

THE

GUITARIST

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**GUITAR-MAKER
TO CLAPTON,
BOLAN,
DONOVAN
REVEALS
HIS SECRETS**

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**FREE!
GUITAR MUSIC BY
RENBOURN, BRUCE COCKBURN
WORTH MORE THAN
THE COVER PRICE**

CP6178

WHAT DO ERIC CLAPTON, DONOVAN, GREG LAKE, THE FACES, DAVY GRAHAM, MARC BOLAN, SPENCER DAVIS AND LONG JOHN BALDRY ALL HAVE IN COMMON?

Answer is, they have all had guitars tailor-made for them by TONY ZEMAITIS. How did Tony leap from being a cabinet-maker to E-Type success as luthier to the stars? Why do guitarists - top professionals and amateurs alike - pay £200 and more for an instrument they'll wait months to collect? In his own words, Tony explains.



Why do guitarists come to me? Often because they're not satisfied with the instruments they can buy in a shop. Perhaps they've seen a friend playing one of my guitars, or they've heard one in a recording studio. I think that's one of the reasons; they do record well. Many a recording engineer has told me that he's been able to cut a track in a single take, using one of my boxes.

DONOVAN wanted something stagey - "cosmic" was the word. He ended up with a dark royal purple-blue guitar with a mother of pearl crescent moon, with scattered stars in pearl, and moons and stars on the fingerboard.

It looked very antique . . . dreamlike. Came out very well. That was a six-string. Then, for a complete contrast, he asked for a big 12-string; he wanted one with a huge sun on the front.

Greg Lake of Emerson, Lake and Palmer had a great big six-string, with a heart-shaped soundhole. All round that there were leaves and flowers coming out. And below it, a garland of flowers, going round underneath the bridge. He wanted gold and silver on the front, but I warned him that I shouldn't put anything but wood on the front. In the end, I did it in pearl - there's about half a pound of pearl on the soundboard. Now that should have killed the sound stone-dead, but it didn't. Without that pearl, it must have been a helluva guitar.

I wouldn't say I do mostly acoustics: It varies. I might get a run of "sixes". Then 12-strings. Right now it's acoustics, with one electric to be made. Last

18 year it was mainly electrics with a heavy



sprinkling of acoustics.

Amplified jumbos or classics are not a good idea. A good acoustic guitar will feedback too much. They do try fixing contact mikes, but using a mike and a good P.A. is still the best method.

Guitar basses - fretless electric basses are coming in. They record really well.

All the electrical components I use are Gold Seal. They're the best you can get. The variation is plus or minus 1% on any particular value on the electrics. And I've started pre-amping my pick ups. That gives it a really cutting sound, and I build the pre-amp into the guitar.

It's a recording device, to give you that bright sound you usually get only on stage. Electric guitars normally go "muddy" in the studio. The pre-amp filters out most of the bass, and lets the treble come through. I also put another control on, so you can filter the treble out and just have the bass come through . . . it's much clearer.

What makes my guitars unique?

The obvious thing is that I never repeat a guitar. Never. I might get a similar one from the same jig - that's the "form" you use to shape the ribs - because you can't make jigs ad infinitum.

Last year Ronnie Wood said: "I want a pearl-fronted guitar, and I'd like it to be a one-off special". So I gave him a letter to the effect that this guitar would never be repeated. Then I destroyed the jig, so I couldn't repeat it. Ronnie Lane had a tortoiseshell bass made up. The tortoiseshell went on the back of the instrument, and it was made to look like the back of a tortoise. I wouldn't repeat that, either.

Metal-fronted electrics are a coming thing now. I believe I've led the field with them. To me, it's technically sound; the metal acts as an electrical shield. You don't get so much howling and fuzz and feedback.

The cheapest guitar I do is about £200. If someone wants a guitar, they have to put a deposit down - about a third - then they wait two to three months, and it's ready.

For that they get a guitar with a rosewood body - that's my favourite wood - and a spruce front. (See photo A, below).

The chap who's ordered this spruce-front jumbo wanted a slow-playing guitar. He wanted a slow build-up, and a lot of sustain. The other thing I've had to do is build up the shoulder on the fingerboard to right his playing. He came off a guitar with a square, chunky neck, and he's got completely the wrong idea - his thumb sticks out a mile. The neck-shape I'm making will help him play better. It's something we've discussed, and he wants me to go ahead. His guitar was stolen. The stolen one had a more antique feel to it, with a moustachioed bridge. But he wanted this one plainer. I've had a lot of success with mahogany guitars... The Faces have three mahogany twelve strings.

I sometimes use cedar for the soundboard - but always ebony for the fingerboard.

The fingerboard of this mahogany guitar is a bit wider than on some twelve-strings, but that's because on many 12-strings the strings are cramped up so close you can't finger them. Of course there's a lot of weight in the neck but that's thanks to the 12 machines. Schallers have brought out a smaller machine head - at £20 a set! - and that will help keep the weight down. In my opinion, they're better than Grovers - and Grovers are about five quid more.

What makes a guitar go over the £200 mark? Well, partly it's the time I have to spend making. And also the material I use. Now when I buy wood, I get the best I can, but some of that best is even better than the other pieces. And the very best pieces I put by for the more expensive guitars.

After that, you start taking into account the inlays, the amount of decoration - that's what starts to eat the time away. Basically, a cheap guitar takes almost as long to make as an expensive guitar... And the materials come to anything between fifty and seventy quid on a standard guitar now. It's ridiculous, but there's a terrific shortage of wood. And there's nothing you can do about it... you can't even grow it - there isn't time!

I don't know what will happen about the wood problem. I know that India and South America put a ban on the export of rosewood for a while... but if I can make a few solids, build up my stocks of acoustic wood, then make a

few acoustics, I might just have enough timber to cope. But there will come a time when wood will be hellish expensive.

Fibreglass? It has similar properties to plywood; it can sound fine, but it can't mellow down. I've tried a fibreglass backed Ovation, and it was quite nice, but it was the wooden front the sound was coming from, not the fibreglass.

Inside a guitar I like to keep things as plain and as simple as possible - and I don't mind you putting it in print. I've tried all the strutting systems, and for me, they don't work. The jumbos in the picture have got transverse struts, hyperbolic shaped; that's the best. But it may not be the best for the next guitar-maker.

If you take a piece of wood, and cut it in half, then the two halves have got different properties; similar but different. And you've got to treat both those halves separately when they're

joined together as a front.

One half might want an extra half-millimetre on it - or an extra strut. There's no telling until you try it.

Classical guitars? I make those, too. I made a pair of guitars for a customer recently - a classical and a flamenco. I made that in maple instead of using cypress, and it was the most incredible guitar I've ever built. It sung. It was loud. And it was mellow - and earthy - everything and all at once.

But nylon guitars are slightly divorced from steel-string techniques, so you've got to keep your hand in with one or the other. The dividing line between a good classical and a superb classical is a very fine one. You can put everything you know into the making, and it turns out good rather than excellent. And there's another thing. People want to see a Spanish label, not an English one.

Then there's more work in a nylon guitar... I follow classical structure -

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Greg Lake of Emerson, Lake and Palmer with Zemaitis' most successful acoustic 6-string



normal fan strutting, nine struts on the fan, two transverse - it's a helluva thing. Nylon classical guitars take a bit longer to "come through"; you should really hang them on the wall for a couple of months, to let them mellow down. I've sold nylon guitars for £150, and later they were re-sold for £250; I wouldn't change that sort of money for a nylon, because it's a bit of a hit or miss thing. I prefer to be confident I can offer something and it's going to turn out exactly right for a cut and dried price.

I don't set myself up as an expert on this. It's just what I've learned from experience. We get hundreds of letters asking me to lay down the law on guitars, and I refuse to. Because there are no laws; you just go by experience. I get letters from the States, too, people wanting to make guitars, and asking me to teach them. They even offer to come and work with me for nothing.

How I got started as a guitar maker is easy to explain: I wanted a guitar, and I couldn't afford one. So I copied a Spanish Tatay, and I made it bigger, because I reasoned that the bigger it was, the better. But that isn't necessarily the case. That would be nineteen years ago.

The next one I made was a classical same size as the Tatay, incorporating what I'd learned, and that turned out really well. After that, I tried twelve strings, and soon after I made instruments for Spencer Davis, Davey Graham and Long John Baldry. But it was still just a hobby; I was a cabinet maker making "antique" furniture.

Then an American wanted a guitar, because he'd seen one of mine in the States, and I got more local orders. In the end, I was lucky enough to find a job where I could spend half my time making furniture and half making guitars.

This is the first year I've had a proper workshop, since we bought this house and moved to Kent. When I was living in South London, I made do with a basement.

Time is a problem. I have to turn a few people down; I try to stick to professionals mainly, now, and people who really know what they want.

Picking and choosing my customers? You could put it that way. It's getting like that. I could take on help, but I daren't; it wouldn't be me making guitars if I did. I've got an engraver. And an electrician. But they're only part-time people.

Unsatisfied customers? Only once. That was when Jo Ann Kelly came round to collect her guitar. She played three chords and I didn't like it. So I



"This is the fingerboard of 'Ivan The Terrible', a massive 12-string guitar I made for Eric Clapton. I hear it rarely leaves his house, he's so frightened someone will steal it, and he only lends it to close friends like George Harrison. Selmer have tested it, and it has a 26-second sustain!" - Tony Zemaitis.



Unfinished jumbos.



made her another one.

If I could get back some of my early

guitars, the ones I was learning on, I'd make a bonfire of them.

- MEL LEWIS