

BUILDING THE DREAM GUITAR

Article by Michael Keller

When I began building guitars in the mid-1970s, it became apparent that marketing handmade instruments was not a simple proposition. There were no custom guitar shows nor stores that carried handmade guitars that I knew of. Most famous bands and high-profile musicians were playing name brand factory guitars and there was no public acceptance of handmade guitars as a viable option for the serious guitarist. Factories ruled the market.

This was a difficult situation for the aspiring luthier. Slowly, into the 1980s, as more and more small, high-quality guitar builders set up shops around the country, interest in handmade guitars began to grow. Through annual exhibitions put on by organizations like the Guild of American Luthiers, the general level of public acceptance of independent luthier-built guitars began to rise, and players began to see the level of quality in handmade guitars climb. It was not very long before the quality of handmade guitars became equal to the finest factory-made instruments. Public demand for a more personalized style of instrument began to take hold and many small shops found guitarists willing to place orders for custom-built instruments.

By the early 1990s, the handmade American acoustic guitar market became a very different beast. No longer considered a lower quality version of factory guitars, small independent luthiers were able to experiment and innovate in ways large corporate factories could not. Without the huge overhead and expensive tooling and labor costs of factories, small luthiers were able to move faster and more quickly to deal with the public's demand for more custom-style guitars. Handmade, custom-built guitars were becoming the trend as luthiers began to take a serious foothold in a factory-dominated market. By 1996, when the first Healdsburg Guitar Festival was held, the custom luthier-built guitar market was experiencing a very strong upward trend. The guitar-buying public found no shortage of cool, sleek, superior-sounding instruments in every style imaginable being built in small, one-person shops.

Strong public attendance at the Healdsburg Guitar Festival let everyone know there was a new acceptance by players and collectors to look seriously at the top luthiers as a viable option for a lifetime instrument. Many serious collectors and players started to show up and purchase or commission guitars from the top luthiers. Each year found attendance at the Healdsburg show growing, with more and more sales and orders being taken by the exhibiting builders. It was a remarkable scene to be a part of and to watch develop. I had the amazing experience of having a guitar collector walk up to my table and buy the two instruments I had brought in the first hour of a show! I soon found many guitarists talking to me about the difficulties they were having with poorly built and difficult-to-play mass-produced guitars. Many players had developed specific ideas for a special and personal guitar. Their dream guitar was one that was not available on the commercial factory market, and one that was built to a level of quality and style unheard of in previous years, with made-to-order custom options and a neck fit to their own hands. This is today's market for the modern luthier. Serious, sophisticated, educated, and informed, the customers I am now meeting at guitar shows are a new breed. The luthier-built guitar

scene has, it seems, come of age.

When Henry Lowenstein walked up to my table on the first day of the 2004 Healdsburg Guitar Festival, I had no idea as to what was about to unfold in my guitar-building life. Having hand-built acoustic guitars for the last thirty years, I was used to many unusual and different requests. Henry had been on a quest for almost ten years to have a remarkable guitar built. He had owned several music stores and handled many world-class guitars. With a very sophisticated knowledge of acoustic guitars, Henry had come to Healdsburg to find a luthier to build a very special guitar that he had had in mind. It was a really different instrument he described to me. It was custom in every aspect, and extremely ornate with a large number of inlays. With hand and shoulder joints that were causing him discomfort, Henry was having prob-



Fashioned after turn-of-the-century parlor guitars admired by the client, this Dream Guitar used the client's stash of Brazilian Rosewood and the luthier's finest Adirondack, mahogany, and ebony. To meet the client's physical needs, this guitar was made narrower than most parlors, and designed to be more playable with a thin neck, compound radius fingerboard, short 24 inch scale, and sound port for added volume and tone. Finally, the client wanted this to be as much a work of art as an instrument

lems playing some of the large, deep-bodied guitars he owned. Could an acoustic guitar with a rather thin, three-inch body be built? Could it have a side sound port to increase the volume for the player? For ease of playing, could it have extra-light-gauge strings and still have adequate volume? Could the heel of the guitar be cut down for ease of high-position fingering? Could it have a very short scale length for the softer action that short scales give? Could it be a really small-bodied parlor and still have volume and presence? These questions astounded me, but I think I said yes to it all, trusting my intuition and years of experience. He also asked about having it be a showpiece for pearl inlay work. Could this happen? Would it work? What would it sound like?

We talked for a very long time while he played the four guitars I had on display. He had just talked to several of the leading makers at the show who all said they would not consider an order for such a strange and unusual guitar. To build such a unique and expensive guitar sounded risky, at best. What if the guitar did not meet the customer's expectations? What if he did not like it? What about refunds on orders? Tying up as much time as this would take was indeed a risk for a guitar builder. These are questions that need to be asked early on in this sort of commission. Henry and I seemed to have a rapport right off the bat, and it seemed we were comfortable talking extreme guitar making, so I gave him the green light and said we should start an email stream between us and see what might develop. Arriving home several days later, I found a three-page fine print letter from Henry, detailing this guitar he had been thinking of. He had most of the details worked out, except the type of art inlays and the scale of the fingerboard, but he also had several dozen questions about the nature of such a guitar. Would it have good volume? Would it be balanced in tone? What would the small size of the body do to the sound? How short could we make the scale length? How would the side sound port affect the tone of the guitar? There were so many unknown factors. A flurry of emails back and forth began, and we both began to unfold our feelings and hopes for this guitar. I sent Henry a very long, detailed letter addressing many of his concerns and ideas and letting him know what I thought about the specific details he had in mind. I told him I thought I could meet his expectations and would not let him down. He responded with a large down payment, and then the race was on!

We found that both of us were getting very excited about this guitar, and the project was becoming a lot of fun and was full of energy. At one point, Henry emailed me and told me that this was the most fun he had ever had! This was good news. We ended up talking or emailing each other almost every other day, and soon had the instrument laid out on paper and in our imaginations. Occasionally, I would have a mild panic attack and think to myself, *How am I going to do all this?* Then I would think, *Wow, what a cool guitar I get to build!* After a while, as I started the build, it became the most fun I had ever had making a guitar. This feeling came mainly from the generous and kind nature of my friend, Henry. He made this guitar a real pleasure and joy to build. It was the most difficult and demanding guitar I have built to date, yet Henry gave it all a fun, relaxed, and happy feel.

At times, I was overwhelmed by the demands of such a finely detailed guitar. The amount of inlay was staggering. Henry told me to put inlay everywhere. Later, he asked me if there were any places on the guitar that we had forgotten to inlay. Well, how about inlay on the inside braces? Just kidding! Ok, inlay the braces! What? Just kidding! We became comrades in a quest to make this a world-class masterwork guitar. In the end, it was really Henry's energy and imagination that made this guitar happen. I may have been the builder that made it become real, but I am convinced that this guitar was firmly in Henry's subconscious mind for years. As he handled all the cool vintage Martins and Gibsons that made their way through his music stores and those he visited, I know he was thinking about the things he liked about them and what would make a better, cooler guitar. This guitar came from Henry's imagination. I know that for a fact.

So, onto the guitar itself. As the guitar came together, very real concerns needed to be addressed. Henry planned on stringing it with extra-light strings, which would cut down on the instrument's volume. To help compensate for this, we chose a stiff, fine-grained, master grade Adirondack spruce top. With a ringing tap-tone like a tuning fork, it would respond to the lightest vibration with a crisp, strong fundamental resonance. To help it along, we used matching air-dried fifteen-year-old Adirondack bracing stock. We decided to scallop the braces heavily, since he was only going to use extra-light-gauge strings. This is a technique used to loosen up a guitar top by selectively shaving down the top braces in certain areas. Scalloping of a guitar's braces must be carefully done, or it can cause permanent damage to the guitar's top. Done well, it tends to really open up a guitar's resonance. Over the last thirty years, I have had the opportunity of looking at the internal construction of, and then playing, many guitars made by my friend Jim Olson, who scallops the braces on his guitars. This gave me a very good idea of how to make this system work without the possible problem of the top collapsing. A Brazilian rosewood bridge plate helped keep things light and



A masterpiece in the making. Note the attached neck is still square, and awaits the final shaping to the designated radius dimensions – very critical to the instrument's playability. The size and location of this sound port make a huge difference in the volume and how this instrument sounds to the player.



This breathtaking Brazilian Rosewood is the finest sounding wood that either the luthier or the client had ever seen. Picked from a large number of boards collected by the client, and tap tested by the luthier, the six sheets could be arranged in a wide variety of combinations. After dozens of emails, this placement of the wood was chosen, both for aesthetic impact and stability.

resonant. All of the plates were carefully thinned for a lighter-than-usual string load by taking a few thousandths off here and there. In the end, a guitar is the sum of all its construction and materials. The sound one hears is a composite of many different materials and efforts. The goal with Henry's guitar was to make it as light as possible to drive the energy into the top and not into excess weight or mass.

One of the really fun things about building this guitar came from modern technology. I have recently begun taking digital pictures of guitars while I am building them and sending customers weekly photo updates. In years past, as I built guitars, very few of my customers ever saw their guitars until they were done. With Henry's guitar, he saw every shaving, every clamping, every brace made and glued. It was a really cool addition to the whole building process for Henry, and it never took very much effort to make it happen. Henry knew every detail of his guitar as it was created, and I think that made the whole process better. He knew exactly what his guitar looked like, inside and out, before it left my hands. He was able to catch any misunderstandings and make sure every detail was as we had planned. So, taking a huge breath, I began the building process.

In his quest to have this guitar built, Henry had acquired a very large plank of master grade, gorgeous Brazilian rosewood and had it sawn into five precise, manicured sheets for guitar building. These he shipped to me, and he left it to me to choose how to best cut out the parts for the guitar. I spent a long time studying the five sheets of veneer and finally cut the wood up into the parts I needed to make his guitar. Making the first cuts in this wood on a band saw took a lot of courage, as it was almost irreplaceable if anything went wrong. With the sides cut out and bent, and the top and back braced, the guitar really started to become a real, living instrument. Very soon, I had the body together and the neck glued on, and we were ready for the art inlays. We had found a pearl inlay

cutting shop in Vietnam and had a very beautiful set of inlays that we both agreed on cut and sent to Henry, who forwarded them to me. This saved a lot of cost and time, and the inlays were world class. Inlaying the guitar was the most difficult work of all, and it was overwhelming at times. But once it was done, the guitar really began to shine.

With the guitar built and inlaid, it was time to apply a finish and get it ready for strings. Excitement began to really flow for both of us as it came to the day I was to actually put strings on. What a day! I could hardly sit still as I strung it up for the first time. My heart was in my throat as I tuned the strings to pitch. Would it sound as good as it looked? Would it sing? What about volume? I was a very nervous guitar maker at that point. Months of my life and Henry's income were on the line.

I could not believe the sound that I heard from the guitar. It was really amazing! I was stunned. The tone was very loud and bright, with an even balance across the strings. It sustained for an amazingly long time. It sounded incredible! I had my wife play it to get her impressions, and she said it was the best sounding guitar I had ever made.

The side sound port gave the guitar an amazing presence for the player, completely changing the tonal experience of playing a guitar. I called Henry and told him the news, and we both did a little dance in place! It was then decided that I was to bring the guitar down in person and spend several days with Henry. The guitar had its own seat on the plane and made the journey without any problems. I had the most beautiful three days with Henry and his family. Everyone was full of excitement and joy as Henry played his new guitar. Henry's brother-in-law thanked me for all the joy I had brought into Henry's life, having heard about the progress each week at family dinners. Wow! I still can't believe it. This was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. Thank you Henry and Marcy (Henry's very understanding wife)! I will never forget the experience of building this instrument and the joy and happiness that were those few days with you and your family! Life is amazing when things go well! ■



This "crossroads" of pearl, ivoroid binding, and inlay summarizes the extraordinary amount of detail that went into this guitar. Every joint, every pattern, and every specification was discussed from both a practical and an artistic point of view. Misunderstandings were avoided by daily emails, though ultimately the client had to have faith in the huge amount of selection and control that went into every inch of the luthier's work.