



Seeing and Hearing the

"When I first saw both guitars, I was instantly struck with how clean and precise the workmanship was...a warm rich tone on a brand new guitar with no age on its side at all, now that's a rarity! Bravo Rod! You've found the secret."

—Richard Smith

2001 National Fingerstyle Champion

Schenk Guitars



Difference



Rod Schenk specializes in building custom instruments for players who are ready to take the next step in their musical journey. Through technical engineering and extreme attention to detail, Rod is removing musical instrument barriers that formerly held back the musician from being the best he or she could be.

BY BILL PIBURN



Schenk Guitars

Tell me about the CD that features guitars built by you that you've been kind enough to include for our subscribers. The idea started when Franco Morone got one of my guitars and did some recordings with it. My goal is to build for the discriminating player and I can't think of any players more discriminating than session players. The first guy I contacted was Martin Young who does studio work and was Clint Black's former guitarist for sixteen years. Martin runs a company called Music City Demos (musiccitydemos.com) and works with many top session players in Nashville. One thing led to another and I sent him two guitars that he started showing players. A lot of the session players became interested in taking part in the CD and at that point it was more of an



Rod Schenk

Brazilian/European Spruce (FE Grand Fingerstyle)



Was it the set up? You know I think most of my guitars are going to be pretty close in the set up but it might be because that guitar is a little older and has had some time to open up. It also has a Cedar top which is typically very warm and inviting right off the bat compared to say, Sitka spruce. They were just really into that guitar.

That brings me to a side note...I get a lot of attention with this airbrushed guitar line and I'm seriously pursuing it. I don't view it as a mere novelty, I see it as another form of expression. I don't believe in the end they will be as popular as traditional looking masterclass instruments but what I want to do is say, here is an airbrushed guitar that through extensive research into finish, sounds as good as a guitar with clear coat on it. I want to dismiss the myth that a finish like this hurts the sound of the guitar; it just plainly doesn't, I've proven that. I'm not saying all painted guitars, I'm only speaking of the guitars I've produced. I probably have less finish on my airbrushed guitar soundboards than most builders have on a clear coat finish. In this case less is definitely more. I also have taken a lot of heat concerning airbrushing over mastergrade wood. I think that is a little short sighted. The best woods help to make the best sounding guitars. I will only use the best materials, period!

The CD should really help define you to our readers, it's a great idea. It goes a lot further than just a photo. Exactly, well I'm running a business here



Killer Paint Tru-Fire Black Flame (GK Concert Windwalker)

issue of logistics and schedules. It took two or three months to get it done. It was great for me because I got to lay my guitars on the line and see what these great players thought about them and I got a lot of positive feedback. The goal of the CD is to showcase the guitars in a full range of styles played by a variety of players. This CD turned out so nice that I can't wait to produce Volume 2!



Killer Koa Edition (FE Grand Fingerstyle)

Were the guitars used for the recording similar? No, they varied substantially and I did that on purpose. I sent out a perfectly straight-grained Brazilian with a Sitka Spruce top, I sent the Blue Tru-Fire airbrushed guitar, which has a Cedar top with Mastergrade Indian Rosewood back and sides, and they're both the larger FE Grand Fingerstyle model. Then I sent my new model, the GK Concert Windwalker, which is my prototype of a concert-size guitar made with Engelmann Spruce and Indian Rosewood. As in the past, I was convinced these players would really like the Brazilian Rosewood guitar or the new GK prototype which was just as immaculate a guitar but as far as playability and overall sound, the guys were just crazy over the Tru-Fire airbrushed guitar.



Headstock (GK Concert Windwalker)

but I'm also running a passion. Hearing music played on my guitars is what I live for! I want to share this experience with everyone and the CD was a great way of doing that. Pursuing my musical passion is very different from what I used to do. I'm a licensed structural engineer by trade. I was a land developer and contractor as well. Basically when I got this sickness of guitar making I started to think, "When can I do this full time and not do this other work." It was a huge shift! It was a money-making shift as well as a stress-level shift; both got less!

How did "sickness," as you describe it, come to be? I had a friend who knew Kevin Ryan and he took me to his shop. This was early in Kevin's career. He showed me some neck designs with a truss rod system that he was working on and being a structural engineer, it really sparked my interest. That conversation led to many more and then I started to do a lot of study and computer analysis with and for him and basically we came up with a proprietary design on a truss rod system and neck assembly as a combined unit. So we're the only two builders using this system. Our goal was to produce an ultra stiff and thin

things that are not real. To me, sound, vibration and playability are all a geometric physics problem. I don't mean to sound dogmatic because the musical approach to design is very important to me. I like to approach things from the beginning as if a guitar has never been built. However, I also want to take the classic form and perfect it the way it's never been done before. All of us want to

Schenk Guitars on Display at the 2007 NAMM Show



make the best guitar in the world and that's my work ethic.

How have you approached the structural aspect differently than say the Martin of the '30s and '40s? I don't know this for a fact but I'd say that most of these guys did not have extensive training in structural design

and when you become an engineer you think differently. It's not what I choose but it's just the way I'm programmed. These builders were brilliant but they might have lacked training that could help guide them in a certain direction. It was more trial and error. Also fifty or sixty years ago they didn't have the facilities that I now have at my own home. I have some incredible technology at my disposal. I was probably one of the first guys to actually model a guitar soundboard on an expensive, sophisticated, finite-element analysis computer program. I'm able to model all the soundboard stresses of the string tension and neck which both want to rotate back into the soundboard. The computer can show me all these stresses graphically and when that picture shows up, that is what I used to develop my bracing pattern. With that insight, I don't have to build fifty guitars to empirically come up with the desired results. Traditionally that is what builders had to do. If they had an idea, they had to build it and try again and again. I also need to say that intuition has to be part of it as well because everyone knows that bad input equals bad output. You have to be smart and use intuition. However, to be honest with you, when I came up with this bracing pattern I hit the nail on its head the first time and have not changed it to this day.

Does this pattern look different than the traditional pattern? To the

Killer Paint Patriot Guitar (FE Grand Fingerstyle)



neck while maintaining the beautiful classy look of a one-piece mahogany neck. Another thing to consider is that today, a lot of players are using altered tunings. As they change tunings the neck will now be more stable and I think it's been very successful. To me it's purely a structural engineering problem and that is what I was trained to do. The fact that I love woodworking was a bonus. If I had not met Kevin I'd probably still be doing structural engineering. It's crazy how life works sometimes!

Did Kevin give you insight to the skills of being a luthier? For sure! We're really good friends, we talk often about guitar-making. Kevin said the other day that we're so much alike in that we both set aside convention, yet we don't ignore it.

I try to evaluate things from the bare-bones truth. I don't want influence from



Killer Paint Tru-Fire Blue Flame (FE Grand Fingerstyle)



Brazilian/Cedar (GK Concert Windwalker)

Schenk Guitars

untrained eye, I don't think so but for someone who understands the load path and where stress is relieved as well as what parts of the soundboard are left to vibrate, it is hugely different. The funny thing is that once I came up with my pattern, I'd look at other guitars and see that they would have braces where there was no stress! To me that's just adding weight to the soundboard and I want to make the soundboard as light as possible, yet handle the load of the strings.

Obviously it's impossible, but the perfect guitar would be one that would stay together without bracing. [Laughter] Absolutely!

I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel, I'm just trying to take some of the voodoo out of it. I wanted to take what was out there and just refine it. I didn't want to be fancy. A typical x-braced soundboard has a reason. I'm not going to ignore the work of these guys because time has proven their design. I'm trying to take what they've done and use what is available today to refine it to that point of maximum Holy Grail of what a guitar should be.

Each guitar soundboard is like a fingerprint and every shape demands its own bracing pattern. There is no bracing pattern that is a be-all and end-all for all shapes. The shape of the soundboard determines what your load path is. How is that stress transmitting through the bridge and saddle into the soundboard

and then into the bracing and back out? What is the direction of that load path? It changes from one guitar shape to another.

When you say shape are you referring to body style? Yes, or what I would call the plan form. There are subtle differences and it can be as subtle as what the angle is on your cross bracing. I'm trying to use this insight that not everyone has to do these little refinements and let me tell you it's paying off big time.

I've heard some makers say that they will vary what they do according to the nature of the particular piece of wood they are working with. Do you consider this? I consider it a little bit but probably not to the extent of some other builders. Regardless of the piece of wood, I believe the design plays the biggest role in the success of building a great guitar. After that, it's a matter of getting my hands on the best materials I can find. I don't prescribe to "tap-tone" too much but there is probably some mystical truth to it. It is very important to be aware of what materials you are using in your guitars but not relying on them; which brings me back to the concept of good design. I pay close attention to the stiffness properties of a particular piece of wood and I can do testing on a batch of wood if I need. I'll ask, what is the elasticity of this wood? You know, Cedar is

GUITAR FESTIVALS 2007

HERE ARE SOME OF THE GREAT GUITAR SHOWS COMING OUR WAY THIS YEAR:

THE 1ST MONTREAL GUITAR SHOW – July 6-8 • As part of the Montreal Musician and Musical Instrument Show, and under the auspices of the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal, this new show is devoted to handcrafted guitars presented by their respective luthiers. With over 70 exhibitors, the event will feature instruments from all over the world, including Canada, USA, Europe and South America. Some of the participating luthiers include J.S. Bogdanovich, Mike Doolin, Charles Fox, Bryan Galloup, Michael Greenfield, John Kingslight, Linda Manzer, Tim McKnight, Tom Ribbecke, Ervin Somogyi, Kathy Wingert, and many more. Guitarists will have the opportunity to try and even purchase the instruments. Private studios will be set up to provide optimal conditions to check out the guitars, and a series of meeting sessions and free workshops will be offered. All the festivities will take place at the Hyatt Regency Montreal. For more info, go to www.montrealguitarshow.com or call 18885150515.

HEALDSBURG GUITAR FESTIVAL – August 17-19 • Held every other year in Sonoma County, Calif., by Luthiers Mercantile International, the Healdsburg Festival offers over 130 of the world's finest luthiers on hand to show, sell and talk about their creations. The show also includes seminars, free daily mini-concerts and workshops. Some of the many guitar companies this year include Hill, Hopkins, Jeffrey Yong, Laurie Williams, Petros, Kevin Ryan, Schenk, Schoenberg, Sheppard, and Kathy Wingert, to name just a few. Go to www.lmii.com/GuitarFestival for more info.

WALNUT VALLEY FESTIVAL – September 12-16 • Not strictly a guitar festival, the Walnut Valley Fest includes several contests, including flat pick guitar, dulcimer, mandolin, fiddle, autoharp, bluegrass banjo and of course, fingerstyle guitar, which at the time of this writing, is full and closed to further applications. Some of the performers slated for this year include Tommy Emmanuel, Beppe Gambetta and Pete Huttlinger. www.wvfest.com

CROSSROADS GUITAR FESTIVAL – July 28 • Benefiting Eric Clapton's Crossroads Centre, a substance abuse rehab facility, this year's festival will take place in Chicago at the Toyota Park in Bridgeview, Ill. Some of the artists confirmed include Jeff Beck, Vince Gill, John Mayer, Robert Cray, B.B. King, Robert Randolph, and of course, Eric himself. www.ericclapton.com

BOSTON GUITARFEST – June 5-10 • The dream of guitar virtuoso Eliot Fisk, the Boston GuitarFest is entitled "The Latin American Legacy" and will explore the relationship between Latin American folk and art music. In addition to an International Competition that must include a piece by Barrios, the festival will feature workshops, master classes and concerts. www.bostonguitarfest.org

WNED Buffalo Niagara Guitar Festival – June 14-18 • www.guitarfestival.org

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here, Engelmann is here, Sitka is here. How does this all relate? Okay, I'm going to thin this one down according to its weight and stiffness ratio, staying within certain design criteria that have produced amazing guitars. Wood varies so vastly, and no one knows exactly how a particular piece of wood will contribute to the overall sound of a completed guitar. Now, having said that, I have come across seemingly very special soundboards that seem to be a bit more special than others but I'm probably too fundamental to admit it!

I have a '68 Ramirez that one day is the greatest guitar and the next, due to the humidity or whatever, sounds not so great. To me that's a sign of a great instrument. Large manufacturers can't afford call-backs on their guitars. They have to produce guitars that will hold up for years and I'd go as far as to say that their bracing may have to be a little heavier. I don't know for a fact but I'd think that they may have to compromise on design in order to get a product that is viable for what they're doing. Now as a fine instrument maker, you can be right on the edge and say, I've thinned this thing down as far as I can go maximizing sustain and vibrations. But because of that, you can't throw it into the back of your car and you certainly can't take it to the beach but it's truly a Masterclass instrument and you have to take care of it. Is it an instrument that is going to be sensitive to climate changes? Absolutely! But to me that separates a very fine Masterclass instrument from the run of the mill.

Where is your shop? I have my shop nestled along the Hood Canal in Silverdale, Washington.

Once you got the bug to build guitars, it goes without saying that you had a huge investment. No doubt about it! You've probably heard every joke in the world about luthiers spending money. This business is truly a leap of faith but my whole life and work ethic has been to put myself out there and roll the dice. So far it's served me well.

As an independent luthier how have you determined the price for your instruments? Establishing a price is one of the most difficult things a luthier does. I am trying to keep my prices reasonable so more people can afford them. My philosophy is to resist raising prices just because I become more popular and I accomplish that by being very aggressive in efficiency! You've got to be fair to the customer but I also have to be fair to myself. You also have to build a guitar worth what you're asking. If my guitar is in a store next to another leading maker but mine is two thousand more I want that person to say, WOW! I actually think this guitar is worth the price difference. Consumers are getting smarter and smarter. If a \$7,000 guitar is faster, louder and sustains like a piano it doesn't take too long to figure out \$26,000 might be a bit too much! But don't get me wrong, I would love to build you a \$26,000 guitar!(Laughter)

I'm glad we did this interview after the NAMM show because it really opened my eyes. The amount of orders I got and the interest from retailers was tremendous. 2007 is bringing a new age of awareness concerning quality and value; I think people are seeing and now hearing the difference. • www.schenkguitars.com 

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