biggest ones.

He emphasizes every word, "You. Don't. Need. Anything. More, than one belly treble hook to catch Striped Bass."

"I have no problem harvesting a bass every now and then for personal consumption . But 99% of fish that are released stand a much better chance of surviving using the one treble-hook method. I go a step further and am a "barb squasher" – it's just so much easier and quicker to unhook a fish and release it... safely."

He is quick to point out that he's already perfected the single belly hook on eight of his plugs, with more to come in the future. He actually was kind enough to give me a single hook Pikie, and I can attest that it works exactly like the two hook version, while also casting further because of the added tail weight.

"You know, if you take off that rear hook, often times you get a lot of wild action and side to side roll. I don't like that. So I had to redesign the plug to work the way I wanted. It's really great, and I'm really excited about this. I don't care if they sell as fast or not, it's what's helping the fish that I care about."



Wonder Boy

At the end of the visit to his shop, just as we were wrapping up, Mike pulled out a couple of the most beat up, used up, and disgusting looking plugs of his I'd ever seen.

"These were hit by lightning."

"Wait, what? Are you kidding?" I was shocked, yet again.

He explains. "They weren't direct hit, but they were in a guys plug bag in his shed. The lightning hit the ground, and then traveled through the electrical conduit, and into the shed. Everything that was in the shed was, like, incinerated. His Van Staal? The stainless steel screws that were in it, they evaporated. They were completely gone. Poof! Gone. So here is a Commander and a Pikie that were hit."

He hands them to me. Yeah, they were melted a bit, and crusty to the touch. But, given they were hit by lightning? They didn't look too bad.



Dave grabbed them from me, “Have you guys seen the movie *The Natural*, with Robert Redford?”

Neither of us had. Dave explains that in the movie, the main character carves a baseball bat out of a tree that was struck by lightning. He calls the bat “wonder boy”, and in the movie it gives the main character special abilities, and takes him through his whole career.

“These are just like that bat. You should wire them up, and fish the hell out of them. Call them Wonder Boy #1 and #2” Dave was insistent.

It’s quiet for a moment as we all consider the plugs. Mike looks up, his eyes sparkling with inspiration, and thoughts of giant striped bass caught with half-fried plugs. “Hey. That’s a great idea,” Mike responds slowly, “I’m going to do just that. I’m going to do that!”

“You could even refinish them,” Dave suggests.

Mike glances at us both briefly, then back to the plugs he holds in his gnarled, calloused hand. “Nahh!” he almost whispers, “You’d just be wrecking the mojo.”