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MAKERS & SHAKERS

In his element:
Roger Bucknall

Wood, Sweat & Tears

UK luthier Roger Bucknall of Fylde Guitars finds his muse in his high-profile clientele

BY JULIE BERGMAN

“I could spend all my life in a forest,” says Roger Bucknall, who is practically doing just that. He and his wife Moira have planted nearly 1,000 native hardwoods around their country home on the outskirts of Penrith, in the northwest England county of Cumbria, surrounded by the rolling green dales of the spectacular Lake District.

There’s a reason Bucknall likes all those native hardwoods nearby: He’s the luthier behind Fylde Guitars, one of the most revered instrument companies in the United Kingdom and beyond. But he also likes to have friends nearby. When he invites Fylde customers into his living room for a bit of scotch and music, he and his wife enjoy taking in the sounds and

magic of what he has created. But if Bucknall appears to be just enjoying the company, he’s actually doing much more: He listens intently to the instruments—for the attack of the strings, for a uniform sound across the upper and lower ranges—and analyzes the relationship between the construction and response of the guitars to the styles of the players.

Give Bucknall a forest to build with and exceptional artists to build *for*, and he’s a happy man. His motivation is “to make my living amongst piles of incredible wood,” he says, “using the weird and wonderful skills and experience I’ve been lucky enough to have, and to fulfill the wishes of so many players that I admire.”

If strong motivation is the life blood of a successful creator, 66-year-old Bucknall has that at his core. He has the heart of a musician, the skills of an engineer, and the mind of an inventor. But it’s Bucknall’s love of music and deep respect for musicians that has driven him to be one of the most celebrated instrument builders in the UK. He has been widely recognized as such not only by the musicians he serves, but by his recent inclusion in the Queen’s 2016 Honors List, having been made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) for his contribution to guitar-building and music.

Bucknall’s relationship with music and musicians is central to everything he has done in his 40-plus years of making guitars

and various Celtic instruments for both budding artists and the elite of acoustic music. Building guitars sprang from his early involvement with playing guitar and wood-working. He constructed his first guitar at age nine in his father's garage. In 1973, he opened a small shop in the basement of a tailor's shop on the northwest coast of England in the Borough of Fylde, Lancashire—the hamlet that gave his company its name. At its peak, Fylde's output swelled to 1,000 guitars a year, but production slowed during the '80s synth-pop era. Now, Bucknall builds about 120 instruments each year in his Cumbrian shop. In all, as a professional builder, he has produced more than 9,000 instruments.

Initially, Bucknall supplied most of the top players in the UK folk scene, as his guitars were ideal for the emerging fingerstyle and open tunings of the 1970s. Over the years, his guitars have been heralded by such top players as Bob Dylan, Martin Carthy, John Renbourn, Nic Jones, John Doyle, John Martyn, Beverley Martyn, Happy Traum, Davey Graham, Eric Bibb, and many others. Rock and jazz players have caught on, too—those who have owned or used Fylde instruments include Paul McCartney, Pete Townshend, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Nancy Wilson, Sting, David Spinozza, Al DiMeola, and Stanley Clark. And a new generation of Fylde players has emerged, including guitarists John Smith, Lisa Hannigan, Ben Walker, Will McNicol, and Megan Henwood. “That has always been my main interest—to see my ‘babies’ played by my guitar heroes,” Bucknall says.

He can come across as serious, a bit gruff even, as he dons goggles and moves around the workbench. But that seriousness evaporates later over a pint in the local pub, where patrons seem to know his work.

From his youth, Bucknall was enthralled by making things, through engineering, fine woodwork, pottery, and weaving. He obtained a university degree in mechanical engineering, and studied musical acoustics, while designing industrial tape recorders. On the side, he played guitar, fiddle, mandolin, and banjo in local folk clubs, where he met many of his eventual friends and customers.

Bucknall describes himself as an unfulfilled musician, but a qualified engineer. His knowledge of electronics, materials science, design, acoustics, and tool making converge in his instruments. He is driven by a fascination of human skills and machinery, but in most of his work, he still seeks the individuality of hands-on craftsmanship. When giving a

guided tour of the towering stacks of tone-woods in the loft of his shop, his excitement for the raw materials of his trade takes centerstage. “I can shape a neck by hand much quicker than a CNC machine,” he says. “I love wood, I love metal, but I have come to love the flexibility of working by hand.”

When Bucknall started making guitars, there were few other makers in England, so he was primarily self-taught, which led him to invent and experiment while still honoring the masters who came before him, particularly C. F. Martin. “I feel strongly that a guitar maker should try and contribute something of his own, and not simply follow other people's ideas,” he says.

Bucknall sees no limit to how “good” a guitar can be or sound, or how far he can push



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his own standards. Fylde guitars are respected not only for their tone and playability, but also the perfection that is evident in the entire building process, from the choice of woods to the design, bracing, construction, finishing, and setup. Bucknall works with a small staff now, including Moira, in the office, and two shop assistants, who under his direction make the components and assembly look as precise as if done by machine. He compares his work to that of the famed British watchmaker George Daniels, who wanted every part to look as if it had never been touched by human hands. “We do at least 95 percent of the work by hand,” Bucknall says. “The only thing made by machine is the truss-rod cover.”

While dedicated to the simplicity of hand work, Bucknall doesn't go in for a lot of

detailed inlay on his instruments. “I recognize the art and skill of inlay, but I am always under pressure to get instruments made, and any extra decoration holds me back,” he says. “I keep purfling and binding very simple, allowing the colors and grains to speak for themselves. No stains, no fillers.”

Bucknall has a massive stock of timber, far more than most guitar makers. His instruments range from his original Oberon model with a wide finger-board and 24 ¾-inch scale length, to smaller bodied slotted-headstock models, cutaways, and everything in between. Fylde has 16 standard-model guitars offered on his website. Mandolin family instruments include a mando with a slightly longer and wider fretboard suited to guitar players, octave mandolas, eight-string bouzoukis, and ten-string citterns.

He uses standard top and side woods, but also builds with materials ranging from exotic snakewoods and sinker redwood to Macassar Ebony and oak whiskey casks.

It is Bucknall's personal association with musicians, though, that remains crucial to the way he stretches himself as a builder. From the day his career path took him toward building instead of performing, the players of Bucknall's instruments have been his muses, and he theirs, as many artists attest in *Wood, Sweat and Tears*, an illustrated book on Fylde Guitars published in 2015.

One of those artists is Eric Bibb, who recalls being backstage some years ago with the Malian guitarist Habib Koité. “My Godin-playing West African brother asked if he could try my Fylde,” Bibb writes. “I handed it over and was delighted to see the look on his face as he played my favorite guitar.” A few years later, Bibb and Koité were headed out on a tour in support of an album they'd recorded together. “I made one of those ‘I know it's short notice’ calls to my dear friend Roger,” Bibb writes, explaining Bucknell's quick turnaround and thoughtful choice of materials for the two musicians. “The result was twin guitars—one for Habib and one for me—with cedar tops and African timber back and sides.”

A lot of Bucknall's work is focused on custom orders. Some are unusual, like the 12-string lute and doubleneck guitar Bucknall built for Deep Purple guitar legend Ritchie Blackmore, who now performs Renaissance-style acoustic folk music. Those are the challenges that keep Bucknall inspired. “I couldn't keep it going if I didn't have that variety,” Bucknall says of his work, adding modestly, “and if I didn't have such a good team around me.” **AC**