

# GUITARMAKER

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## PARSONS GUITAR REPAIR SCHOOL REBOOTS IN CAPITAL REGION

By DJ Parsons



**M**y parents gave me a Stella acoustic guitar for Christmas when I was 14. I was immediately hooked on all things guitar and have always been interested in finding out what makes these simple machines tick. I was always trying to make them play easier and sound better.

I majored in English at UMass hoping to teach at the university level and write books.

As it turned out, the late 70's was an awful time to try and enter the teaching profession. So, after taking a BA at U. Mass, I struck out into the business world.

Throughout my career in the lumber business, I always kept my hand in playing guitars and working on them. We had a band called "The Bored Feet" during my stint at a NH lumber yard.

By the early 2000's, I was sick and tired of the dog eat dog world of sales. At that time, two of the finest luthiers I had met, TJ Thompson and Steve Kovacik, encouraged me to pursue lutherie as a noble profession.

There were a number of schools cropping up at that time. Though most of these were geared towards building guitars, The Galloup School in Big Rapids, MI also included setup and repair instruction. I thought that if I could learn how to do guitar setup and repair the right way, by the book, I might be able to make a go of being a full-time luthier and guitar tech.

My time at The Galloup School, now the most renowned in the world, was amazing. There were students in my class from all over the world. 22 benches in the instruction room, each with its own set of tools. I learned how to do things in the first week that had stymied me for years. The most rewarding part of the school was building a high-end acoustic guitar from scratch. Bryan Galloup told us that there is no better way to understand

a guitar from the inside out than to build one. He was right.

After graduating with a Journeyman Luthier certificate, I set up my shop in Watertown, MA. It was very difficult getting started. But I doggedly stuck with it and with the help of some great people at the New England Luthiers, especially Bob Pittman, Parsons Guitar Repair began to grow and take on a life of its own.

A couple of things that set my business apart from the others in the Boston area:

- I decided to pick up and deliver guitars for my customers. This was a real boon to the shop.

- I worked on everything with strings: guitars, basses, fiddles,



mandolins, banjos, ukes, charangos, cuatros, ouds, balalaikas, sitars, you name it.

- I never turned down any work. Tuner buttons and string changes that others would not do often led to bigger jobs with those same customers. I also encouraged customers to bring me the project guitars they had begun but needed help completing.

- I started taking on guitar building projects, mostly electrics. Customers would get parts from all over the Internet and bring me their dream guitars in a box. I would build them and they'd play a real guitar upon pickup. Just as rewarding as delivering babies.

- Restoring old guitars is also a passion of mine.

- I have studied and worked on and GAS'd about guitars my whole life so I started doing market & insurance appraisals.

- My customers told me there were several places in New England where you could learn to build a guitar but none where you could learn setup & repair. So I started the Parsons Guitar Repair School. Still going strong, it has brought out and fulfilled the teaching instinct in me..

When I initially designed the school curriculum, I set it up in 6 distinct phases consisting of 5 sessions each.

Each successive phase increased the degree of difficulty culminating in a series of review sessions prior to my students being certified to work on customers' guitars.

The students who have thrived in my school and gone on to have successful shops of their own have set up work spaces at home. It's all about method, repetition, muscle memory and patience. Typically, they are only with me once or twice a week. The secret to success seems to be the amount of work my students do at home between sessions at the school. If we make a nut in class, they go home and make 2 more. If they learn fret dressing here, they can't wait to dress the frets on all their guitars.

There are three distinct aspects of my setup & repair course; I teach my students to do the work, I instruct them in the tradecraft of running a repair shop and I tell them the guitar stories. I have a story for everything we do.

Over the years, the curriculum came to include what I call 'sidetracks' - exposing my students to cool repairs that come through my busy repair shop - and eventually incorporated working on my students' personal projects. This change involved merging the school section of my shop seamlessly with the repair section.



One of the pleasant surprises in training so many luthier/guitar techs was the discovery that most of my students gravitated towards and began to excel at one aspect of the discipline. They quickly became my go to techs for frets, electronics, finish work, etc.

As I have gotten older, the Parsons Guitar Repair School has become a legacy thing for me. I am on a mission to create a network of luthier/guitar techs who do things the DJ way.

The Coronavirus hit early in my final year in MA. By then I had trained and graduated some four dozen luthier/guitar techs.

I immediately started following the Covid protocols and was

able to safely complete the training of a handful of students.

Covid puts everything into perspective. We have two sons living in the capital region of NY and, with two grandchildren here and another on the way, we decided to relocate to NY to be close to our family.

I was not sure I could reboot the Parsons Guitar Repair School here during these difficult times. So I reached out to Steve Kovacik and Dave LaPlante only to find out that, as was the case in the Boston area, there is nobody here who teaches guitar setup and repair as I do.

I set out to find a secure building for my shop/school. The Frog Island Schoolhouse fits that bill. I have Covid protocols in place and my one-on-one instruction method will allow me to continue teaching while meeting the NY State Covid mandate.

This is the best shop I have had. Located in what used to be an elementary school on a bluff overlooking the mighty Hudson River, it just seemed to call to me and the teaching I do. It's a cool place with really good energy. You can feel it when you come in here.

These days, it is difficult to market yourself, especially in a new location. I have reached out to Parkway Music and Saratoga Guitar and have received a warm welcome. I have also joined the local Guitar Tech and Albany Music Scene groups on Facebook, posted on Craigslist and Next Door and Google My Business. As was the case in the Boston area, having an established website is a real help in acceptance and credibility. When I reached out to A.S.I.A., Bear graciously offered to run



this article in the Winter issue of Guitarmaker.

<https://guitartechschoo.com/>

I opened the NY Chapter of the PGR School on October 1 and am gratified to have 4 students with a handful of others who are interested. Bill Sterling who writes The Fledgling Luthier column for this magazine and teaches guitar building has enrolled in my course. One of Bill's students, a wonderful guitar builder in his own right, has recently enrolled. There is a transplanted Texas guitarist who commutes from Burlington, VT. The fourth is a nurse at a local medical center.

I was concerned to hear recently that Guitar Center may be filing bankruptcy. I have always encouraged my students to get out of the shop from time to time and visit a Guitar Center to see what's new in this business: the latest pickups, tremos, amplifiers, etc.

One of the most essential skills of any luthier/guitar tech is the ability to troubleshoot. Your customers depend on you to know what their instruments need. . This ability is also enhanced by my affording my students the opportunity to train in an active repair shop. The more they are exposed to during training, the more value they will bring to their customers.

Now more than ever, in the age of Covid, training to become a skilled artisan makes a lot of sense. Ours is a skill that will always be needed, Guitar setup and repair is fairly recession-proof.

If you know somebody who is interested in pursuing a career as a luthier/guitar tech, please contact me.

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**iBUILD GUITARS.ORG**

*By Tom Morrissey*

**iBuildGuitars Mission Statement:** Provide Veterans who have physical and/or emotional traumatic stress the materials, supplies and expertise required to introduce luthier training (guitar building) and skills in their healing process.

As an ASIA member and guitar builder, as are we all, I am interested in my community. Being a combat veteran, I am always looking for ways to assist those veterans less fortunate than I. Over the years as a college professor, I have worked with veterans from pretty much every era: WWII, Korea, Vietnam and later ... veterans from all of the battles in the Mid-East. These younger "Desert Storm" era "and beyond" veterans suffer from the same post-combat issues as have their predecessors. Fortunately, today a better informed populous is at hand, reaching out to these veterans with several "veteran inspired" programs going well beyond that over-used "thank you for your service" reaction we have all heard.

My first "full time job," in my early 20s was that of a pilot in the US Army. From there, I went into the arts and education with a 40-year career as a college professor. I had always "messed" with guitars in one way or another, but never really thought of "guitar building" as an occupational option. When I first saw guitar building as a potential *occupation*, the idea that I could visualize, create and make something whole from a myriad of pieces... explore boundaries I didn't even know existed, and end up with something that didn't just sit there was an experience I wanted to offer to others. Fortunately, the Veterans Administration's VR&E Program was there for me to pursue this goal and I spent a year developing the craft. Unfortunately, this program no longer offers such individualized "entrepreneurial" programming options for veterans, a void which the *iBuild Guitars* Program hopes to fill.

Building a beautiful, functioning, playable instrument from not only parts but from "damaged" parts and scraps became the metaphor upon which the *iBuildGuitars* program was conceived. Those suffering from PTSD, physical and emotional trauma, as well as their caregivers, are always seeking new and innovative processes to address and meld these critical issues into a complete and functioning individual. This too is our goal.

*iBuild Guitars* addresses these issues through hands-on instruction ranging from individual one-on-one mentoring to small group situations. *iBuild Guitar* program provides access to the materials and expertise and leadership to introduce veterans to the creative and therapeutic art of woodworking... sculpting with one's own hands. Individuals experience healing by creating a unique instrument, that articulates their own individual voice, they can be proud of and utilize.

Having successfully completed an education in the art of the