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A LITTLE KISS**
Eddie Lang

DAY AND AGE
Julian Lage

NEW RIVER TRAIN
Traditional

4 SONGS

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MAKERS & SHAKERS

COURTESY OF GEORGE LOWDEN

George Lowden of Lowden Guitars

Building guitars his own way in Northern Ireland for 43 years

BY JULIE BERGMAN

Northern Ireland's Lowden Guitars recently celebrated the production of its 20,000th guitar with a commemorative model called Genesis. This instrument marks over 40 years in lutherie for George Lowden, whose journey has brought him to the upper echelons of guitar makers worldwide.

Working with a small crew that includes members of his family in a Downpatrick, County Down, workshop, a half-hour south of Belfast, Lowden continues to meet and exceed the expectations of guitar players everywhere. Because the luthier followed his own path rather than copying established templates, his instruments are distinctive in sound, build, and finish.

Beginning in the 1970s, a stream of well-known musicians, most notably Pierre Bensusan,

adopted Lowdens. Irish and English guitarists Paul Brady, Richard Thompson, Eric Clapton, and Gary Lightbody found Lowdens close to home, and the instruments became sought-after in the USA, with notable artists such as Alex de Grassi and Kaki King on board. I recently interviewed George Lowden in Downpatrick about his history, philosophy, and future plans.

You started building guitars from boxes with fishing lines for strings when you were ten years old, and by the mid-'70s, you were focused on experimenting with design and building instruments professionally. What got you started on that road to being one of the best in the field?

Forty-three years ago, when I told my father that I was going to make guitars, he hesitated

for a moment and then said, "Well, just make sure they're good." And I think I picked up something from my mother as well. Everything she did, she did really well, and she tried to do it to the best of her ability. I think that I've picked that up even from my grandfather, who was a foreman in a linen factory. So it's obviously something that runs in my family.

How did you get to the overall design and character of the Lowden guitar?

With one of the first guitars I made, I got a piece of paper and I just drew a shape and fiddled about with it and redrew it and redrew it and then made the guitar. After I made that one, I thought the shape was not quite proportioned, so then I drew another shape and another. Over a period of about three years, I

arrived at what is now called the O Series, the Original Series, which is the larger shape. I had arrived at the design of the internal bracing and all that, and all the while I was thinking about the way the soundboard vibrates, and it changed the way I did the bracing and the carving of the bracing, to make it vibrate as evenly as possible.

Looking back now, I can see that some of what I was doing was good because the guitars sounded really good, but they looked awful. The workmanship was bad because I didn't know anything about chisels, sharpening woodworking tools, or wood seasoning. I didn't know anything about anything; I wasn't smart enough to just take a design that really worked and copy it. I had a tiny little book by a guitar maker named John Bailey and that was all I had. But in that booklet, there were a couple of real gems of wisdom about how you should approach guitar making, and I've never forgotten those.

You've said it takes about 40 hours to build an instrument, which in your shop involves a lot of work by hand. How have you introduced automation into your process and what are your limits for building by machine versus by hand?

I always think that 40 hours is a lot of time, but I realize that if you switch to an automated process, or a fairly automated process, then you lose the personality in the guitar, and that's been my concern. You also lose the skills. The craftsmen would become just people who put soundboards into a machine and press a button, take it out, and that's it. Whereas, if you've got people working in the company who actually know how to use very sharp Japanese chisels to carve and voice struts, for example, the very fact that you're carving by hand means that there's judgment involved.

When you build a guitar, every piece of wood is different and therefore you have to have an element of judgment when you're working with that piece of wood; how stiff you make it, how light you make it, depending on the wood, and all those kinds of decisions are the skill of the luthier. If you're doing it by machine, there's none. It's just programmed.

We take some of the grind out of it by using machines at the early stages and then finishing everything by hand using Japanese tools—mostly hand chisels and saws—because they're very good. It makes the job a lot easier.

What kind of response are you looking for from people playing your guitars?

When I see a musician pick up one of my guitars, I'm looking at his or her face for the

first few minutes when they play it. Sometimes you can just see that the sound of the guitar, the responsiveness of it, has made them happy because they *feel* the guitar as well as hear it. That's what I'm looking for—that my guitars inspire a musician to make better music, to make new music, and to develop new ways of playing. I want the guitar to respond very, very easily, so that players have the ability to be subtle and the guitar still speaks.

How did you develop your standard satin finish and why?

I've been doing that right from the very beginning, more or less. I've always liked that kind of subtle look. You have to look twice to get the beauty of the wood, and you don't get the reflections. In order to get the finish looking right, we have a four-stage process that we go through, with finer and finer abrasives, to get to that look and feel.

How does that type of finish affect the sound of your guitars?

What affects the sound in terms of the finish is the thickness of the film that you have at the end and maybe also the kind of material, whether it's polyurethane, cellulose lacquer, or an oil finish.

We just use polyurethane acrylic. I've always used it, and nobody has ever complained about the sound, so therefore it seems to work. But we keep it really, really thin. We work it down to around about 100 microns, which is the thickness of a thin piece of paper.

Who was the first well-known artist that picked up a Lowden and said, "This is my sound"?

The first real "name" artist was Pierre Bensusan and that was in 1978. I built a guitar for a friend of mine, Alastair Burke, who went to Paris to study at university, and I believe Pierre saw him play the guitar at a session and really liked it. Alastair directed Pierre to come to me, and took my guitar—unbeknownst to me—to the best guitar shop in Paris to show it to them. Then I got a phone call out of the blue from this shop wanting to buy six of them. For me, it was, "Oh . . . six guitars? That's going to take forever!" I had one guy helping me. So, I made the guitars and Alastair put them in the back of his Renault 5 and drove the whole way to Paris. It was a big adventure!

How many people work in your shop now, and what is the involvement of your family?

We have 30 people in the company, including those who look after the shop, marketing, and all the business side of things. I think

there are 22 or 23 in the workshop. As far as the family, Flo and I have five kids and when we find out what's causing it, we're going to stop! Five is enough! They're wonderful kids—I'm very blessed to have such a good family. My three sons work in the business and one of my daughters works with us part-time. My son-in-law, David Ausdahl, is the business director. My son Aaron is doing the voicing on all these guitars, all the hand carving of the struts. I taught him how to do it, and he's very skilled and determined. He's not one of these people who is casual about things. He's going to do it and he's going to do it right. That's the way Aaron is and that's the way I am. So, it is a real family business. I don't have time to do everything.

What's your position now in this family business?

My focus is working on the designs, working on the skill levels of the team, and directing the big picture. I'm not retiring yet. Currently we're doing about 21 or 22 guitars a week and we're doing what we've always done, which is to expand slowly, so that there's no degradation of the detail of it.

How much do you think the aging of a guitar affects its sound?

It affects it a lot. The more you play it, the better it gets. There's something about the three-dimensional nature of the tone in an older guitar that you cannot replicate in a new one. At the same time, with an older guitar you lose some of the resilience in the wood. Its sustain shortens a little bit and the wood gets used to the tension that's being exerted upon it. So I notice with older guitars that there's this beautiful tone, but you don't have quite the sustain that you get with a newer guitar.

What about the instruments you build personally? You have a backlog of your personal builds; do you have a plan?

Yes, I have a plan! It's really important for me to keep building guitars personally, not just designing new guitars and not just teaching the luthier skills and so on, to my team. It's important that I keep developing as a luthier. Unfortunately, some of the people who ordered guitars from me personally have been waiting for longer than I would prefer. My plan is to still do quite a lot of the building myself, but with my sons helping me and one or two of the very best of my team helping me to make those guitars. I think that's a good thing for the team as well as for me, and a good thing for the players, some who have been waiting patiently for rather too long!

AG