

CRAFTING SOUNDS AND DREAMS



BY MARK BRUT

For many people, owning a vintage guitar such as an early 20th century Martin acoustic or a 1950's Gibson Les Paul or Fender Stratocaster is a lifelong dream and can require a serious investment. For others, having a guitar custom built to their exact specifications and desires by a guitar luthier is a far more rewarding and personal experience.

The term “luthier” comes from the French word “luth”, and refers to someone who builds or repairs stringed instruments. Luthiers are not limited to building just guitars. Any stringed instrument you can think of is fair game, including mandolins, banjos, violins and so forth.

So how does one become a luthier? Many experienced luthiers start by learning to repair instruments. Others take up the trade as a hobby. I discovered through my research for this article that there are many fine luthiers just within the state of Colorado, as well as some very valuable resources for aspiring luthiers to learn the skills necessary for the same. They are as diverse as you can possibly imagine, coming from different backgrounds and of many different skill levels. But they all share a passion for making finely crafted instruments. I was able to interview several Colorado luthiers for this article, including Scott Baxendale, Karen Kemerling, Alan Dunwell and Robbie O'Brien.

My research for this article started with a bit of a coincidence. Upon moving to Colorado last year from Athens, GA, my own acoustic guitar developed some problems, likely due to the change in altitude and air pressure. While living in Athens, I had interned at Chase Park Transduction recording studio under producer David Barbe. During my time at the studio, I was fortunate to have worked as assistant engineer on two Drive By Truckers releases. I recalled that Scott Baxendale from the Colfax Guitar Shop in Denver had ties to the band and therefore it was an easy decision as to where to take my guitar.

When I received the assignment for this article, I knew I had my starting place. To my surprise, Scott advised me that he had sold the Colfax Guitar Shop and would be relocating to Athens to start a new business in the same building occupied by Chase Park Transduction and the Drive By Truckers offices. He agreed to be interviewed for this article and I also wrote a separate piece for the Athens weekly free publication, Flagpole, to introduce him to the Athens music community.

As an aspiring musician and student at the University of Kansas in 1974, Scott Baxendale came across an article in the local newspaper on Stuart Mossman and the Mossman Guitar Company. In the article, Mossman mentioned how he would love to take on inexperienced luthiers wanting to learn the trade. Baxendale answered the ad, and soon after decided to quit college and move to the small town of Winfield, KS to work at the Mossman factory.

After several years with Mossman, Baxendale moved back to Kansas City and did guitar repairs for a time before relocating to Nashville to work for Gruhn Guitars. It was in Nashville that Baxendale really learned the ins and outs of luthiering as well as restoring scores of vintage guitars. “Mossman was like my primary education for guitar and Gruhn was like getting a doctorate in guitar knowledge”, he states. “At any given time in the shop you were working on more pre-war Martins for instance than most people ever see in their lifetimes.” Gruhn was the primary repair and building company for the Grand Ol’ Opry, maintaining all kinds of vintage guitars. Baxendale worked on guitars for country legends such as Roy Acuff, Norman Blake, Johnny Cash, Deford Bailey and Marty Stuart while working at Gruhn.

Baxendale left Gruhn in 1982 and moved to Texas, where he resumed repairing guitars on his own. Shortly thereafter, Baxendale was presented with an opportunity to buy Mossman Guitars, and he relocated the company to Dallas. It was there that Baxendale really started to build guitars in volume. Under the Mossman name, he built “Baxendale Mossmans” for legendary players James Burton, Joe Walsh, John Mellencamp, Chris Hillman, Jorma Kaukonen, Donovan and others. During this time, Baxendale was also contracted by the Hard Rock Café to construct a bar-sized replica of a vintage Les Paul and care for their burgeoning collection of vintage instruments.

Unfortunately, due to some personal issues, Baxendale sold Mossman Guitars after several years. He resurfaced in Denver after taking some time away from luthiering, and admits that there was a re-learning curve associated with the same. “I really had to go through another whole new learning process again to re-hone my skills as a craftsman. It really took a couple of years to where I was really back on top of my building skills”, he states.

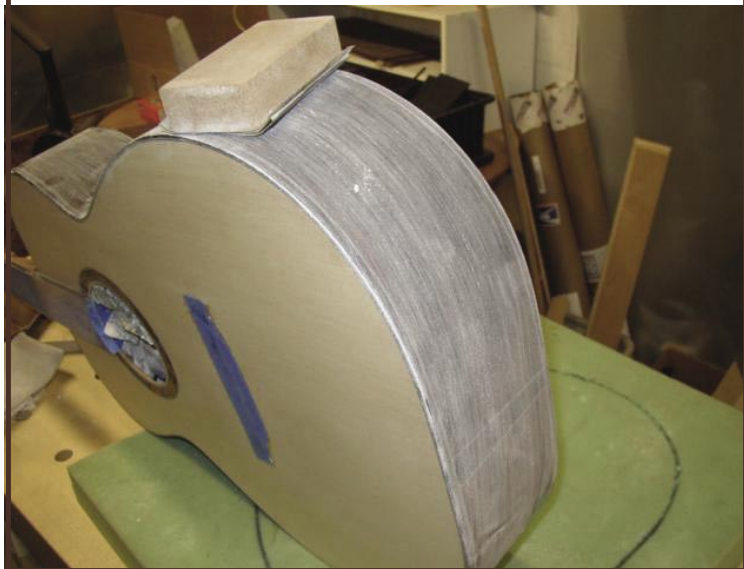
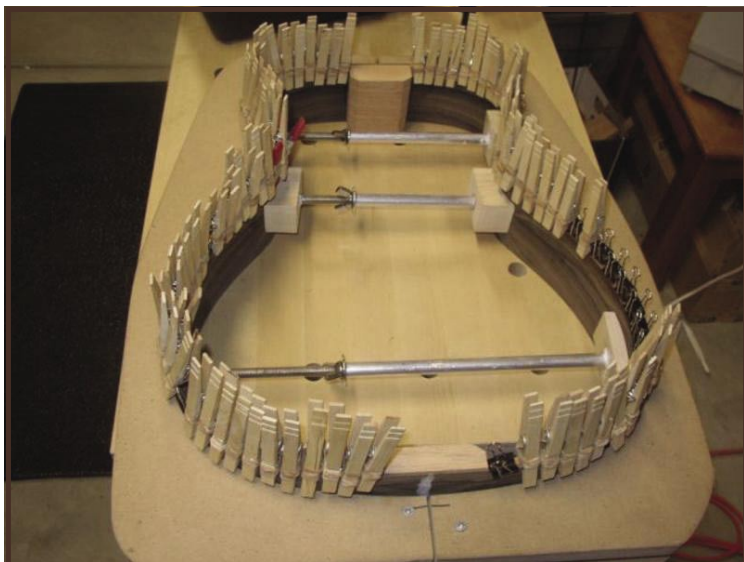
Until his recent move to Georgia, Scott Baxendale owned the Colfax Guitar Shop since 1998, where he has thrived as a top shelf repair facility while also building custom guitars under the Baxendale name. Located directly across from the Bluebird Theatre in Denver, Baxendale directly credits the location of his shop for its success, as he saw a lot of bands “on their way up or on their way down” playing at the venue. His son John also has trained to do repairs and has branched off to open his own store in Littleton.

Baxendale estimates he has built over 350 guitars to date. Recent clients include several members of the Drive By Truckers and Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi All Stars, who I interviewed for the cover story of the last Mousike issue.



Karen Kemerling’s path to building guitars could not be more of an opposite from the background of Scott Baxendale. After over 20 years as an engineer, Karen was looking to “do something different with my hands and with my head.” She enrolled at Red Rocks Community College in 2003 to take a class in the woodworking program and was instantly hooked. Karen also did not have a musician’s background prior to beginning. “I played guitar a little bit but I am not good by any means (laughs).” She credits her initial interest to having affection for wood working and drafting. “The thing with guitars is there’s art and there’s science all in one thing, so the science piece kind of drew me in because that’s my background. But the art piece is kind of a good thing for me because it’s a part of my life that I hadn’t really gotten into. After you make one, and you sort of see this thing come to life from a box of firewood to all of a sudden you’ve got a musical instrument with a heart and a soul and all that. Seeing stuff that you did with your own hands, you either sort of fall in love or you move on, and I was one of those who fell in love.”

From there, Karen began building guitars on her own as well as teaching in the Red Rocks Community College program. She formed K2 Guitars (www.k2guitars.com) in Golden and has built over 25 guitars, generally building 3 or 4 a year, while teaching and also still working a day job. Karen takes pride in being a female in a trade largely dominated by males.



Alan Dunwell also became a guitar luthier without extensive music or repair experience. “I am proudly not the person to come to for repairs,” he laughs. Unlike Baxendale and Kemerling, he is largely self-taught. He built a guitar at an early age growing up in Illinois, and then after relocating to Boulder, began dissecting how his friend’s guitars were built. “A couple of friends had guitars and I wanted one so I figured I’d try to make one again. At that time the only books or information available was a book on how to build a classical guitar. And so using that and a mirror and a flashlight and looking at my buddy’s guitars, I built a couple.” Alan also began accumulating knowledge from spending time talking to the luthiers working at NBN Guitars and Ome Banjos, both of which were in business building instruments near Boulder.

Alan also comes from an engineering background, working as a software development engineer in conjunction with the University of Colorado in Boulder. He brings a much more analytical approach to building than others. “I’ve always been more interested in the research and development of what makes an instrument tick,” he states. “Every time I build an instrument I keep logs so I know exactly what I did and how long it took me. So I have a log of everything I did on that instrument. In addition to that I take photographs digitally, so each guitar comes with a baby book of the whole build process. Part of that is so I can go back and look at that data. It is an ongoing process in that the more you do, the more data you get and the more control you have over it.”

Dunwell is also one of the founding members of the Colorado Luthiers Association, and runs his one man building operation, Dunwell Guitars (www.dunwellguitars.com), based out of his home in Nederland. He has built 28 guitars over the years, mostly steel string acoustic but also including a mandolin, banjo, and even an Irish Bouzouki.

So while Scott Baxendale took a more traditional approach to becoming a luthier, people like Karen Kemerling and Alan Dunwell came into it more as a craft-related extension of their careers.

The process of making custom handcrafted guitars and planning a build starts with fact gathering, where the luthier has to evaluate what is best for the customer based on their playing style and other needs.

What makes a custom guitar right is a very individual experience. Scott Baxendale states that he tries to match the guitar with the person by finding out as much as he can about their likes and dislikes. “A lot of makers will go ‘well what kind of woods, what kind of binding, what kind of trim,’ and we do talk about all that. But I try to find out more about the person because I want to try to tailor the guitar to match. So I’ll ask questions like “what was the first guitar you ever saw that inspired you or you thought was cool?” or “who was the first musician that made you want to play the guitar?” I try to get more into the personal reasons of what a person likes. I find out what kind of music they like and who they listen to and how they play.”

Dunwell concurs that the beginning stages are all about finding as much as possible about the person who will be playing the guitar. “The first thing that I need to know about the person is what type of music they currently play. That kind of gives me a feel for whether

the person needs a flat pick guitar or a finger style guitar. It takes a bit of back and forth for me, and then I can make suggestions on guitar body style and woods.”

It is also not uncommon to where a customer may come in and want a particular guitar based on appearance, when in reality the make up and composition of that guitar is not ideally suited to their playing style. Dunwell states “I usually get a request that says “I want you to build me a guitar with this wood and that size, but I also want the 5th fret to be made out of gold and what not (laughs). So they’ve already got this picture in their head of this perfect guitar. In reality, that may be absolutely wrong for what they really want.” Kemerling adds “people are drawn to a certain look, but every species of wood has a different tone. And so if they play a rosewood guitar and say “jeez, I just love this” and then they want me to make one that’s made out of maple because they like the appearance, I will tell them that they will sound different.”

The early stages of the build process also heavily dictates what materials are used to craft a custom instrument. It varies between luthiers how the general body style of the guitar is started. Many custom makers, such as Dunwell and Kemerling, have developed base “models” of guitars which are starting places regarding body style, mainly based on the finger picking vs. strumming player, and then tailor the other elements of the guitar from there.

The list of items that can be modified to make a guitar feel and sound different is very extensive and includes the choice of wood type and thickness, body and neck shape, bracing patterns, head stock, finish and other cosmetics.

Baxendale feels that having his customer on board for the build process is vitally important. “When the person gets it and understands what they are getting and goes through the process, it’s the coolest experience because when they get the guitar it’s just like they are married to that guitar forever after that. It’s a guitar that every time they pick it up it inspires them in some way. If I perceive that the person totally appreciates it and understands and gets what I’m doing, I’m just overjoyed when I’m handing the guitar to them.”

He says the flip side of that can be difficult however. “Sometimes a customer will come in and they want a guitar but they don’t have any concept of the fact that I’m creating an artistic sculpture for them based on all that information. They only see that this is a shop and they don’t really understand the difference between what I do and if they went to Guitar Center and bought a Taylor or something. So they are always the type that’s calling you up every other day with different ideas and changes and they don’t envision what the final result is going to be and then you have this kind of letdown when then get it. It’s almost like they have this buyer’s remorse because they just didn’t get the process. And those are the hardest guitars for me to make when I get in that situation.” Kemerling agrees, stating “It is a custom guitar. If you want us to build you one, we want to make it the way you want it. That’s kind of the novelty of having someone like me building you a guitar versus going to a guitar store and buying the stock model off of the wall. That’s what you’re paying for. At least that is my thought on it.”

In 1999, the Colorado Luthiers Association came into existence, founded by Alan Dunwell and Randy Reynolds. This organization can be found online at www.coloradoluthiers.com. The website directory features over 60 luthiers of varying experience from aspiring luthiers to those with extensive experience all right here in the state of Colorado. The basis of this group is for existing luthiers to exchange ideas, techniques and information regarding the craft, as well as to encourage and support new luthiers in learning the skills of the masters. Alan Dunwell states, “I take the blame that the emphasis that I put on the group was primarily getting together and exchanging information without regard for experience or how many you’ve built or even if you’ve built one at all. I wanted to make sure it was an open forum for anyone of any skill



KAREN KEMERLING

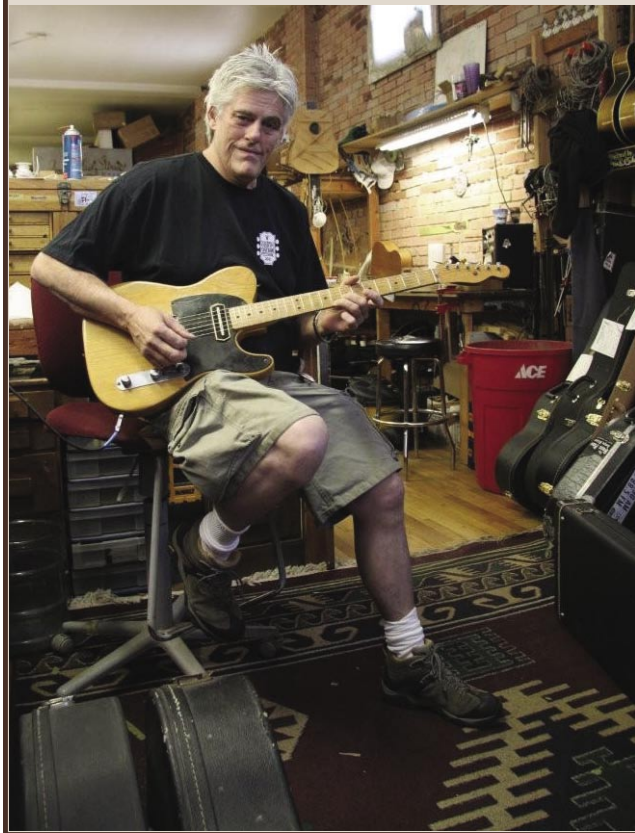


level. And that's worked out fairly well." The organization also seeks to combine purchases to facilitate better pricing for materials used to make instruments. In 2009, the group convened for the Third Annual Colorado Custom Guitar Festival at Denver East High School. This festival presented many custom instruments for display as well as workshops and performances.

There is also a highly acclaimed luthier program right here in the state of Colorado at Red Rocks Community College (www.rrcc.edu). The program is run by Rand Richards and Robbie O'Brien. O'Brien is another custom builder who learned the craft while living in Brazil in the late 1990's. He studied under Brazilian luthier Antonio Tessarin before returning to United States, where he furthered his education studying under Kent Everett in Atlanta. In addition to facilitating the college program, he runs O'Brien Guitars (www.obrienguitars.com) and produces an instructional video series "Luthier Tips du Jour," which can be found on Youtube (www.youtube.com). He also runs several sessions per year out of his home workshop where an individual can work with him directly for a period of 8 to 10 days and build an actual custom guitar for themselves from scratch.

The program is called "Red Rocks School of Fine Woodworking and Lutherie," which they bill as "a unique and intensive hands-on program." In addition to the full time staff, the program features 19 part time instructors and 14 teaching assistants, including Karen Kemerling. There are many specific classes that focus on luthiering, such as instrument specific courses or ones relating to special techniques in the building process. The prospective student can earn an Associate's Degree in Fine Woodworking or certificates for numerous skill specific criteria, such as Luthier Fundamentals. It is an impressive program right here in Colorado that can accommodate someone looking to become an advanced luthier to a simple hobbyist looking to further their skills.

SCOTT BAXENDALE



Scott Baxendale also plans on starting a luthier school in Georgia, the Athens Luthier Academy, training prospective luthiers in guitar building, repairs and how to serve as roach technicians for working bands.

For most luthiers, the true reward of this work is handing the finished product over to the customer. There is a natural attachment to the instruments they build. Alan Dunwell describes the final part of the process as bittersweet. "You don't want to let go of it, probably for two reasons. One is that you're never really done. At some point you just have to say "this is done." And then you play it a bit and you say, "Well maybe I ought to keep this for myself (laughs)." Because each one is always "the next best one," but the next one you build is going to be the perfect one. But that is a real kick to see when they first open the case."

"When I start building them, I have in my head, just like the person who has ordered the guitar, an image of exactly what this guitar is going to be and that it will be perfect and flawless. And of course, I haven't yet found that person that built a flawless guitar, but I think they are out there somewhere. You keep trying and refining your skills with every instrument, and there's never been one that I haven't learned something from."

Karen Kemerling states "I get chills just thinking about the last one I did, for a woman who had actually been in the military for the last 30 years and recently retired. The guitar I built for her was sponsored by a whole bunch of her friends and it was made out of Koa, and we got the wood in Hawaii because at one point she was stationed there. The day that I gave her the guitar, she cried. I don't know how to explain it. It's one of the greatest feelings in the world, to give somebody a guitar that you know they are going to take care of. And then you walk away and it's almost like you gave the child away, but you hope that it grows up and it lives and it gets its heart and soul from the person that owns it. It's a great feeling, like no other to be honest."

For Scott Baxendale, the legacy of building is the best part. "The guitar you built with your name on it, that guitar goes out and travels the world and it's connected to you no matter who owns it, who buys it, who sells it or where it goes." Perhaps for this reason, Baxendale is looking to fully concentrate on building going forward. "I'm 55. I figure I have at the absolute outside 20 years but I figure more like 10 years left to build guitars if I'm lucky. I can only build so many guitars in 10 years and the more Ibanez's or Yamaha's I repair and the more Squire's I adjust, the fewer of those guitars I'm going to build. And when I'm long dead and gone, no one is going care about any repair I did. All they are going to care about is the guitars that I've built."

It is the joy and inspiration that the guitar brings a person that is the payoff for the owner. Baxendale sums it up best by saying, "To me the definition of a great guitar is one that inspires you to play something that you wouldn't have played if you hadn't picked up that guitar. And that could be a \$10.00 yard sale guitar or it can be a \$10,000.00 vintage guitar. It really doesn't matter that much."

It is clearly evident that the trade of guitar luthiering is not only alive and well, but thriving in Colorado. There is camaraderie among luthiers of all skill levels to support and mentor and a free exchange of ideas and techniques. There is also a very impressive program at Red Rocks Community College for those wishing to further their skills or start learning. So if you are thinking of looking for your dream guitar, you might consider having a custom made guitar built by a Colorado luthier.

