

For Irish guitarmaker George Lowden,
bigger isn't always better

HAPPY MEDIUM

BY JULIE BERGMAN





Photograph by Bradley Quinn

Despite being 7,000 miles from Hawaii, Lowden is able to source some truly wonderful koa for their guitars. This example has a sinker redwood top, maple binding and a Pau Ferro strap button.





George Lowden enters his 44th year as an acoustic guitar-builder, he continues to hold on to the same guiding principle his father first set down when George announced he was going to become a luthier. “Just make sure they’re good,” was the fatherly dictate to the young George Lowden of Belfast, Northern Ireland, who had started tinkering with boxes and fishing wire to make noise at the age of 10.

Lowden began building guitars in earnest in 1978, around the time one of his original “O” body-style instruments ended up in the hands of Pierre Bensusan in Paris, and there was no looking back from there. Lowden gathered some craftsmen to expand his output, and got his guitars out in the UK, Ireland and Europe. His guitars quickly crossed the Atlantic as well, with their first dealer being Music Emporium in Massachusetts.

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 heralded a new era in Northern Ireland, bringing relief from the strife that permeated life in Belfast when George and Flo Lowden were raising a family of five children and growing a small business. Lowden Guitars had experienced some corporate changes in the early 1990s, bringing in partial outside ownership for a period while George focused on building classical guitars. In the late 1990s, as peace returned to the country, Lowden resumed control of the company

and continued refining his instruments. New models appeared as the catalogue expanded, but many of his designs have been consistent throughout the years. The original O-shape body, the clarity of sound, responsiveness, playability and the satin finish have all remained hallmarks of a Lowden.

Lowden’s Downpatrick, County Down, headquarters has grown to some 30 staff between the shop and office, including six immediate family members—among them George’s wife, Flo, and business director David Ausdahl in the front office. George Lowden still doesn’t want a big guitar company: He wants a small operation that he can get his hands around, while keeping the guitars consistent and the methods, designs and products always improving.

Keeping the shop size manageable has been part of the magic of Lowden Guitars, not the least because it has enabled Lowden’s staff to do a significant amount of the delicate and finishing work by hand, such as hand carving bracings and necks. Lowden has incorporated more fixtures and laser cutters into the shop over time to aid in productivity, but he insists that everyone who works for him gets hands-on with manual tools, to keep judgment and skills involved in the process of building. He says, “Because we’re a small shop, we can pick and choose the technologies we use. Let’s say we take an extra hour to do a certain job, it’s not catastrophic for us, but could be for a bigger company. So that’s the flexibility.”

A day in the life of George Lowden includes some R&D work on designs, walks through the shop to chat with his craftspeople and aid in their training, progress on some of his personal guitar orders and no small amount of doling out encouragement. Lowden says, “It’s a mixture of encouraging the craftsmen just to keep at it, trying to learn the skills, because making guitars at this level requires real hand skills. You need to be able to use hand tools and Japanese chisels, saws and planes. That requires a lot of dedication that requires encouragement from me.”

Cemented now as one of the world’s premier custom guitar companies, Lowden has a large cadre of loyal customers at all levels—which includes a number of artists who pick up a Lowden in front of stadium crowds. Helping to modify the design of guitars and their amplification for various sizes of venues also became part of George’s day, when Lowden players such as Pierre Bensusan, Paul Brady and Gary Lightbody, Stephen Inglis, Kaki King, Shawn Jones, Niall Horan, Richard Thompson or Ed Sheeran embarked on tour.

“Recently I’ve come to the realization that if you use some of my best acoustic guitars in large venues, there can be feedback issues because the guitars themselves are extremely responsive,” Lowden says. “That makes them perfect in a studio or small gig or at home, but it isn’t perfect at an event in a large area or stadium. So I’ve had to come up with a solution for that and revoice some of our existing models so that they work perfectly in a loud environment.”

As a result, often a part of Lowden’s day-to-day work is communicating with the artists and the guitar techs about what they need for the road, assisted by office manager Alastair Simpson. If feedback is an issue, revoicing can be an answer. Lowden also makes a Stage Model with this in mind. He explains, “It’s a question of disciplining the soundboard more, not just stiffening up the bracing to suppress the overtones and vibration. If you just stiffen it up, then you can get a guitar that sounds sterile. So it’s stiffening it up in a way that still allows it to respond but not too much, then controlling the volume of the air inside the guitar as well.”

Ed Sheeran went on the road in 2018 with a half dozen Lowdens, which are all stage voiced and slightly thinner with revoiced bracings—bearing in mind he went on a stadium tour around the world with just himself, a guitar and loop pedal. Included in Sheeran’s stage rack are five Wee Lowdens and one of the new GL-10 Lowden electric guitars, both models that had their inception in the friendship between George, Snow Patrol’s Gary Lightbody and Sheeran.

George designed the Wee Lowden at the request of Lightbody, a Belfast native who came to George several years ago saying he wanted a small-body guitar to give to Ed Sheeran. The design worked so well that it became part of the Lowden lineup and has become very popular, challenging the idea of how big a parlor-sized guitar can sound.

The new Lowden electrics were also born because of Sheeran. Lowden says, “I didn’t want to do electric. I had more than enough to do with the acoustics. So it was just because Ed pushed me. He asked if I would make one as a gift for Gary, and I was happy to do that as a one-off. It was only intended to be one guitar, but it has turned out much better than I thought it would be. I went away to Portugal for a week and just thought about all the design aspects of what I would like it to do, getting the balance, feel and look of the guitar right. I wanted it to have its own unique look as well as sound. When I came back, some of my team contributed more details, such as the pickups, recesses around the control

Scenes from Lowden’s Downpatrick, County Down, headquarters: The company founder going through stacks of tone woods, his personal workbench, a guitar mold and various sides awaiting tops and backs.

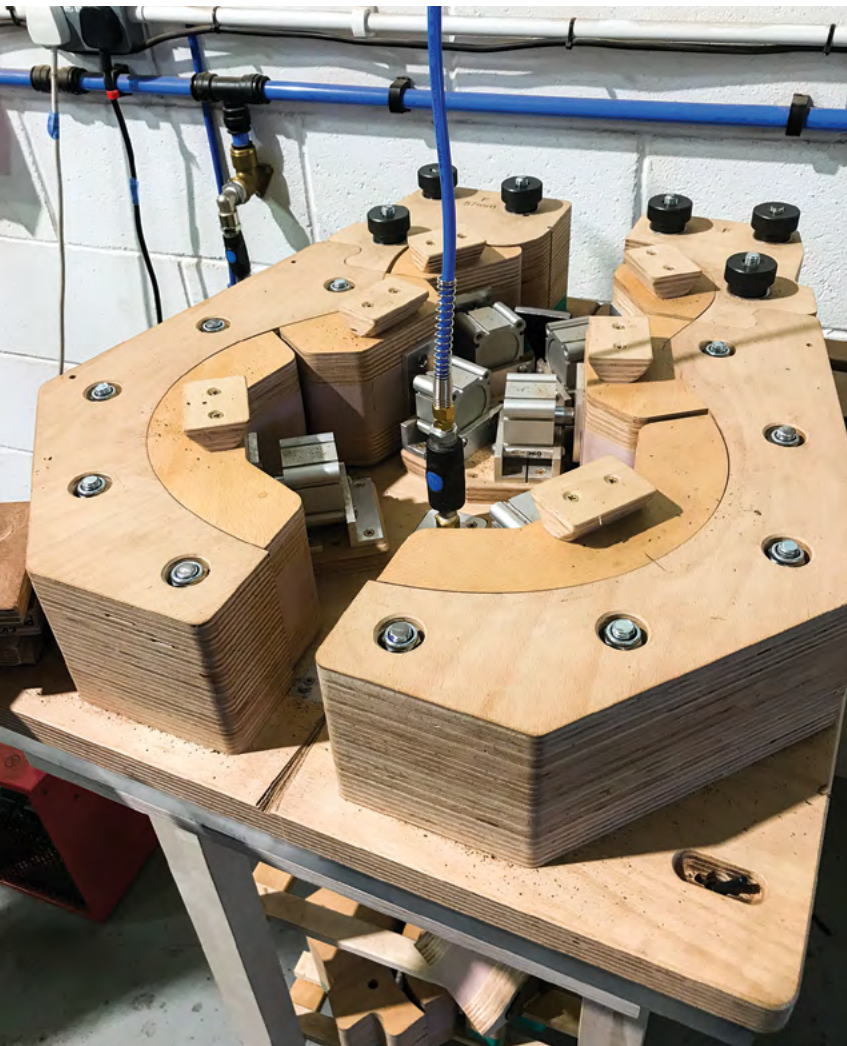
knobs and other features in regard to the string anchoring block to increase sustain. We’re very excited about it because the reaction of all the players has surpassed my expectations, for sure.”

Johnny Lowden did the research into pickups for the new electrics and decided on the Lollar Imperial humbuckers. The guitar currently comes in three versions of hand-rubbed oil finishes of master-grade figured Tasmanian blackwood, walnut and koa. The backs and sides are mahogany, and the necks are five-piece mahogany, except for the walnut version, which has a five-piece maple and rosewood neck. Lowden hopes to bring a semi-hollow version on line next year. “You can actually play this guitar without being plugged in and feel the natural sustain within it,” Lowden says.

There seems to be no shortage of guitarists who claim Lowden loyalty. Ed Sheeran recently said, “Lowden is the best guitar I have had the pleasure of playing.” Gary Lightbody wouldn’t part with his Lowden come high water or fire. Lightbody says, “I was introduced to Lowden guitars by my old pal Iain Archer. He worked at the factory for a time and has always played one. Iain was in Snow Patrol for a while in 2003 and we’d known him a long time before that, so it could be 15 to 20 years since I’ve known about Lowdens. I never had enough money to buy a nice guitar until our third album, so it would have been 2004 or 5 before I got a Lowden of my own. These days I play acoustic live more and more, so am never without a Lowden or two on tour.” Lightbody’s touring guitars include two F-style models with redwood tops and cocobola back and sides, and a GL-10 Electric.

Lightbody is also the owner of a custom F50 sinker redwood, African blackwood guitar with a side bevel that occupies a premier spot in his musical universe. He says, “When I introduced Ed Sheeran to George and Ed bought about 10 guitars in one go, George, as a gift, built me a special one-off guitar that I have written every song I’ve written since with. In a fire, I would save my family and that guitar. I’m not that bothered about anything else I own.”

Like Richard Thompson, Alex De Grassi, Thomas Leeb, Jon Gomm and Pierre Bensusan, who have





A worker uses compressed air to clean out the wood shavings of a Bushmills X Lowden guitar. This unique collaboration between Lowden and the Irish whiskey maker features ancient bog oak back and sides, a reclaimed sinker redwood top and a back inlay and bevel featuring wood from actual whiskey barrels.





Photograph by Bradley Quinn

An unfinished Bushmills X Lowden gets its kerfing strips attached to its ancient bog oak sides. Lowden doesn't use the word "ancient" lightly; the wood was carbon-dated to be 5,300 years old.





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signature Lowdens in their names, Paul Brady, one of Ireland’s premier artists and songwriters, provided the impetus for a signature model. “I first hooked up with Lowdens in the early to mid-1990s,” Brady notes. “What I wanted in a guitar was a richer, more realistic acoustic sound from a pickup at the time and a guitar that had a classier acoustic sound unplugged. I bought two on the same day, an O22 and an O32, both of which I still have. Then I bought their top-of-the-range Brazilian rosewood o38, which I still have and use mostly for open tunings.”

Brady also began using microphones on stands in his solo shows instead of an internal pickup, so he needed as powerful and resonant a bottom-end sound as possible from his signature guitar. “This was why George used bubinga, sometimes called African rosewood, for the back and sides, which has given me the depth I need. The soundboard is cedar. It’s bright and clear in contrast to the depth, which makes for a well balanced overall sound spectrum.”

The Lowden shop is a study in modern equipment combined with time-honored luthier skills and knowledge. Turning out 20 to 22 guitars a week, Lowden estimates each guitar requires about 40 hours to build. The process starts, as always, with the acquisition, storage and seasoning of wood. Lowden has wood on shelves the whole way through the workshop, to keep it as close as possible to where it’s used. The main top woods used by Lowden include sinker redwood, cedar, and Sitka, Alpine and Adirondack

spruce. Lowden’s back and side woods commonly include walnut, mahogany, cocobolo, Tasmanian blackwood and Indian rosewood, among others.

Each piece of soundboard wood is inspected for its qualities. “When we pick up a piece of redwood or Sitka or Alpine spruce or cedar, we always flex it to get an idea of the properties of that piece of wood. If you don’t do that, if you treat every piece of wood the same, the guitars are going to be less consistent.” Lowden also continues to try different combinations of woods. “I’ve had plenty of time to experiment, 43 years, but sometimes you still get a surprise. I was of the view that Alpine spruce wasn’t so good for steel-string guitars until three or four years ago, when I heard a really good one. It comes from Italy, Austria, Germany, Switzerland. We use just the highest grade.”

Soundboard and side woods, as well as bridge and fingerboard wood stocks, are kept for a minimum of one year, if not two, before being used. Lowden says, “We make sure all soundboard woods are fully acclimatized to the humidity in the workshop, which we keep between 45 to 50 percent, which is quite difficult in Ireland. We keep them here for a year, typically. A lot of the wood that comes in is already dry, so this is really only insurance. The longer we keep it, the lighter the wood gets, because some of the resins oxidize. In an ideal world we’d like to keep tops for 5 to 10 years before we use them, but practically speaking, that’s a little bit difficult.”

Lowden uses salvaged wood when possible, including recovered cedar and redwood for soundboards. “We use what I call beachcomber cedar, which has been in the sea for quite a long time and washed up on the beach. Our supplier finds the best logs and splits them on the beach, and then we get the split wood. It’s very light because it has been lying around for a long time out of the water. It’s beautiful stuff. We also like to use sinker redwood

More scenes from Lowden’s workshop, including the company’s guitar press and side bender. Lowden describes his bracing as having a “dolphin profile.” Though they vary with each guitar model, Lowden’s braces are typically taller and thinner than those you’d find on a Martin or Gibson acoustic.

Gary Lightbody, the frontman for Irish group Snow Patrol, with his Lowden 35 series guitar. Other famous Lowden owners include Richard Thompson, Paul Brady, Pierre Bensusan and Alex de Grassi.



and salvaged Sitka spruce as much as possible, because we're not cutting down live trees."

Lowden makes his jigs and fixtures using two CNC machines in the shop: an American-made Haas and a German Euro Isel model. Cutting fingerboards by machine allows for a time-saving and precise result. Lowden has nearly 40 different fingerboards of slightly different scale lengths, and slightly different widths and profiles. George says, "One of the CNC machines is used for making all the fingerboards, which means everything is very accurate, so there's a good reason for doing it. We still use wood-working machines like a spindle moulder or a router or a standard circular saw, but the truth is, these CNC machines are more accurate and produce more work." Fingerboard inlays, however, are done using a hand chisel. George maintains, "Anything that can be done better by hand, we do by hand. Anything that can be done by machines better, we do by machine. But in general that means most things are done starting off by machine, then we do all the final work by hand."

Salvaged Sitka spruce is used for strutting material. "We're one of the few companies that insists on using the wood which has been split for the struts," Lowden says. "We cut parallel to the split so that the struts have the maximum strength for the lowest weight. If we were to cut parallel to the sawn side, we'd be cutting across the grain, so it's not as strong. For a lot of different reasons, split is the right way to go, but it's slower."

Construction of the guitar sides is another process where Lowden combines the use of a mold with hand-work. The side wood is placed into a blocking mold, then pushed tight against the mold and the block is glued on. The blocking mold also has a section that can be unscrewed for a cutaway. Custom-built bending machines are also used for hand-bending, which is not typical of other builders. "Small factories generally just bend the sides in the machine and force them into position. But for us, we like to reduce the tension on the guitar as much as possible, because that helps the sound, so we take the time to bend the sides to the exact shape before it goes into the jig. Again, that's time consuming, maybe an hour and a half per guitar."

Lowden's pinless bridge is another signature aspect of his guitars, designed with a purpose. "The pin bridge makes a steeper angle and that produces more torque on the top, which is a good thing if the top is designed to take it. I designed my soundboards so that they take a slightly shallower string angle, so it produces a more relaxed sound. Maybe

one of the reasons flatpickers tend to like pin bridges is because they are using quite heavy picks sometimes, and they don't want the strings to move across the saddle at all. These days I try to strike a happy medium between a steep angle more typical of a pin bridge and a shallow angle more typical of a pinless bridge."

Another George Lowden specialty is the way the struts are finished by hand carving. Lowden claims, "That joint is so important. Structurally you can do it pretty well using a machine, but you get tiny little ridges. Hand carving makes a difference tone-wise to transfer the sound. When the blade is sharp, the surface is like glass. You have to be slightly obsessive. It's a small thing, but if you've got a hundred small things of how a guitar is made, it does make a difference in the end." Lowden and his team also developed a fixture for cutting the housings for struts, which uses magnets to secure the saw so the housing for the struts can be done more accurately.

Finishing the guitars involves six coats of lacquer and a four-stage process using finer and finer abrasives to get their hallmark satin look and feel. Final planing of the fretboard and placing of frets is still done by the old method, with Lowden's fret master completing four or five fretboards per day. "Even though this is one of our more tedious jobs, rubbing down the frets and all that, the aspect of getting the profile right is very skilled. It's hard work, but there's no room for getting it wrong," Lowden acknowledges.

Lowdens are built for sound, responsiveness, beauty and also strength. Lowden insists, "All the strength and stability is in the design. And you can tour with them no problem, as long as you look after the humidity side of things, which is the same with every instrument."

Of course, dropping them can be a problem, as George observed recently while he surveyed cracks in two of Gary Lightbody's guitars, which were in for some repair before a Snow Patrol tour. "Both of these guitars have the scars of war upon them," Lowden offered. But hearing Gary use one of them for a solo acoustic show at a Bangor Abbey gig in Northern Ireland was especially rewarding for the maker, and reflects the golden era that Lowden Guitars is now enjoying. George recalled, "Gary was playing acoustically on his own and it was shockingly good. He's just amazing. It was good to hear a guitar sounding so clear and defined and acoustic. It didn't sound compressed in any way or electrified in any way. Just the Fishman Eclipse blend pickup, probably not very much mic in there. The acoustic sound of the guitar was the best I've ever heard." **FJ**