

Scott MacDonald

L u t h i e r

Scott MacDonald didn't always want to make guitars. In fact, after college he spent 12 years producing and directing television commercials. But then he needed a change. Having learned woodwork as a child from his father, a furniture repairer, Scott decided to build a guitar from a kit, and next, one from scratch. They sounded good, so he took a leap of faith and left the TV world. Scott's new career as a luthier, or stringed instrument builder, was slow going at first. But 14 years later, his guitar shop on Long Island, New York, is teeming with orders; some people call for custom-made guitars, others for restorations of vintage six-strings. And for Scott, building these instruments is an honor. "I consider it alchemy," he says. "I take something that grew out of the ground and died, and then bring it back to life in another form."

Do you remember the first guitar you made?

It was a Frankenstein to look at, but it had a nice soul. I knew I could get good if I practiced, so I started fixing and building guitars based on books, videos, and workshops.

What is your shop like?

It's in my basement, and if you're 5' 8" or taller, you have to duck to get in. There are four climate-controlled zones. If it's too dry or too humid, the guitars will crack or buckle.

What kind of tools do you use?

Bandsaws, table saws, and various chisels and sanding machines. And I built a machine to help me bend

the wood for the sides of acoustic guitars. Then there are funky-looking clamps, each specifically made to help glue tops and backs to the rim. The tools are on a much smaller, more accurate scale.



If you're building a house and you have a 1/16" gap somewhere, you're still doing well; on a guitar, it would be disastrous. It's very exact work. I realized that I could have been an amazing surgeon!

How do you select wood?

I look at it and tap it and listen to it. I see how stiff it is by flexing it. If I have a two-foot-long piece of black mahogany, I'll put my ear at one end and then scratch with my fingernail at the other. And if

the sound comes through into my ear, then the wood is tonally alive.

What guides the variations you make for each customer?

The guitar should reflect the person's personality and spirit. If you're perky, I'll make a guitar with a crisp, poppy tone. If you're more mellow, I'll make one with overtones and depth [in the sound]. My customers are spending \$2,000–\$4,000 to have guitars made, and I'm supporting their musical dreams. It's a sacred thing.

What's going through your mind as you're building?

With an acoustic guitar, 140 lbs. of string pressure is pulling on wood that's less than an 1/8" thick, so there's engineering involved. You have to line the neck up just right, so that the wood flexes the right amount under the pressure of the strings. It's almost impossible!

Do you ever get attached to guitars you've sold?

Yes. It takes me a couple of years to make an acoustic, and six months for an electric. These are my babies, and I want them to be with people who respect them, the world, and other people. I'm not pulling a lever and having guitars come out on a conveyor belt—I'm making them with my fingers. There's a little bit of me in each guitar.

Check out Scott's Web site, www.customguitars.com. 