

Meet the Maker: Shaun Newman by Mike Gluyas



So, Shaun, how did you begin your interest in the guitar? How was your passion born?

I remember as a teenager my first taste of the classical guitar. It was “love at first hearing.” I had no idea who was playing, or what the piece was. After a bit of searching, and without the facility of the Internet, I discovered that it was Rey de la Torre and the piece was the famous *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. Something really grabbed me, and I felt I should look further.

Does this mean you were good at music at school?

Not at all. My school had the view that music was the last refuge of those lacking in any academic ability, unless you had the kind of voice that could join the King’s College Cambridge choir. Crazy, really. I never had music lessons at school, and from time to time I feel a sense of gratitude that any love of music was not beaten out of me. Grammar school in England in the 1950s and ’60s was concerned with getting university places, so the curriculum was very academic and one’s enthusiasm for anything off the academic curriculum was soon dampened.

How about woodwork? Did you show early promise?

Well, it depends what you mean by “promise.” I recall that my parents gave me a secondhand junior carpentry set when I was around seven years old. It had a few primitive tools, but a good and quite handy saw. I decided that our four kitchen chairs could well be improved... if I converted them into stools. I managed to saw the backs from three of them before I was discovered. From that day on, my mother, my sister, and myself were blessed with a kitchen stool, whilst my dad had a chair with a back! But, I have to say, I always loved making things.

Tell us a little about your early life. What was your family background?



Above: Shaun Newman at his workbench in Devon, England. Below: Shaun’s early mentor David Oddy.



ALL COURTESY OF SHAUN NEWMAN

I was born in the front room of a “prefab,” which was built as part of a temporary housing regime established by the British government after WWII to house returning service personnel and those whose homes had been destroyed by the bombs. My father went over to France on the D-day landings and somehow survived. He was an ammunition truck driver and described how the trips to the front line, loaded with high explosives, instantly cured any constipation one may have had! When he demobbed from the army, he became a dump truck driver (pardon the unintended pun). My mother was an office cleaner. I guess I was destined for life in a menial job. However, I had fantastic support from both of my parents and was lucky enough to get a grammar school place. I found I was good at languages and studied German, French, and Latin. As I was saying earlier, all of this was in a very tightly controlled environment.

After Grammar school I managed to get a Place at the University of Birmingham to study European languages. Even today I can find my way around in French, Italian, and German, and I went on to teach languages. But part of my university course left an afternoon a week to engage in sports. I was not sure what to take up, and as I had missed most athletic activity at school because of severe asthma, I wondered what might suit. For some reason, and even today I don’t know why, I chose basketball. At the time in England, basketball was a very underdeveloped game, and I kind of found it easy to shine. But my real opportunity in the sport came when I was teaching English in Germany. The school physical education teacher was the West German Olympic basketball coach. Chance in a million!! He ran a club and invited me to join. He brought my skills up to a very reasonable standard, and when I returned to England I was able to play at competitive league standard for fifteen years. I must say that the game remained underdeveloped, so it was more a tribute to my availability than my ability.



How did you learn your lutherie skills?

I was unlucky enough to be caught under several tons of falling masonry and finished up with two smashed-up legs. I was lucky to survive and was on crutches for the best part of a year. So, it was time to reevaluate. I had to concentrate on the things that perhaps I could do, rather than spend endless hours moaning about the things I could not. I loved the guitar, I could make things, so why not make a guitar? Well, it took a while for me to get into the swing of things.

I had borrowed a book from the local library, *Make Your Own Classical Guitar*, by the wonderfully named Stanley Doubtfire. I struggled and felt perhaps I could not move forward. To my great fortune, my wife spotted an evening class in guitar making at the local community college and that is where I met the fantastic maker David Oddy. He taught me so much in just a few evenings, and during the first year of class I managed to make three classical guitars, one for each of my three children.

After the class folded, I stayed in touch with David. He was a very private person and shunned publicity. When I had presented some work to him as "finished," he would say, "you mean half finished!" If ever I was stuck with a problem, he would say in his typical Devon English, "Allsyougorrado is...." David was still making fine guitars until his 85th year, but sadly he died in 2017. He was a source of wisdom and support for me for almost thirty years. He always used to say to me that as a guitar maker, "You don't get better at guitar making, you



Above: Classical guitars in granadillo (at left) and rosewood. One is an endangered species, the other is not. The Der Jung tuners are elegant and a good value. Below: Dowels prevent splitting the barrel holes when drilling slot ends. Bottom: Scalloping brace ends for a classical guitar.



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just get better at covering up your mistakes." Such enduring advice, which has pulled me through many a sticky moment! I have nothing but enormous regard for the man, and miss him enormously.

Are there other makers out there who have influenced you?

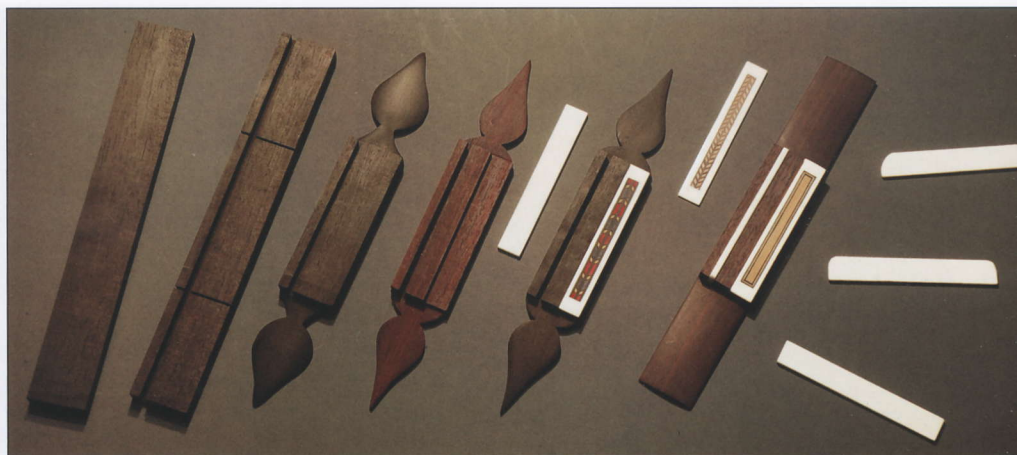
I got Roy Courttnall's book *Making Master Guitars* around twenty-five years ago and I've been influenced by a number of makers featured in that work. My main "design" influence however has been Ramírez, based on a plan of his 1963 guitar used by Segovia. But Torres, Santos Hernández, Romanillos, and many others have had an influence, however marginal. Over the years that I have been making guitars, I have become a firm believer that it is well to follow your instincts rather than just to copy the work of others. For example, if I make a copy, it is normally "in the style of" rather than an exact replica. It always intrigues me to see what personal touches I can add into a build to make the instrument as much my own as that of the original maker. Traditionalists would probably have me hanged, or at least flogged, for taking such a view! But, if you always do what you always did, you will always just get what you always got.

What do you consider to be your first "break" in lutherie?

Apart from having the great fortune of meeting David Oddy, I was at a friend's birthday party a little under thirty years ago, where a local professional guitarist named David Cottam was playing. We fell into conversation and I mentioned that I had made three classical guitars. He invited me to come over for coffee and he could try them out. He was extremely impressed, borrowed one for a recital, and then ordered a guitar from me. I am now working on a fifth instrument for him, so he must think I am getting something right. David opened a number of doors for me and helped me to get my instruments "out there" as they say.

But you have not only made guitars.

I enjoy experimenting. My first love remains the classical guitar, but I have made mandolins, harps, dulcimers, ukuleles, mediaeval fiddles and lutes, and have just completed a 5-course



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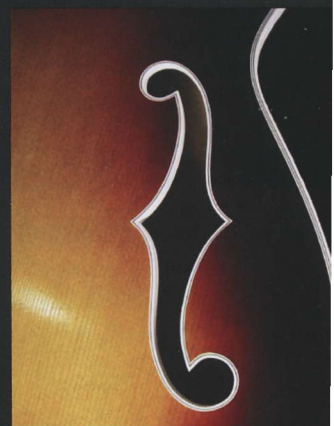


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Facing page: Bridges give you an opportunity to express a little individuality. This page, clockwise from above: Making purflings and bindings is work for a winter evening. Some (occasionally odd-looking) instruments under construction. I wish I could play this little maple-and-sycamore Gothic harp. This mediaeval fiddle is based on carvings in the cathedral of Compostela, Northern Spain. A 19th-century flat-backed mandolin in rosewood, koa, and spruce. These smaller instruments are great for using up leftovers from other projects. Taping the back bindings onto the mandolin.



guitar in the Baroque style with a parchment rose. Part of the enjoyment of such experimentation is how much you find out about the many different stringed instruments there are, and I have barely scratched the surface.

You have also undertaken some interesting restorations.

Yes. The ball started rolling after I received a phone call from someone who had found an old guitar on a council rubbish tip nearby. I had already done some repair work for this person, and I guess he trusted me enough to hand the guitar over. Having said that, he did not realize what he had bought for the princely sum of just £5, which I guess is around \$6 or \$7. It was a Salvador Ibáñez made from Brazilian rosewood with a spruce top and a great deal of mother-of-pearl inlay work. From the label, which was still intact, I could deduce that it was made between 1898 and 1906. The story got into the press and radio nationally, and was on local TV. Before long the story got onto the Internet, and I began receiving requests from far and wide to undertake restoration work or to offer advice. The jobs have been many and varied, but notable amongst them was an 1837 Lacôte salon guitar and a Coimbra Portuguese guitar, along with at least a dozen more instruments made by Salvador Ibáñez.

So why branch out when you could be perfecting one aspect of your craft by concentrating on the classical guitar?

I am firmly of the view that no work is ever wasted. I have learned so much more about better ways of constructing concert classical guitars through experimenting with other instruments than I ever would have staying in the same field. From time to time a flash of light appears during a particular job that illuminates a way forward in the craft of the classical guitar.

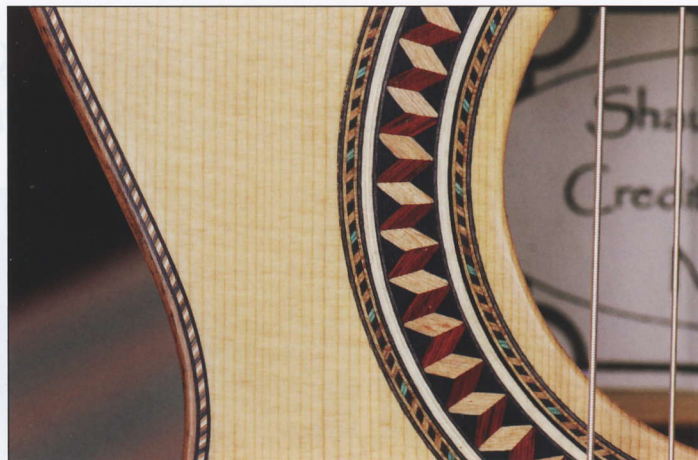
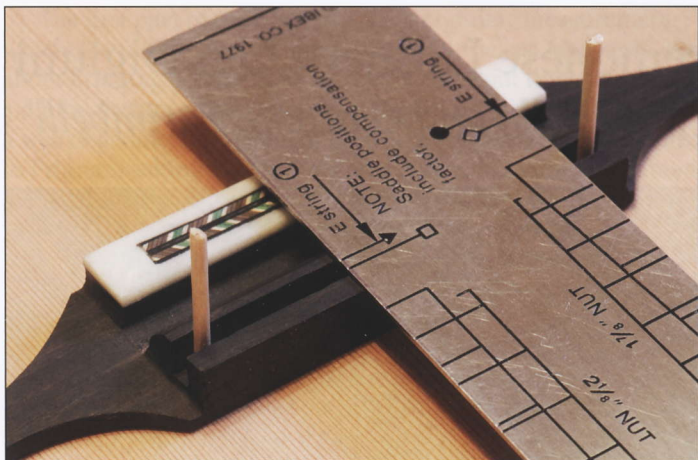
Are all of your methods traditional?

I guess this could be another area where I would fall out with traditionalists. Yes, I do use traditional methods where they suit what I am doing. For example, I love to cut curves with a hand-held bow saw, and my “wedge-and-lace” jig for joining bookmatched back and soundboard timbers has never yet failed me. However, I rarely use animal glue and could be accused of cheating by using superglue. But I reckon if Stradivari had been able to gain access to cyanoacrylate, he would have used it. However, I am not in favor of heavy mechanization; if too much is done by machine, I feel you lose touch with the soul of the work. A happy balance is best, so a minirouter with a bearing-guided cutter to remove binding



Top left: This Salvador Ibáñez guitar from about 1900 was found in a dump. Top right: An attic in Bournemouth, UK was the hiding place for this 1837 Lacôte before it came in for restoration. Above: Another Salvador Ibáñez restoration project. Right: Copy of a Stauffer Legnani classical guitar c. 1830. Facing page, top left: Cocktail sticks are a boon. Top right: The “Giannini” rosette of a salon guitar in the French style.





and purfling channels will normally make a better job than chisel work. Furthermore, I don't tend to use French polish. I have had several instruments come through the workshop in need of a refinish, and I usually find that they have been treated with French polish which has broken down and become sticky and messy. Products such as the acrylic resin produced by General Finishes in the USA, for example, do a good job, and this particular one has low VOCs and is straightforward to use. Titebond II is a winner for me.

What timbers do you use, and why?

When I first began making guitars, I almost always used rosewood and spruce, and occasionally cypress. I think it's now time for a change of mindset, particularly since the restrictions that have been imposed by CITES on all types of rosewood. I have read several articles on blind tests where some guitars are made with rosewood backs and sides, whilst

others are not. Both players and listeners find it easy to hear a difference between cedar tops and spruce tops, but they are much less definite about what the backs and sides might be made of. Take the blindfolds off, and people seem to favor the sound of rosewood! There must be something in that, and I think it is psychology! So, I have been moving towards such timbers as cherry, walnut, zebrano, ovankol, granadillo, and, of course, maple and cypress. I know I am not alone in this. I still have a number of sets of rosewood, but am enjoying the different timbers.

Do you play your instruments?

Poorly! I have taught myself the rudiments of classical guitar playing but largely I struggle with any of the others... apart from a few ukulele chords. But there is something that really grabs you when you hear one of your instruments being played by an expert. I was lucky enough last year to be invited to the Royal Greenwich International Guitar Festival in London, where I was able to display my work and hear my instruments played by world-class musicians. I am also very fortunate to be able to hear my good friend David Cottam, who himself has a huge reputation, play on a regular basis. Perhaps when I grow up, I might be a player.

Where will you take your craft now you have turned seventy?

Onwards and upwards, I hope. I have been lucky enough to have cataracts removed from both eyes which has improved my vision dramatically. I still await two knee replacements (too many hours on the basketball court), whereupon my intention is to retire at ninety if I can, eighty if I must! —

