

How I Learned to Make Guitars

JAYNE HENDERSON, PHOTO BY BETTY CLICKER



MICHIHIRO MATSUDA, COURTESY OF MICHIHIRO MATSUDA



ISAAC JANG, PHOTO BY DANIEL SON



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MÓNICA ESPARZA, PHOTO BY MARK WESTLING



ERICH SOLOMON, COURTESY OF ERICH SOLOMON

Eight contemporary luthiers on the origins of their craft and more



Jayne Henderson

As the old saying goes, getting started is the hardest part. What does it take to go from loving acoustic guitars to actually building them? To answer this question, we asked a handful of luthiers to tell us their origin stories. The acclaimed members of our roundtable come from a wide variety of backgrounds: multi-instrumentalist Rachel Rosenkrantz of Atelier Rosenkrantz; composer/classical guitarist Kenny Hill of Hill Guitar Company; longtime Gryphon repairman and Matsuda Guitars owner Michihiro Matsuda; Solomon Guitars founder and archtop specialist Erich Solomon; Spanish classical builder Mónica Esparza of Esparza Guitars; RS Muth mastermind and lifelong scientist/explorer Randy Muth; steel-string expert and Musicians Institute instructor Isaac Jang of Isaac Jang Guitars; and EJ Henderson Guitars' Jayne Henderson, whose aesthetic is closely tied to that of her father, masterful guitarist/luthier Wayne Henderson. We asked about everything from mentors and tradition vs. innovation to the impact of being a player and repairperson. Sit back and listen to how they got their feet in the door—and what they've learned since.

'I was paid \$25,000 for that guitar, so I made another one!'

—JAYNE HENDERSON

AG: Jayne, your dad has built and played guitars since before you were born. Did you ever think you'd be a luthier?

Jayne Henderson: Never. I majored in psychology and developed a strong love for the outdoors, so I got a master's in environmental law and policy. After graduation, I asked my dad to let me sell one of his guitars on eBay to help pay off my loans. He agreed but said he would help me make one myself. I thought it would be horrible, but getting to know my dad and being able to understand why he loved making guitars so much was the best gift I've ever been given. Plus, I was paid \$25,000 for that guitar, so I made another one!

AG: Randy, why did you leave a great job as a chemist to build guitars?

Randy Muth: My decision to leave the pharmaceutical industry came before I decided to build guitars. My wife and I had very successful careers, both as chemists, but ultimately I was unsatisfied working in the corporate structure and with my trajectory towards management and away from the science. We also made the decision to value our time raising our young children, as we were fortunate enough to be financially secure with one income.

MÓNICA ESPARZA



MARK WESTLING

ERICH SOLOMON



COURTESY OF ERICH SOLOMON

JAYNE HENDERSON



AG: When did you first know that you wanted to make instruments?

Muth: My love has always been to make or build things. As a synthetic organic chemist, this is exactly what I did: I figured out how to build molecules. This particular field of science is a bit different than most in that it's not so much about doing studies and gathering data, but about using one's knowledge, intuition, and good old trial and error to make something. In my time away from work, I thought about how I could apply these basic processes in another area. Music has always been a very important part of my life, from a listener's perspective, and I wanted to make a contribution. And that's how I came to build guitars.

Isaac Jang: I've always loved playing guitars, and I had a curiosity about the sound of guitar. This curiosity led me to discover the profession of lutherie, or more specifically, guitar-making. It was a wild idea to build a guitar from scratch, but before I knew it, I found myself signing up for Galloup [School of Lutherie], which gave me my training the strong structure that allowed me to adapt to different work environments.

'There are so many guitar builders now, new and old, and the level of players and education is vast by comparison.'

—KENNY HILL

Michihiro Matsuda: I was born in Nagoya and raised in Tokyo, and I have enjoyed drawing, music, and making things by hand since I was a child. I started playing guitar in high school. I didn't have woodwork training—my major was sociology—and I didn't know anyone who made guitars by hand. By coincidence, I found a small article about a handcrafted acoustic guitar maker in a magazine at a train-station kiosk. I was fascinated, but it took me a while to come across the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery, the only place I could find to learn about making acoustic guitars. I quit my job and decided to go to Phoenix, Arizona.

AG: Were there advantages to starting out in an era where guitar-making info was scarce?

Kenny Hill: Maybe it triggered a sense of adventure and mystery and discovery about the whole thing that seemed exotic, an allure that there might be some holy grail that could finally be revealed. That can be motivating. Today I would say the reality has surpassed the fantasy, but the grail is still waiting to be found.

MICHIHIRO MATSUDA





JON MCCORMACK

Kenny Hill

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Erich Solomon: These days, there is an endless amount of information for the beginning luthier on the internet. Some of it can cut a lot of time off your learning curve, but it is also very easy to learn other people's mistakes.

AG: Jayne, how were things different for your dad, who began building in the '60s?

Henderson: He had to figure out how to make a guitar that resembled Red Smiley's 1938 D-45 just by looking at an old songbook someone had given him. His work has been 50 years of trial and error, using what was available and figuring out what to do rather than just doing what he was told. That's a skill that can't really be taught, and it's what sets his instruments slightly ahead of so many others.

AG: What was the first instrument you built?

Muth: The first instruments I made were simple system transverse PVC flutes for my own enjoyment. From a building perspective, of course, I wanted to make something a bit more complex and more open to creative expression. The first guitar I built—I still have it—was made from an

'These days, there is an endless amount of information for the beginning luthier on the internet!'

—ERICH SOLOMON

LMI [Luthiers Mercantile International] kit, although I did deviate quite a bit from the kit.

Rachel Rosenkrantz: My very first instrument as a musician was classical guitar, so naturally, that was my first instrument as a builder. I built a Hauser to specs in order to learn—it's a perfect design to sink your teeth into lutherie. I quickly started building steel-string parlor guitars after that.

AG: What were the main things you learned from an early mentor?

Rosenkrantz: I received a strong foundation from [Shady Lea Guitars'] Dan Collins, going through the thorough motions of Building 101. Having a career in industrial design under my belt definitely helped ease the learning curve.

Henderson: The most important lesson I learned from my dad was to not stop working when the work is "good enough." If there's room for you to make it better, redo it until it is the best you're able to do. He taught me to listen to wood—to hear, for example, how

ISAAC JANG



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Matsuda: My experience as an apprentice at Ervin Somogyi's shop is my foundation as a guitar maker. I learned so many things—not only technical aspects of guitar making, but also how to manage business, how to talk to customers, etc. Just observing what he was doing, how he was doing it, and why he did it gave me many ideas about how to survive as a guitar maker.

Solomon: Bob Benedetto's book *Making an Archtop Guitar* was formative and enlightening; a Tom Ribbecke archtop construction course showed me the process of an instrument actually coming together; and when I was first starting out, the woodworkers and craftsmen of the Hartvigson family, in Anchorage, Alaska, showed me what a craftsman really was and gave me a level of excellence to aspire to.

Jang: I started my apprenticeship with Kathy Wingert shortly after I graduated from Galloup, and I can proudly say that experience formed

'If you become a good player, you become an even better builder.'

—MÓNICA ESPARZA

and shaped my career as a guitar maker. Having spent ten years with her, not only did I learn about technical aspects, but also about mindset, approach, and attention to details.

AG: Mónica, you've spent lots of time with the great Spanish luthier José Romanillos.

Mónica Esparza: After my struggle to get into my first workshop with him, he invited me back every year to observe and share projects in his shop. Aside from the guitar workshops that I've attended throughout the years, he has also invited me to special events, such as the grand opening of the Spanish Guitar Museum in Sigüenza and the intimate workshop he did to recreate a *vihuela de mano* that was found in a convent in the north of Spain. We have become very good friends.

AG: Does being a player inform your lutherie?

Esparza: If you become a good player, you become an even better builder. Since I began studying with my current guitar teacher, my design decisions and approach have helped me improve my guitars.

Rosenkrantz: I play upright bass, bouzouki, and guitar in various styles; I have played in



RANDY MUTH

PATRICIA MATSON



KENNY HILL

JON MCCORMACK

Acoustic
SAVAREZ

Bronze

*Phosphore
Bronze*

*Christie Lenée plays
Savarez*



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bands, ensembles, and solo, too. Once you have that experience, you can absolutely put yourself in your client's shoes and understand their needs. Making a guitar is more than designing and building an object. It is addressing a bigger picture about having a creative lifestyle.

Hill: I have the same desires for sound that everyone does—beauty, power, clarity, contrast, balance, etc.—but as a player I have also been able to home in on personal preferences for playability and the ergonomics of the guitar, to make an instrument that pleases me first, and hope that it pleases other players, as well.

Jang: I wouldn't have been a guitar maker if I hadn't been a guitar player first. I try to play whenever I can. It gives me insights as a player, and it allows me to test-drive my instruments.

AG: How does repair work influence your design decisions?

Jang: Doing repairs has helped me gain a wide range of knowledge of instruments in many different areas: sound, playability,

structure, etc. At Westwood Music [in Los Angeles], Fred Walecki gave me the opportunity to work on so many cool instruments, and seeing his way of working with his clients was an eye-opening experience. He taught me how to see the needs of each player and how to meet those needs by going extra miles. Fred would always say, "There's no traffic jam on the extra mile."

Matsuda: My repair experience at Gryphon is a foundation of my guitar making. You learn so many valuable things from repair work that apply to making guitars, and you get many new ideas from old instruments. Working at Gryphon is a great chance for me to observe the massive culture and history of American stringed instruments.

AG: How important is it to know the work of the masters before embarking on one's own path?

Muth: Very important. Actually, for the creative process, there is value in doing your brainstorming before doing your research,

but then one should do the research before attempting to execute the idea.

AG: Is it crucial for you to pass on the lessons you've learned?

Esparza: Yes. Nobody can take away our personal journeys as luthiers, but there are a lot of lessons we can share with others who are interested in continuing the tradition.

AG: How do you balance tradition, innovation, personal style, practicality, and the needs of your customers?

Esparza: There is always room for personal style and innovation—as long as luthiers don't lose sight of tradition. I am all about tradition and style. We have various opportunities within a guitar to place our signatures without having to lose respect for the instrument.

Rosenkrantz: Form and function are interlocked. It is a balance, an equilibrium between both, without sacrificing one for another. When I started lutherie, I was a designer on the innovation team at Philips during the day, using

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cutting-edge technology, while at night, I was learning how to build classical guitars traditionally. It was a funny contrast. Naturally, over time, both worlds merged.

Matsuda: I think it is important not to mix up your artistry and the needs of your clients. They will never become the same. Your artistry should be a question to your clients, not an answer. It is the same as the relationship between art and design. What I try to do is to make good questions. It's a never-ending challenge.

AG: How has the business changed since you began making guitars?

Jang: I believe we are living in the golden era of lutherie, where there are more high-quality, handmade guitars available than ever before.

Hill: There are so many guitar builders now, new and old, and the level of players and education is vast by comparison. There are so many tools and materials available . . . and so much information—too much sometimes.

Esparza: When I started building guitars almost 20 years ago, our work was admired and appreciated so much more. Today, people expect you to compete with inexpensive, factory guitars coming from other countries like China and Vietnam without really appreciating the true value of a one-of-a-kind, finely crafted instrument.

Solomon: Demand is going down while more and more people are building—not a good combo. The days of holy-grail makers like D'Angelico or D'Aquisto are dead. While there are absolutely better makers and better instruments out there today, they will never have the historical cachet of these well-regarded and well-celebrated makers. All that being said, luthiers right now are building some of the best guitars that have ever been made.

AG: What would you say to a luthier who was just starting out?

Solomon: If you want to be a full-time luthier, you really have to have guts, grit, gumption,

and be able to set yourself apart from the crowd with your vision, craftsmanship, or both.

Muth: Keep your day job until your night job pays! Also, figure out your learning style; everyone learns differently, whether it be by apprenticing or just jumping in. Finally, there is a lot of sharing of knowledge and ideas in the incredible community of luthiers. Take advantage of that!

Rosenkrantz: Even though it is important to make designs that sell, leave room for play and for projects that are more experimental. This is how discovery happens, and it's also how you keep it fun.

Henderson: Find what you have to offer that will make your instruments special to you and your customers. If you put your soul into it, you can hear it in your work. And just like Wayne Henderson, be sure to complete each task to the absolute best of your ability. If you see something isn't as perfect as you can make it, take the time to redo it. **AC**

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