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**JONI MITCHELL**  
HELP ME

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## MAKERS & SHAKERS



JULIE BERGMAN

## British Bespoke

**Rosie Heydenrych of Turnstone Guitars incorporates English and other tonewoods in her stunning custom instruments**

BY JULIE BERGMAN

**B**ased in the countryside of southeast England, Turnstone Guitars has been gaining accolades and visibility in the custom-built acoustic world. Founded in 2015 by its principal builder, Rosie Heydenrych, Turnstone is producing 20 tonally brilliant guitars on average per year, from parlor-sized instruments to dreadnoughts.

Turnstone's guitars have found demand in the UK and U.S. as well as Europe and Asia, and the company is attracting top players such as Britain's Martin Simpson to its artist stable. Simpson, who is shown with his TM model on the cover of his album *Home Recordings*, says, "Turnstone guitars are among the most beautiful and expressive instruments I have ever played. Rosie Heydenrych is an exquisite woodworker with a wonderful sense of style, and she has decades of work to look forward to."

I recently took the train an hour south from London to Lingfield, Surrey, to meet

Heydenrych in her shop. She was preparing to leave for the Woodstock Invitational Luthiers Showcase, while her husband, Karl, was keeping production rolling. We discussed her path to the world of lutherie and where Turnstone is headed.

### How many years have you been building?

I first started building guitars in 2010 with a weekly evening course that went on for a year before I began working with a repairer on Denmark Street in London. A year into that, I took on a two-year internship with another builder until moving into my own shop in 2015. That was when I started to develop models, go to guitar shows, and hone my craft.

### What was your career background before becoming a guitar builder?

After I went to University of Liverpool, my working background was in the charity sector,

fundraising initially. That branched into communications for a housing charity, developing their website and working on internal events.

### How did music enter the picture?

I started playing guitar when I was 17. I played saxophone as my school instrument, and my sister played classical guitar. She never really got on with it, so I started borrowing her guitar. Then thankfully, my dad then got me a steel-string, an Aria, from a music shop in St Albans. I taught myself and played in bands, singing, playing acoustic and electric, and writing songs.

### So how did your pursuits as a player morph into building guitars?

More than playing, building just somehow fit my psyche at that point in time, and also it was something that I was willing to push myself to work at. I've always been reasonably good

with my hands. I did woodwork technology at school—I think I was the only girl that did it for what's called GCSE level in England, which is your higher-level education. So I had that kind of background, and I wanted to do something creative. When I was working full time in London, I felt like I was losing that part of me. I wanted to pursue something in music or just do something more creative. When that evening course in guitar making was being held at the London Metropolitan University, I just thought, That's kind of cool . . . I want to give it a try.

**As you were developing your models, were you looking to replicate vintage acoustics or go down another path?**

I was definitely more interested in the modern builders. I've never particularly been drawn to vintage instruments. I was purely interested in where the guitar could go in the future. I try to think of altered approaches to bracing, tone-wood use, and build structure. I want to push the craft forward in playability, aesthetics, and building, trying to see where it can be changed and potentially improved.

**What are your favorite woods to use?**

I've always been interested in using alternative woods. I do love traditional woods, but I have a particular passion for the English woods, because I'm from England. I've developed the E-Series model, which is made out of all English timbers. I use a lot of local woods like cherry, sycamore, London plane, bog oak, and apple. They are tricky to get in larger quantities, though. We have begun starting to mill our own wood for these purposes now. I love using glorious woods like rosewood, but the future is in alternative woods, and it's important to learn and understand what they can do in relation to tone. I strongly believe they can build an equally enjoyable and responsive instrument.

**Do you use a variety of tonewoods on your bracing as well?**

I use an active X-bracing structure on the back utilizing different tonewoods, depending on the wood type of the body. On the soundboard I don't solely use the traditional spruce bracing that you see on Martins or a lot of traditionally X-braced instruments. I use different woods for the tone bars that come off the main X. I'm looking at strength, density, and shape; I'm figuring out what frequencies you're trying to excite on the instrument for your trebles, your mids, and your bass—and understanding how you can accentuate those.

In a nutshell, structurally, you've got your X braces counteracting the pull of the bridge.

Your X bracing has some influence on tone, but first and foremost it's there to stop the guitar from falling apart. Your bridge plate is the connection between the strings and the bridge and the body of the instrument. That's where the energy is coming through. From there, it's how vibrations and the energy disperse across the soundboard and, subsequently, the body.

**Tell me more about the shape of your internal braces and how they affect the sound.**

I like having a higher density of bracing on the treble side, shaped high and sharp, to imitate the way that treble frequencies react and are excited. Alternatively on the bass side, I prefer bracing being low, round, and more dispersed. I aim to have points of resonance in treble, bass, and mids, with the result of obtaining a balanced, even sound overall. I don't want my trebles to be amazing, but my bass to be nonexistent, and equally the other way, right?

**Do you think the combinations of tonewoods and bracings you use have produced a unique Turnstone sound?**

Our guitars all have a Turnstone personality that I think consistently replicates across any of the guitars that we build. The personality of the fundamental tone is similar across our range, but with a coloration that's different depending on the tonewoods chosen.

**What are your favorite top woods?**

We use European and Sitka spruce, Western red cedar, and North American redwood. They're the more traditional choices, and I love those. Then for the English woods, we began by using Western red cedar, which again, is a traditional material, but it's grown in England. That was the first English soundboard that I used after I started to experiment a little bit wider with English-grown materials. And I then started using English yew, which is really nice. It's a harder wood, so it's a bit harder to get the same kind of volume out of it. But it's got a really sweet chime, and paired with the right model and the right back and sides, it sounds amazing. The other one we use is cedar of Lebanon, which is grown quite widely in England; it has fine grain and it's quite strong.

**You have a sloped neck heel on most of your models. What's the reason for that?**

We do a couple of different neck heels, but our signature one is offset and sloped towards the cutaway. Even if we don't have a cutaway on the guitar, some people will choose it as well, because it just eases your hand into the upper register of the fretboard.

**Besides yourself, who do you have on your team in the shop?**

My husband, Karl, was working in the shop part time for two years up until I gave birth to our son in February 2022. Karl went full time after that. He has a background in IT, which has made it easy for us to work with CNC. We've also had periodic additions to the team, such as Daisy Tempest, who worked with us for a while before starting her own business.

**Having a baby while running a guitar business must be an interesting challenge.**

For any woman that's running a business, it's difficult, but especially with something like this, where the work is so intricate and intense. It's kind of a unique situation in this business because most guitar builders are men. I knew that we were going to have to have childcare and that I wasn't going to get a long maternity leave. Karl started doing more at the shop because of the baby. We were still getting guitars out, and it really felt like everything was coming together. I was super proud seeing the fruition of all our hard work. There are more women builders now, and the hope is that more women are seeing this as a viable career option. But yeah, if you want to have children, it's not easy.

**Where did the name Turnstone Guitars come from, and how does it relate to your signature headstock?**

The company is named after a bird that you can see on British shores called the turnstone that essentially runs along the beach turning stones over for food and such. Although the bird looks quite understated on the beach, it's got a beautiful pattern that you don't see until it spreads its wings. I liked the thought of naming the company after that bird and carving the shape of the bird into the top of the headstock instead of putting a decal logo there.

**What are your eventual goals for Turnstone?**

One of the most important things for us is that as many people as possible get to play and enjoy our guitars. We built a TG [orchestra model] guitar recently that will be given to an artist, selected by a panel of judges, for a year to freely use. And then it will go to somebody else. It's going to be a rolling guitar over the next ten years or even longer.

At the end of the day, I got into making guitars because I love music and I love playing guitar, and I want to be part of that wider experience. More people playing our guitars—that's what makes me happy. **AC**