

Manny Salvador

Stringed Instrument Repairer/Builder

“So you think I have a cool career?” asks Manny Salvador, seeming somewhat surprised. “Look at this mess!” Scanning his New York City store, we see a variety of stringed instruments. Some might have been played by your great-grandparents, and others have obviously seen a lot of rock ‘n’ roll (many are missing parts and look pretty hurt). Sure, there’s a ton of work to do, but it seems like Manny has a pretty awesome job getting to restore all these neat instruments.

Manny has been repairing stringed instruments since the 1970s, and he builds them, too. Recently, he was nice enough to take a break from his busy schedule, show us his shop, and talk about his craft.

Q: What was the first instrument you played?

A: I started on guitar.

Q: When did you first fix an instrument?

A: Around 1971, I fixed my girlfriend’s guitar. It was a classical [nylon string] model, and I figured out by myself how to repair its broken bridge.

Q: How did you go about learning more?

A: I destroyed a couple dozen guitars, and then I decided it was time for an apprenticeship. I was lucky to find someone who would let me work with him. His name was Noah Wolf, and he had a repair shop where he dealt primarily with classical guitars, lutes, and other older acoustic instruments. From Noah, I learned the basic “ins and outs” of guitar repair.

Q: So what happened next?

A: I wanted to learn how to build guitars, but Noah was quite an old man, and he no longer made them. One day we were really busy, and Noah had me deliver two classical guitars for a builder named Miguel Luciano to repair. I asked Miguel for an apprenticeship right there on the spot, and he agreed. That position lasted for nine months, and

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then, with Miguel’s encouragement, I took a job as the repairman at Sam Ash [an instrument store] in Brooklyn.

Q: What is your current work?

A: I still do a lot of repair work on fretted instruments—mandolins, guitars, banjos. I also work on orchestral instruments like upright basses, cellos, violins, and violas. Plus I make instruments, mostly

semi-hollow and acoustic guitars, but some basses, too. [Note: Semi-hollow guitars are electric: Their bodies are hollow, but they have solid blocks of wood inside. Many blues players prefer them.]

Q: What are the most common repairs you do?

A: I would say the most common request is for maintenance, or for setup—making sure an instrument plays as well as possible. For acoustic guitars, bridge repair and fret replacement are most common, and for electric guitars, I often have to troubleshoot the electronics and wiring. People sometimes bring me their electric guitars to customize. That commonly involves changing the pickups [magnetic devices that transfer the strings’ vibrations to an amplifier]. People change them, of course, to get different sounds.

Q: Having done repair work in New York City for so long, do you have any famous clients?

A: [Famous funk player] Bootsy Collins. I made his most recent star-shaped bass back in December of ‘98. It’s got flashing LEDs and everything. I’ve also done work for Matthias Jabs from the Scorpions, and work for singer-songwriters like Jill Sobule.

Q: What is the most rewarding aspect of your career?

A: Seeing a customer smile when he gets his instrument back. 