

GUITARMAKER

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WILLIAM EATONS DOUBLE NECK
HARP GUITAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN
WALKER

THE TRANSPERFORMANCE
TUNING SYSSYTEM

THE FLEDGLING LUTHIER

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WALKER

In issue #27 of 'Guitarmaker' (April 1995) Gibson's Montana Custom Shop was featured. At that time, John Walker was working for Gibson and certainly seemed to be the 'go to' man. We thought it might be interesting to touch bases with John and see what he has been up to over the past decade.

Rich: *When did you leave the Gibson Custom Shop and what have you been up to since?*

John: After leaving Gibson in Nov. 1995, I took a position at a new guitar manufacturing facility. It was owned by Young Chang America. Shortly after arriving it was renamed Tacoma Guitar Company. My responsibilities included tooling design, process implementation, employee training, and assisting in guitar design.

In 1998 I went to work for Michael Gurian. Michael of course makes all those great parts for guitars, all sorts of marquetry and binding, bridge pins, end pins, specialty files, and custom laser work.

2001 found me working for Steve Andersen. While I was with Steve, we took the opportunity to upgrade his tooling and processes. We also developed his StreamLine and Gold Standard models. This was a very exciting time for me. I was learning so much from Steve, about building archtops and also just what it takes to be able to operate a small shop.

With all of these experiences under my belt, it was my fortune to find our dream home in the mountains of western Montana. Deb Sonnenberg, my long time partner, and I took the plunge and began building our own guitars.

Rich: *What was your biggest challenge after leaving Gibson and establishing your independence as a small shop luthier?*

John: I didn't start out thinking about being a small shop luthier. I really loved the challenge and advantages of the "big" shop. After leaving Gibson, each of my subsequent

positions has been with a smaller shop. I guess because I was able to gradually work my way into it, I was able to make the adjustment without too much trouble. Small challenges arose that I had not foreseen. Our shop is 35 miles from the closest hardware store. Setting up the shop physically took twice as long as I had anticipated (simply because of our isolation).

Rich: *Did you have a client base that followed you, or did you have to start from scratch?*

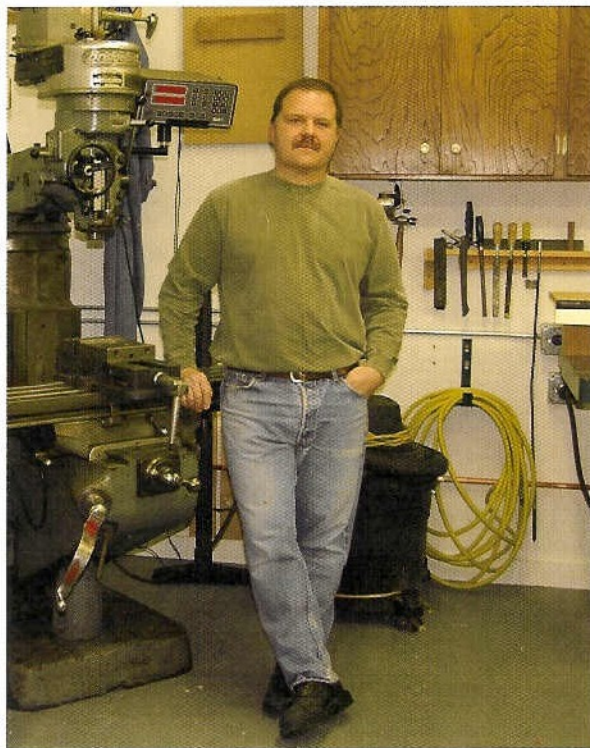
John: When I first left Gibson there were a lot of people encouraging me to build on my own. Financially at the time I could not swing it. A good thing as it turns out, as I had so much more to learn. It's been 12 years, and so much has changed in the way people buy guitars. The guitar community is so well informed and communicates cross-country in real time. So even though people recognize me from my time with Gibson, I definitely have to re-prove myself as a builder.

Rich: *Since leaving Gibson, what are you doing differently with respect to your building process and instrument design? How have your instruments evolved?*

John: While at Gibson I studied the old guitars and tried to reproduce them, as true to the original as possible. Sometimes that would work and sometimes that model was flawed. I was always jousting with ghosts. Some of the old guitars are so great it is impossible to imagine recreating them. So at most I can only be inspired by them, use them as a model, and come up with the best interpretation that I can.

The process that I have developed, of course, involves less automation. Another big issue is the ability to acquire wood far in advance of it's use, in most cases years, instead of weeks or months. Also glue and lacquer cure times are not as rushed.

Rich: *What instruments and styles are you building these days?*



John: So far I have chosen 3 models based on historic Gibson models and one that I designed while at Gurian's in Seattle. The slope shoulder dreadnought is just a great guitar, my models are named after rivers, streams, or creeks; and the slopes are the "Wise", and the "Clark Fork". The small jumbo is another great versatile guitar, with it's obvious shapeliness, the river name of "Ruby" was hard to resist. A guitar that I have more recently been drawn to is the Gibson L-00. In a nod to the original, and considering the small size of both the guitar and the creek, we thought our local "Lolo Creek" was a good fit. Flowing through our property is a very small creek, and our smallest guitar is the parlor sized "Gus".

Rich: *With a background in large scale production, what is your current strategy with respect to numbers of instruments built? Do you now build 1 or 2 at a time, or larger production runs?*

John: It is fortunate that my background has not diminished my love for building guitars. Production does not necessarily have evil connotations. I believe in producing as efficiently as possible. That often means using jigs and fixtures, and running as many parts as possible while you have tooling set up. This can be very beneficial for the guitars also. For instance, I am now in the process of shaping necks. I first lay them out on the wood and then bandsaw them close to shape. Then they rest and they might move a little. Then I rough shape them all and let them rest at this stage also. So I will have produced quit a few necks to this point and they will have time, maybe a year, to relax and move a little before they are taken the next step to becoming a guitar. The time gained by efficiencies in one area can then be spent on the guitar in other more critical operations. I find that it works well to make as many parts as is possible, or practical at once, and then to make the guitars in batches of six. As a one man shop this number seems to work for me in both the time that it takes for completion (about 3 months), and the physical fact that by the time I am done sanding six guitars I am ready to do something else, like spray six guitars.

Rich: *Do you use CNC or any of the other technologies?*



John: I do have the fret slots cut on a CNC machine. Other than that I do everything myself. I am considering having the logos cut for me, but for now I still even cut those by hand with a jewelers saw.

Rich: *Have you adapted any of the big production jigs or fixtures to your personal shop space?*

John: Jigs and fixtures for repeated processes have an obvious appeal, but for the most part things are still pretty simple in the shop. There is a long list of tooling that I would like to develop, like a dish sander for sanding rims. Mostly though it's hard to justify the time and expense in relation to the number of guitars that I can build.

Rich: *Where do you hope to see your shop and business in say 5 years?*

John: Right now, I feel like the luckiest man in the world. Deb and I are living our dream of a home in the mountains, and we get to build guitars for a living. My hope is that the shop and business have expanded, become more efficient, and my guitars are instruments that people enjoy to play, and most important is that I continue to improve my guitar building skills.

