

PLAYERS|LUTHIERS|COLLECTORS

GUITAR BENCH

ACOUSTIC & CLASSICAL

Issue 6 2013



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GUITAR BENCH

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EDITORS NOTE

Welcome to our second issue of 2013!

We've decided to do something different this issue by putting out a bumper issue with more interviews than usual. We've interviewed so many wonderful folks recently, we decided to put together a bumper issue for our readers. So this month, Al Carruth, Kenny Hill and Jay Lichty give us a breath of knowledge in lutherie with Doug Young telling us how he finds the time to play professional and yet contribute to various magazines.

In addition, we're very lucky to be able to bring you the very latest in guitar technology through our High Voltage feature. Paul Vo just launched his standalone acoustic synthetizer, a rather amazing piece of technology designed to complement acoustic guitars and we managed to get an interview with him within days!

The guitarbench team however, hasn't forgotten our love for cool and unusual guitars and this month sees both modern and vintage guitars as well as more unusual views of a guitar...

Warmest regards and happy picking,
Terence Tan,
Editor.

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THE INTERVIEW:

LICHTY GUITARS





Thanks for taking the time to speak to us, Jay. Can we maybe start at the beginning and ask how you got started building instruments?

Sure! I started building ukuleles as a remedy to a severe case of UAS (ukulele acquisition syndrome). I've been a musician since the early 70's...mainly playing banjo and mandolin with a bit of guitar along the way. In early 2009 I stumbled across the ukulele, bought one (well, actually two...well really three...)and became hooked.

I have had the pleasure of owning and playing custom made mandolins and banjos and know first hand how much better they can be than their factory cousins so I naturally wanted a custom ukulele. Instead of buying one I decided to try my hand at building one. That first build was a complete success and after about seven ukulele builds I found myself in a guitar building workshop with one of the best acoustic guitar builders in the world, Wayne Henderson.

That was a four student class and we each built a mahogany dreadnaught modelled after the Martin D-18. That first guitar turned out great and I could see that I had the right aptitude and temperament for the craft. My years of building houses and playing music were meshing into a new career choice and so with the down-turn of the economy and decline of my home building business...one step led to another and now I am building guitars and ukuleles full time.

Let's touch on ukes a little later and focus on guitars now.... so can you share with us your experiences at Wayne Henderson's course?

Working with Wayne was a big boost for me. Here I was getting the inside track from one of the most respected builders in the world. The workshop was intense as four students each built a guitar from a pile of wood to a finished instrument in 10 days! Bless Wayne's heart.

He accomplished this feat in a make shift workshop four hours from the comfort of his own shop and tools. Fortunately fellow luthier, Don Wilson, was there for the first couple of days...long enough to get the four bodies together. I had just enough experience to know some fundamentals so the timing was perfect and I felt like a sponge soaking it all in. I have to say it was one of the best experiences of my life... literally life changing.

“I have to say he does a lot more with a pocket knife than I.”

All of Wayne's methods and jigs made so much sense to me and I still use most of his ways, though I have to say he does a lot more with a pocket knife than I. Wayne is very laid back and funny. He teaches by example and I left that workshop with a strong sense of both how a guitar is built and with a deep respect for Wayne and how he presents himself to the world. He is just so genuine... what you see is what you get... and what you see is fantastic.



And where did you go from there?

I came home from that workshop all motivated to build guitars. Up to that point I had been building in the garage which was not climate controlled so I immediately started building a shop. I was a very successful residential builder up to this point but the economy was winding down and work was not available so I figured I'd bide my time building guitars until things picked up.

About 6 months into this transition Corrie, my wife, came on board and started developing our web site and marketing strategies. The phone literally quit ringing for new houses and started ringing for guitars. We have been going full time ever since. I build custom guitars and ukuleles when the demand is there.

The rest of the time I build speculative instruments. For these I typically build what I'd like to own. That way I stay excited and inspired and that dedicated energy helps in my development of the craft and with the development of new techniques.

So now it's ukes and guitars, there are a lot of differences between the two I understand?

Not really. The two are more similar than one would think. The biggest difference is in the bracing and, therefore, the voicing of the top and over all instrument. Obviously a guitar top is under a lot more stress than that of the ukulele.

The larger surface area means more areas to work with for bracing and voicing. As far as the actual building goes the ukulele takes almost as much time to build as the guitar. In some respects it is more difficult with its tighter curves.





How about tonewood choices for guitars vs. ukes?

I find that the woods that work well for guitar work well for ukulele. Guitars, being larger, benefit proportionately more by the choice of back and sides but both instruments are sonically colored by the wood species used. Then there is the whole visual aspect that the back and sides offer. My personal preference are the rosewoods both for that visual bling and the quality it adds to the voice of an instrument.

That said, I am a huge fan of the warmth of mahogany and clarity of maple. As most builders will agree, the top of an instrument is the engine and produces the majority of the voice. Some will tell you that the tone wood used for the back and sides offer very little, if any, effect. I agree with the top being the engine but think the effect of the back and side wood is synonymous with the type of spices one would use in cooking...that choice really effects the flavour of the instrument.



And have you any particular favourite tonewood combinations?

Because I like to mix it up and not do the same build over and over I have had a chance to hear and play a lot of woods and combinations. What happens though is that my “favourite” combination is subject to change depending on my mood. This is in no particular order of preference but I like Brazilian rosewood with either Engelmann or Carpathian spruce; Cocobolo and sinker redwood are amazing together; I have a Cocobolo/ western cedar steel string that really works well. A current favourite is Chechen with either Engelmann or Carpathian spruce.

My personal guitar is has one side out of Honduran mahogany, the other and the back out of Spanish Cedar and the top is Engelmann. It was a trial run of some design ideas that I used “scrap/orphaned” wood to build.

I kept it really because I could not offer it for sale, but as it turned out I really love the guitar. The “favourite” depends so much on the style of music being played and how each individual determines their “favourite”. Some people are more visual than they are audible.

In other words, they get as much inspiration out of the look of the wood (and accompanying bindings and bling) as the sound. Then I have had players come in to demo guitars who never even look, with their eyes, at the instrument. They don’t care what it looks like. To them it is about feel or sound... even smell. Who hasn’t sniffed inside a guitar?

When I’m working with a customer I find out how they play and how they experience the instrument and I use that info to recommend wood combinations. If I’m building a spec guitar I try and build in a way that excites all the senses.



So what would you recommend to a fingerpicker vs. flatpicker for example?

When I'm finger picking I'm typically playing solo so I like a certain amount of overtones to add fullness to the piece. Think right pedal of a piano used modestly.

Flatpicking is more often done with other accompaniment so the overtones would likely be too much. Here, too much of that right piano pedal would be distracting.

I think a good flatpicking guitar should have a loud voice and each notes should decay pretty quickly to make room for the next. The cool thing is that, while the wood choice is important for each style of playing, it is the construction (mainly of the soundboard, but the back and sides as well) that influences these elements.

“a conversation about expectations and guitar style with the customer is so important.”



This is why a conversation about expectations and guitar style with the customer is so important. There are some wood combinations that have been proven to work well with certain styles such as Adirondack red spruce and Brazilian rosewood for that vintage flat picking sound.

I think in the end it is as much about the build as it is the wood. A good builder can use that same wood combination and make a *killer* fingerpicking guitar.

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But there are other factors, such as body shape, scale length which can also affect the final tone?

You are correct. Everything makes a difference. A deeper body will give more bass and typically more volume. Scale length can effect comfort and tone. A longer scale, such as Martin's typical 25.4" or Fender's 25.5", causes the strings to have more tension at a given tuning than Gibson's 24.5" scale.

The longer scale will make the tone a bit brighter. To me a good finger picking guitar will have the longer scale while the shorter scale lends itself better to blues and strumming.

The shorter scale length will be a bit easier on the fingers. Of course these are broad generalities but all things we can use to help create a guitar to suit our customers.

.. and do these general rules hold true for ukes too? Or are they totally different beasts?

Yes, the rules still apply. Body size and depth... and shape all matter. Scale length is going to have an effect on the string tension and therefore the voice.

The basic rule is that every part makes up the whole so changing any part affects the whole...some more than others. On an aside, I have found that one of the most profound alterations is the addition of a side sound port both in guitars and ukuleles.

The effect, to me, is amazing... especially in the ukulele where the players are bit more accepting of a non-traditional element. Guitarist either love them or simply think they are wrong.

My side sound ports are in addition to the sound hole in the instrument's top and, in addition to giving the player their own personal monitor, they open up the bass and lower midrange nicely.





And is there anything you have noticed customers tend to gloss over which is very important?

String spacing at the nut and saddle might fall into that category. It is amazing what 1/16" can do at the nut. I try to keep my customers focused during the ordering process so that they won't just gloss over a detail. It is important for me to figure out how each customer interprets the guitar. Again, for some it is touch, others sound...and some mainly visual. I can do my best work when I key into that aspect and then invite them to tune into the parts they may not be focusing on. It is also important for me to play some different guitars so they can hear/see/feel what the instrument sounds like from the audience perspective.

And would you say that the string gauge eventually used on the instrument will impact on the way you build?

Yes. The top plate can be more accurately tuned if the string gauge is a given factor. The style and preference of the player is very helpful because if light gauge strings are the preferences I can go a bit more delicate on the bracing and of course the set up is fine tuned to the particular string gauge.

This does not mean that the string gauge has to always stay the same. The guitar won't fail if we change from lights to mediums for example, however a bit of set up may need to be done for optimum play. This is something any competent repair person can do.





And I understand you've just been to the Somogyi voicing course- how was that experience?

Absolutely amazing! Ervin Somogyi has spent a good part of his life experimenting with the construction of the guitar. In his quest for the ultimate responsive guitar he dared, and still dares, to push the limits of what and how the bracing and thickness of the top plate (as well as back plate) can do to the voice of his guitars. I just completed his voicing class which was a very intense week of lectures and hands on construction focused mainly but not exclusively to the guitar top.

I came away with a whole new understanding of how different bracing patterns and brace dimensions effect the voice and responsiveness of the guitar and how to manipulate them to achieve a desired outcome. Now I have a much better understanding of how to brace and voice my guitars to better support or suit any particular style or player's preferences. Not being afraid to step outside of the box (no pun intended) to build the best instruments I can I am now more confident that my experimentation will be from a more informed place. I can't really put into words how profound my new understanding is but to say that I am really excited to see where this leads my building.



And moving forwards, what projects are on the horizon for you?

Although the bulk of our customers are regular players (as in nonprofessional) we have been fortunate that some pros have found us as well. Our guitars are in the hands of players like Geoff Achison from Australia, Doug Lancio (John Hyatt band), Mike and Tom Gossin (Gloriana) and Randall Bramblett. One of the biggest R&B players in the business is currently talking with us about a custom guitar for her act.

On the ukulele front we currently are working with Hawaiian ukulele master Kimo Hussey on some new designs. He has been introducing our ukes to the Asian market with great results. So business is looking up. As always I will continue to do by best to create quality work and, as most builders, continue the quest for the ultimate build and to make each next instrument better than the last.

P R E V I E W

Stay tuned for Issue 7 of
Guitarbench Magazine.

With our usual mix of
great guitars, vintage and
contemporary...

and interviews with
world reknown luthiers..

and even a ukulele or
two....



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