

Search for the perfect guitar

Mixing mathematics and common sense to get the right sound

By FRANK PEEBLES

Free Press staff writer

Roch Schneider is a perfectionist.

By day he works at Comprehensive Financial Planning, but in his spare time he buries himself in the construction of fine guitars and basses.

You aren't likely to find much similarity between his instruments and the ones on the racks of music stores. He doesn't enjoy building guitars. He enjoys creating them.

The term for his penchant is "Luthier" and it defines someone who strives to improve their craft and always seek refinement in their designs. Schneider complains that guitar building has traditionally stagnated, Luthiers have become fewer, and the larger instrument companies are content to follow outdated, and impractical construction themes.

"I would ask myself all kinds of questions," he says. "Why are guitar bodies so big? Why do the necks almost always join at the 14th fret? Why does the heel stick out and block you from reaching in to the outer frets?"

"My guitars join at the 17th fret, and my heel design allows a player to reach down with no trouble."

Although the explanation for much of his work is in the language of mathematics and physics, there is a common sense to his changes to the style of putting a guitar together. It basically centers around making the neck stronger, and keeping the flat top from warping.

To do that, he has rearranged the brace patterns inside the body, and scrapped the old practice of placing the hole in the middle.

"The idea of placing the hole in the middle of the guitar just doesn't make physical sense. The tension of the strings makes it impractical to weaken the instrument with a hole there. It needs all the support it can get through the middle of the guitar."

To address this problem of string tension, Schneider has fortified the neck, and moved the acoustic hole to the edges of the body. He also used some of the best woods he can acquire. The whole goal is quality.

"I give a lifetime guarantee to my instruments. Mine or yours,



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ROB BIRON/FREE PRESS

whoever goes first," he laughs.

"My problem is building inventory. It takes so much time to build a guitar, and the customer comes in, slaps down his money, takes it away, and I'm left back where I started."

Combine the new designs with the handcrafted wood work, and the finished product is quite striking.

"Some will brag about a finger board being made out of ebony," he says matter-of-factly. "This one over here, the whole neck is made out of ebony."

Schneider's craftsmanship is best seen first hand. Explaining the creative process is long, involved, and exciting. His quiet, frank manners add to the impression that when he sets to a project, it will be a whole hearted effort.

He is very much a student of the science of musical instruments. "I don't want a guitar to haunt me. I want to send it away with no guilt. No repairs will ever have to be done."

"There are violins made 300 years ago that are still being played, so there are no reasons why these guitars can't be in use for 1,000."

In addition to the guitars, Schneider is also working on things like six-string basses that are more user friendly than in the past. He has done specialty mandolins, and is thinking about odd combinations of all these tools.

One of his instruments has been commissioned by American recording star Doug Kershaw, who loved Schneider's craftsmanship. The average player is equally impressed with the work.

"It's funny. People come in with no intentions for this stuff, I give them a little tour of my shop and my past work, tell them why I do what I do, and suddenly they've just gotta have it."

None of the instruments come cheap, but players seem to accept the price in exchange for a guitar with a longer life, and great sound. Sound with longer sustain, and more fluid tone. Sound that can only be described as "sweet."

Schneider plans on having an open house in the near future to introduce more people to his services. Upcoming trade shows may also be a possibility. Scrutinizing his wares will be an education.

► Healing With Art

Registrations are now being taken for a workshop at the Prince George Art Gallery that explores the cathartic possibilities of art.

The Healing Arts Workshop is being facilitated by UNBC's Ruth Suvee. It runs May 6 and 7.

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