

Jim Sullivan Interview

Sullivan Guitars & Acoustic Guitar Corner

An interview by Bryan Layne, film journalist and writer, who writes for the magazines 'Films in Review', 'Oddity Cinema' and 'Humor Magazine'.

We are talking with Jim Sullivan, a custom handmade acoustic guitar builder or luthier as they are call in their trade. Sullivan Guitars is located in Portland Tennessee, which is about 35 miles north of Nashville in the heart of Chet Atkins music territory. Jim has been working with the Chet Atkins Music Appreciation Society (CAAS) for about 12 years. Paul Yandell, who worked with Chet Atkins or Mister Guitar as Chet was referred to stated, "Jim Sullivan is one of the best builders of acoustic guitars around! The quality and sound are outstanding! Anyone who is in the market for a great acoustic guitar should give Sullivan Guitars a listen."

Bryan Layne: What makes your guitars so unique?

Jim Sullivan: I emulate a lot of what Paul McGill does and I use a patent in my guitars that is his design, his patent and his brainchild. It changes the whole physics of how the guitar works and after building them that way for Paul, I couldn't see building them any other way because to me, everything else is the same. Guitars have been made the same exact way for two hundred years and they all have these inherent problems where the neck on acoustic guitars will pull up, they sink in at the sound hole, they bubble at the bridge and after fifteen or twenty years they require neck sets. This system of Paul's, not only changes the way the guitar utilizes string energy, but it also makes the guitars really loud and negates the necessity for neck sets in 15 or 20 years. Plus, I've learned how to use other finish mediums besides lacquer, which I think are better. You tend to hear a lot of the older guitar makers and players say that guitars need to be finished with lacquer to get a good the sound. I think that is a bunch of baloney. My guitars are sealed everywhere except for the inside of the top. I've had people speculate that I do that just for looks, but that's not the only reason I do it. The inside of the guitars are actually sealed with nitrocellulose lacquer to seal them and reduce the effects of humidity. Guitars are very susceptible to changes in humidity and sealed wood is a lot less affected by humidity than unsealed wood. So, not only does it look nice, but also it protects the guitar from moving around due to humidity changes.

B.L.: What is your mission in your guitar building business?

J.S.: My approach has been to do something that is just a cut above the way everybody else is building guitars. Even though there are guys out there that can do all of this fancy inlay work, and I realize some collectors enjoy that kind of stuff, but I think most players can't afford that sort of thing or they don't really care about all of that. Guys like Tommy Emmanuel; I mean he plays the whole guitar. I think I've heard him refer to the guitar as a percussion instrument with strings and he beats on it like a drum. I don't think he cares a whole lot about abalone and fancy trim. I believe he probably cares more about what the instrument sounds like, how it plays and whether it can be tuned or not. My guitars are intonated on both ends instead of just at the 12 fret. As I heard Buster B. Jones say one day, there's no money up there. Who the hell plays the guitar above the 12 fret all the time? Most guys play the guitar in the first 12 frets. So, when you intonate them at the twelfth fret by moving the saddle, they play in tune at the twelfth fret. A lot of acoustic guitar players know that guitars are always a little out of tune in the first position. You kinda' have to temper tune them in the open position. My guitars intonate and play well everywhere on the neck. I spend a lot of time on intonation and set up to make them tune and play well. I use compound and severe compound radiuses so they feel the same all the way up the neck. A lot of the older guitars had solid radiuses on them which made the action feel much stiffer as you played further up on the neck.

B.L.: What can you tell me about the patented bracing system you use on these guitars?

J.S.: The patent is a beaming system that is part of the side assembly, freeing the top of the guitar from the phenomenon that causes it to sink in at the sound hole leading to a neck set over time. I don't publish any pictures of it out of courtesy to Paul McGill. I'm building that way by his gracious permission. Anybody who wants to look inside the guitar can see how it's done, but it would be a lot harder to figure out—looking backwards with a mirror—than looking at a bunch of detailed pictures. He does have a patent on it, so it would be a violation of copyright for somebody to start making guitars similar to these without his permission. This bracing system changes the whole physics of how the guitar works. It keeps the sound holes from sinking in where the fingerboard tongue comes out over the top of the guitar. They just don't ever move.

If you were to take a traditionally built instrument, attach the back of it to a table and then take the top of the guitar off. Then if you were to stand at the key head and pull up on the neck, which is what strings do, the sides of the instrument would distort out of shape. If you could picture that it makes sense. Now, if you were to take one of my guitars with the turbo bracing system in it and you were to do the same thing, nothing moves. The sound of the acoustic guitar comes from the top and from its ability to move freely, it's kind of like a speaker, it vibrates. How can it do that when it is all bound up around the perimeter of the sides, trying to keep the sides in the shape that they are in when there is string tension on the neck? So, this system takes all of that energy out of there that wants to pull the sides out of shape. It makes the top kind of sit there freely on its own and able to vibrate. It allows us to graduate the tops. They are thinner out on the perimeter than they are in the middle. A lot of the guys probably graduate tops, but this system allows us to be more extreme about it. The grand classical body shape that I build, which is a smaller guitar, sounds huge. It makes the guitars really loud and it gives them a full frequency range and takes away the necessity for neck sets.

B.L.: Where can people find your guitars on-line?

J.S.: I have two websites, one of which is www.sullivanguitars.com and that site promotes the guitars that I build. I also have built another website and it is located at www.acousticguitarcorner.com and that one sells acoustic guitar related accessories. Products like cases, pre-amps, capos, instructional DVD's, pickup systems and the acoustic reference amplifier by L.R. Baggs. I'm looking at some new manufacturers to add another case line on there that has some great solutions to the humidity problems built right into the case itself. I'm also adding inventive little products that make any gig a little easier, like a little tray that clips onto your mic stand that is capable of holding your picks or your capo. Things like little tool kits—guitar tool maintenance kits that you throw into your gig bag that contain a string winder, wire cutters and wrenches. I'm always looking for new and cool stuff to add to our product line. It takes time to find good suppliers with quality products. The Acoustic Guitar Corner site also puts out a quarterly news letter that tells everyone about new products and guitars that are in the manufacturing process. Registration for the news letter is on every page of the site. There is also a links page full of resources for musicians and a form to fill out for anyone who would like to exchange links.

B.L.: How can people contact you?

J.S.: They can email me at customersupport@sullivanguitars.com, the contact information can be found on both websites.

B.L.: Your guitars are built by hand?

J.S.: When I say handmade I don't mean that my guitars are built like Stradivarius handmade violins were, but for the most part they are handmade. There's a lot of nice stuff being made in small one-man shops like mine. I have it more in my mind to keep it small and build a dozen guitars a year. I think when manufacturers get big and they start expanding with a lot of C&C equipment, it takes a lot of the mystique out of handmade. I even like re-sawing my own wood because I can get it like I want it. I can't always do that, sometimes I have to buy materials that

are pre-cut, like back and side sets. The availability of materials is getting tough also. A lot of the major manufacturers have jumped on the environmental bandwagon and they're doing things to conserve and make sure the materials are renewable. People have to start doing it that way because the building materials are getting harder to come by. Some of the major manufacturers are scarf-joining headstocks and stacking heels. Where they used to get 1 neck out of a board, they now are getting 3 and that's all in an effort to get max yield from hard to get materials. I will continue to make solid necks for as long as I can, but there may come a time when I will have to start doing all of that, as well. I think adding a joint, to attach a headstock, creates a place for the guitar to come apart and adds a weak spot. I think it's of better quality and a better product if it's solid, or any laminations run length wise, but I understand why they are making all of these changes. So, there is a lot of good stuff being made in small shops, but I would also have to say, buyers beware. If people are going to buy a handmade guitar, then the buyer should get to know the builder. They should call them up and talk with them. If they are able to, they should go visit the builder, check his shop out. They should evaluate for themselves and make an educated decision on which builder they should go with.

B.L.: Why aren't more guitar builders using a concept that is similar to the turbo bracing system?

J.S.: I just think that a lot of guitar makers are hung-up on tradition. I think it takes an out-of-the-box thinker to be brazen enough to step out there and do something like this. I wish it were my idea. I can't claim the idea and Paul deserves every bit of credit for developing this turbo bracing system.

B.L.: How can a buyer try your guitars out?

J.S.: If a buyer puts the money up front and allows me to hold on to it, I will send them a guitar for seventy-two hours. That's so they can play it and feel it in their hands to see if they like it. If, for any reason, they don't want the guitar, if they contact me within that seventy-two hour period and if they send it back to me in a resalable condition, I will return their money. If they purchase the guitar over the Internet, I will take care of the shipping. If they get a guitar for a seventy-two hour approval period and they send it back, then the shipping to and from is, of course, their responsibility. If the buyer doesn't want to do the shipping thing, then they will need to find a broker that I work with in the Nashville area that has my guitars in their music stores. If they want to go deal with the broker and try my guitars out that way, then they certainly can go and do that. I do try to work out some sort of an arrangement so that my guitars can be tried out.

B.L.: What price do your guitars start out at?

J.S.: My guitars start at three thousand dollars and it's really hard for me to build anything for less than that amount. What I am doing for \$3,000.00... a lot of other makers are doing a lot less for \$8,000.00 to \$15,000.00. The difference is that somebody well known is playing on their guitars. Does that make the guitar better? No. It's a perception that people have. You know, if James Taylor is playing your guitar everybody wants one.

B.L.: How long does it take to build the guitar and ship it out to a customer?

J.S.: If someone was to call and custom order a guitar right now, they may have to wait six months. That's actually pretty quick because most builders have a year or more waiting period.

B.L.: How much of a down payment do you need before you start building a custom guitar for a customer?

J.S.: When I do custom guitars I have to take a \$1,000.00 down payment on the order. I try to work with people and allow them to pay on their guitar as the instrument is being built. If I get working on the guitar and right in the middle of it the customer chooses to back out, the down payment is not refundable. I don't know if a different customer will like that guitar or not. You need

to have those policies or your whole business would fold. I'm passionate about building guitars and I like doing it. I can only hope that it will catch on and some good players will get a hold of and start playing my guitars. I also hope these guitars will sell based upon their merit. I try to do the very best that I can. When the guitars go out of my shop they are as perfect as I can get them. Although, I never feel like they are absolutely perfect, I don't think there is such a thing. I really, really scrutinize and fuss over these guitars. I like to string every one of my custom ordered guitars and have them around for a few weeks so they will settle in. That way I can make minor adjustments before they go out the door.

B.L.: Do you still do some work for Paul McGill?

J.S.: I still work for Paul occasionally. I'll do some body assembly work for him. I haven't done much for him this year, but near the beginning of last year I made him a half a dozen bodies. He knows that I know how he wants it done. There are minor differences between Paul's guitars and mine. I think we approach fretwork differently because we both learned it from different sources. The results are probably the same. My headstocks look different because they are a little less traditional and more unique. Those have kind of become a signature for my guitars, as well as the S style bridges I use. My bridges have an S-shape and I've gotten some static from the traditionalists about that. They are different, but that was my intent; to make them different than everybody else's. If you were standing across the room or if you saw a flash of my headstock in a video, you would definitely know that it was one of my guitars. I was driven to make the headstock shape different but elegant. Most guitar bridges have the standard shape to them or variations of that shape. After a couple of years of building these guitars, I developed a more traditional looking bridge to appease the traditionalists. I do still make the S-shaped bridges and I charge more money for those because there's more work involved in creating them. I'm not doing them on a C&C machine; I'm hand carving them. I cut the basic shape out on a router, but all of the detail is hand carved. If somebody wants to order a guitar from me, they can choose to order the S bridge. I've cut back on the original detail of the headstock design to make it easier to cut on the router table. The end of my headstock is shaped like an S and my logo is S-shaped. The logo's in two pieces and it looks like two C clefts. It follows the contour of the end of the headstock. A lot of manufactured guitars have their name written across the top of the headstock. When somebody is playing one of my guitars and you are standing there looking at him or her, you would see the S facing you in the end of the headstock. I also cut the S into the end of the fingerboard and also into the bridge. I tried to make the S follow through the whole design as part of my signature.

The bodies of the guitars are buffed and I have finished one guitar entirely in a satin, but generally the bodies are buffed to a shine and the necks are in satin. The necks have a satin finish on them because I think it feels better when you hands get sweaty. If you are playing and your hands get sweaty, satin feels a lot less sticky.

B.L.: How did you decide to start building guitars?

J.S.: In 2002 I got up to go to work and a friend of mine called me on the telephone. He wanted to know if I had ever thought of building somebody a guitar on time, making payments. He referred to an Uncle of his wife that was a violin builder and he always had money coming in from doing that. I explained to him that my shop was only tooled for repair work at that time because I really never had any intentions of ever getting into building. I went on into work and I never really took that phone call conversation too seriously. When I got into work, Paul McGill sat me down and said, "Listen, since 9-11 my orders have been way down. I haven't got anything new going on and I don't ever want to get where I can't pay you. I'm going to have to let you go." I sort of took all of it as a signal that maybe I should jump out there and start building some of my own guitars. So I started my first guitar in 2002 for the friend that had called me that morning. He had purchased some very expensive wood and materials for that guitar which made me a little nervous about screwing the thing up trying to work out all the design logistics. I suggested that he allow me to build a guitar out of some cheaper materials so I could work out all of the design problems,

logistics, and manufacturing procedures. Let me work all that out on something that is not so expensive. He had ordered a pretty fancy guitar with a lot of trim and abalone. That was how it all got started. I approached it with the idea that I wanted to build something that was unique and recognizable from across a room. I also wanted to capitalize on sound, playability and intonation because those were the things that were always very important to me as a player. I knew that guitar players were willing to trade off aesthetics and the way a guitar looked for more sound and playability. Also, intonation — how well the guitar tunes up or not — was a huge issue with people. I tried to approach it without compromise or mediocrity. I tried to do the very best that I could, using all of the knowledge that I had obtained from all of the people I had worked with throughout the years.

B.L.: How did your involvement with The Chet Atkins Appreciation Society begin?

J.S.: I was invited to attend C.A.A.S. for the very first time because I had refinished a 1904 vintage guitar for the president of that organization. When they asked me about doing it I said no because I didn't even have a shop built at that time. It began to strike me that if I continued to make excuses for not being able to do things, then I would never get established. So, I set up a little shop in the utility room of my house where the washing machine was kept and I put a box fan in the window. I painted that vintage guitar in my utility room with a borrowed airbrush and it came out really well because I was pretty picky about the detail. I went ahead and accepted the invitation to go to C.A.A.S. I started out doing repair work at a repair table in a vender's room and that lead to being asked to run one of stages for the performers. I had mixed emotions because I felt I didn't know enough about the sound to get the job done, but I guess I did because I've been doing it for about 12 years now. It also allowed me a better opportunity to see everybody play and what type of instrument they were playing on. It has given me a lot of insight not only into what kind of guitars they were all playing on but what kind of pickup systems and sound gear they were using also. At the convention I met Paul McGill's girl friend and that was how I met him. I went to his house one day and showed him some of the work I was doing on guitars and told him I would like to work with him if he ever needed any extra help. I wanted to learn more about the construction of the acoustic guitar. I didn't know very much about Paul as far as his history and how long he had been doing guitar work. I didn't even realize how well established he was as a builder. Paul has always been an out-of-the-box thinker, as far as tradition and the construction of guitars. He sees the problems that traditional construction poses and then finds solutions to those problems.

B. L.: Where did your musical background come from?

J. S.: Originally, I took classical violin lessons when I was eight or nine years old. Back then, that wasn't cool and I was bored with reading the music. I used to have my teacher play the piece and I would listen closely so I could learn it by ear. Then, The Beatles came out and I wanted to play the guitar, like an idiot. I should have kept playing the violin because I probably would have made a better living. I used to sneak out my father's guitar or my sister's guitar when they weren't around because I wasn't supposed to touch them. I started to become obsessed with the guitar when I was about twelve. My father also played locally on the weekends. He taught me to change his strings, set his intonation and maintain his guitars. So, I started learning about the maintaining of guitars and set-up work at a very young age because of my father. Soon after, I started playing the guitar in local clubs around my hometown. I was thirteen years old when I started playing in a band called Corporation T-Shirt and we would play a bunch of The Beatles' music. We were a good band and we used to win all of the band contests, the battle of the bands contests. We ranged from thirteen to seventeen years of age and I believe I was the youngest member in the band. We had to bring a chaperone when we played these gigs, you know? We would drink the bar out of cokes and eat them out of beer nuts. As I got older, around fifteen, my dad sort of threw the bass guitar at me and wanted me to go play bass with him and his band. He said, "Why don't you play bass for me? You know what I'm doing." He was the type of guy who would take a three-cord country song and put fifteen changes into it. He also had a habit of playing out of position, so

he was bouncing all over the neck. He was constantly making bass players mad because they couldn't follow him, but since I learned how to play from him, I could follow him fine.

B.L.: How was playing in a band with your father?

J.S.: Well, I didn't take it too seriously. I listened to the tape he made me for about forty-five minutes, like a kid would do and a few weeks later he asked me if I had been practicing. I told him I did listen to the tape, but I never told him how much and he said that was good because we had a gig over the weekend. I told him I couldn't do it and I wasn't ready, but he insisted that I had to do this thing. So, that's how I started playing the bass guitar. Later on, I would discover that everybody seemed to need a bass player. A good bass player was hard to come by and guitar players were a dime a dozen. So, I played the bass. All through high school, while my buddies were working in the grocery stores or gas stations, I was playing on the weekends and I was making more money than all of them.

B.L.: When would you say you started playing for a living?

J.S.: When I started playing out on the road with Leroy Van Dyke. I got that job through a friend that set up an audition. I spent about a year and a half with Leroy. I also worked with a lot of various unknown club bands that played the hotel circuits all over the mid-west. While doing all of this, I always maintained my own gear and that was based out of necessity because I had no money. Another reason was that I didn't trust anybody else to do it correctly. I was sort of fussy and, as long as it wasn't something that I couldn't do, before I got into maintenance/repair work, I always did everything on my own. If it was something that was easy and obvious, I would usually figure it out and fix it myself.

B.L.: How did you end up in Nashville?

J.S.: Well, I got married in 1977 and moved my wife and twin daughters down to Bowling Green, Kentucky to get away from the interference of my in-laws. She stayed for about a year and then she left. After that, I had a friend that worked at MCA publishing as a song plugger in Nashville. He invited me down there after my wife went back up north. I got a job at the Opryland Hotel for about two weeks in the food and beverage department. That job used to drive me crazy because I was always around all of these musicians. I would see them coming in and setting up for shows. I'd get yelled at all the time because I would always poke my head into the doorway of different rooms to see who was playing music in them.

I then had an opportunity to work for Sho-Bud Steel Guitars and, at that time, they were on 2nd avenue in downtown Nashville. They had their store on Broadway, but the factory was on 2nd avenue. That was where I got my first introduction into inlay work. I used to inlay all of the strips on the front of the Steel guitars and I got to observe all kinds of finish work in the Sho-Bud factory. I was back and forth between New England and Nashville until the early nineties. I went to school on Cape Cod in 1990 and became an Emergency Medical Technician and then moved back down to Nashville so I could be associated with the music business. My goal was to have a job that would sustain me while I dabbled in song writing. It inspired me to build a recording studio in my apartment in Madison, Tennessee. The studio stuff was sort of a hassle because you would be charging twenty dollars for guitar/vocal demos and people would come in with these little bands that you'd have to work with all day just to get a single track out of them. They would want masters of the sessions and working for only a hundred dollars a song made the whole ordeal not worth it. You'd also be recording songs that weren't worth recording in the first place and it was kind of tough to sit there biting your tongue, you know?

B.L.: Why did you move to Portland, Tennessee?

J.S.: I guess around 1995 I decided that I was tired of living in Davidson County and paying rent. When it came time to buy a house, I only qualified for a certain amount of money and it wasn't

very much. So, I ended up finding this place out here in Portland, Tennessee. That put me so far out of town, thirty-five miles north of Nashville that nobody wanted to travel that far to record a demo tape. The recording gear sat in my bedroom gathering dust for a while. So, that's why I decided to start selling the studio off, piece by piece and build myself a repair shop. I was hoping that as I got older I could get myself established as a guitar/stringed instrument repair shop and that was all I ever intended on doing.

B.L.: Is there anything you'd like to add that I might have neglected to bring up?

J.S.: Not really, but I would like to stress the fact that people should visit my websites, and see what I have available or what's in the works. If they are interested in anything, they should [contact me](#) and we'll get one of my [handmade guitars](#) in front of them so they can try it out. I've made special provisions to give potential customers the opportunity to do this and all the details are listed on the [policies page](#) of my [Sullivan Guitars website](#). I honestly believe the guitar player who tries a guitar with this patented bracing system and hears the difference, will be hooked for life and find it very difficult to go back to the traditionally built guitars with less sound and all the inherent problems of tops moving around and necks needing resets after a few years. The quality of these guitars is my top priority, as well as good customer service. I'll go out of my way to accommodate my customers on custom orders with things like wood selection to any special aesthetics they would like and even payment plans if necessary.

B.L.: Well, I think the guitars look and sound great! Thanks for talking with me and good luck in all your endeavors.

J.S.: Thanks Bryan and good luck with all your interviews in the future. Thanks for talking with me.