

SETUP

Roger Bucknall

GUITAR TALK



PHOTO BY JULIE BERGMAN

Strings That Nimble Leap

Roger Bucknall's Fylde Guitars continue to be coveted by musicians around the globe

BY JULIE BERGMAN

Roger Bucknall built his first guitar around 1959 and started taking his craft seriously around 1973 in a small shop on the northwest coast of England, in Fylde, Lancashire. There were very few guitar builders in that country at the time, but Bucknall helped spearhead the fine art of guitar making there, and Fylde (pronounced "Filed") instruments became among the most sought-after guitars in the UK and beyond.

Bucknall now makes 100 or so instruments per year in his shop in Cumbria, in England's Lake District—with the help of his two assistants, Alex Reay and Paul Ferrie, and Bucknall's wife, Moira, in the office—and Fylde Guitars' impact on musicians continues to grow. A short list of artists who have played these instruments includes Pete Townshend, Martin Carthy, Paul McCartney, Mick

Jagger, Keith Richards, Gordon Giltrap, Martin Simpson, Eric Bibb, Nancy Wilson, Sting, Al Di Meola, Lisa Hannigan, and John Smith. In acknowledgement of his contributions to guitar making and music, Bucknall was awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth.

Recently, Bucknall released a double CD entitled *Strings That Nimble Leap* (in a nod to William Shakespeare's Sonnet 128), available for order at fyldeguitars.com, which features instrumental and vocal tracks by 52 artists celebrating over 45 years of Fylde Guitars, along with a stunning 128-page booklet of photos and stories about each artist. On a recent visit to the UK, I spoke with Bucknall about the compilation, his view of the contemporary guitar-making scene, and his plans for the future of Fylde Guitars. And I was

careful not to refer to him as a luthier—a term he is adamant does not apply, unless one actually makes lutes.

How did *Strings That Nimble Leap* come about?

I'd made an album in 1977 called *Fylde Acoustic* with the English guitar players who were around at the time, including John James, Martin Carthy, Gordon Giltrap, and John Renbourn, all friends and customers of mine. That was a vinyl album that hasn't been available for years, and it's now a bit of a collector's item. A guy I know quite well in the music world came to me and said, "Why don't you do another one?" It was just coming up to the Ullapool Guitar Festival in the Scottish Highlands, which I attend every year. So, every time I met players, I mentioned the idea and they all said, "Yes, we'd love to help."

We wanted to make this a charity project that my wife, Moira, and I could work on together. We decided on Help Musicians UK and MIND, which is a mental-health charity in the UK, and the Woodland Trust, which goes around in this country planting trees. Everybody went for it. All the artists donated their tracks free of charge.

There's a photo and story for every track—a beautiful narrative to accompany each of the 43 tracks.

Yes, the book and the two CDs are largely a story of Fylde Guitars from about 1971, starting with Gordon Giltrap, my first ever professional customer. And then Martin Carthy and John James, all of whom were on the first album and I've known for a long, long time.

Your focus has always been on supporting up-and-coming artists as well as your established professional players. How are the new players doing in today's music industry?

A big part of what I do is make instruments for professionals. It's more or less why I do this, and it's what I enjoy, from folk to rock, pop, and jazz. But I want to be aware of younger talents coming through. There is a lot of new talent, but the landscape has changed. There isn't the space for them. There are not enough venues, and recording contracts are not the same as they used to be. We find that a lot of young players start out and then fade away. It's like in guitar-making, actually, there are a lot of parallels. It's all very well thinking you can make guitars, and it's all very well thinking you can sing and play, making a start. But taking it further than that, five years or certainly ten years, is another matter altogether. Music doesn't make you a living; you've got to have the business brain as well.

Just this last year I've been on a talent hunt. I got in touch with young musicians that I'd been referred to and asked if there is anything I can do to assist. I don't give guitars away, but I do my best to make it easy, and I can help them in many other ways.

How have you seen the acoustic guitar evolve over the years?

The acoustic guitar has gone through phases. In the early '80s it almost disappeared. Economic, political changes, and commercial music that didn't use the instrument very much. But it has come back, and the guitar will always come back, because it's so convenient. It's so very personal. It fits the human being, the human frame, and voice probably better than any other instrument. There are also lots

more women playing guitars and making guitars as well, which is absolutely wonderful.

What are your plans for the next couple of years for the types of guitars you want to build?

By around 1979, I was making 1,000 guitars a year. I've backed off now, basically to keep myself closely involved, rather than having layers of people between me and the wood, and between me and the players. I now build maybe 80 or 100 per year. I will keep trying to make the guitars that lead the music and show the artist what they can do if they have a guitar like this.

Has the style of guitars you and others are building changed?

Most steel string-guitars have been fairly big, with 14th-fret neck joints. You can get a much better sound out of a shorter neck that joins at the 12th fret, so that the bridge is in a more efficient position. It's much more comfortable to play, as well, so I am building more smaller-bodied guitars, like my Ariel model. My best seller, particularly for professional players, is still my dreadnought—the Falstaff—which is used on records more than anything else. But there's a huge movement now to build smaller guitars, and you'll find a lot of the newer builders are making smaller guitars.

And how has the guitar building profession changed in the time you've been in the business?

The big makers are still there; they haven't really changed much, like C.F. Martin, who are making such a range now. They were the iconic maker that everybody followed, and still are to an extent, and they were my reference point. But making guitars is a lot more accessible now to more builders, because there's so much information available: books, videos, toolmaking companies that supply everything you need. That wasn't the case in 1973; there was nothing. We didn't have super glue for instance. Guitar makers can't exist without super glue! We can't! We didn't have routers; we didn't have bandsaws or drill presses, all these things that are essential to guitar making now. So there are more guitar makers now than ever, and I think we're in a golden age with the flashiness of the guitars and the quality of the timber being used. But whether they're ever going to be guitars that translate into music is another matter. Players need something they can get on stage with, be sure it's going to perform again and again. If a guitar is highly decorated and made from the most expensive timbers with not that much

regard for strength and durability, then it doesn't work in that way.

What are your favorite woods?

As I've scaled back my production, it has become a lot easier to use newer materials. That is quite a driving force now, particularly when I have freedom to choose myself, going through piles of timber, looking for inspiration. But overall, if a guitar is going to perform, Indian rosewood for backs and sides continues to be a go-to timber. Partly because that's the timber that acoustic guitars were developed around. The performance guitars have either been rosewood or mahogany, or perhaps maple, and Brazilian rosewood until Indian rosewood started taking over. Those timbers make the sounds that people expect to hear.

And what soundboard woods and for what type of player?

I don't use Sitka spruce very much. Cedar came along as a top wood in the '70s, but American makers didn't take to it because it doesn't suit the factory environment; it's too easily damaged. But the smaller-scale makers like myself took to it quite nicely. Sitka is a bit too hard and stiff for most of my customers, who tend to play fingerstyle. Although if you have a guitar with a Sitka spruce top, you can dig in a lot harder and get the sound out. More headroom if you like. Nowadays you're seeing more of the softer timbers like European spruce or even Engelmann. European spruce, German spruce, Italian spruce, Swiss pine—they're all variations on a theme. They tend to be softer than the Sitka and suit fingerstyle players well.

What about redwood? I'm seeing a lot of companies, yourself included, using this tonewood for soundboards.

The actual old-growth redwoods that fell by themselves would have been lovely to use. They are massive trees. One tree would have kept us going for years, but we weren't allowed to use it. Then, fortunately, sinker redwood came along, and it was reclaimed. It's a little brittle and can be a bit difficult to use, but it's a lovely timber. Even sinker logs are restricted now, as they have to be pulled out of rivers, which can damage the habitat for salmon. But there are plenty of supplies of it.

What do you see for Fylde's future?

I'll keep on making guitars. They will get better and better, and I hope will continue to be part of the music of professional players. That's my driving force. That's the world I live in, and that's where I want to be. **AG**