

ACOUSTIC GUITAR CORNER SPECIAL REPORT

Why Purchase a Handmade Guitar vs. a Factory Built Guitar.

I heard a fellow luthier say one day, "they call this the golden age of guitar making." Twenty years ago in this country there was a hand full of people that could build handmade guitars from scratch. There weren't a lot of people that even knew how to procure the materials needed for such an ambitious undertaking. Today with the internet and the availability of just about anything you could want, anybody with any computer savvy at all, can find not only the materials, but the instructions to build just about anything. All you need is some mechanical aptitude, mixed with a good eye for detail, the perseverance to get it done and you might be able to build yourself a playable guitar. This is one of the reasons why there are a few hundred thousand web sites when you do a search for handmade guitars. It seems like everybody, their brother and, illegitimate child is building guitars these days.

With that being said, it would also be note worthy to say," buyer beware!" There are a lot of hobbyists out there that don't really understand what a high level of skill and experience can bring to the table of handmade guitars. Experience tells a luthier about things like, cross grain stiffness in a board and how thick to make a top according to how it feels or bends in their hands, or how to tap tune a top by removing wood from certain areas of a brace or two. There's also a great deal of skill involved in hand cutting mitered purfling lines or fitting traditional dove tail neck joints on handmade guitars. A good and skilled craftsman scrutinizes every little detail and understands the physics behind what makes the guitar work like it does and how to change it to make it better. Skill and experience tell a luthier what materials to use in the making of handmade guitars and how to get the most out of those materials. A well built handmade guitar will often have a flawless finish, which requires year of experience and practice. A lot of hand built guitars made in small shops are built by luthiers that play the guitar themselves and know what other players expect in a good set up. They know about issues concerning playability and intonation. When a handmade guitar goes out the door with your name on it, the words "quality control" take on a whole new meaning.

Then there's the big manufacturing facilities with all their computer controlled automated equipment and their multi million dollar advertising budgets. Who's really building these guitars? They are hourly employees that are usually over worked and under paid. They're not really guitar builders, they're machine operators. They know how to do a particular operation on a particular part. They don't really understand how a guitar works and most of them probably don't care. There might be a few supervisors that have an idea of what's going on but they can't be everywhere at once and probably have little to say about the quality of the process. The supervisors jobs consist mostly of paper work, keeping the machines set up and running correctly and the coordination of the machine operators.

It's impossible to process 100 guitar tops all at the same thickness and get 100 guitar tops that will yield the same results. There is really no comparison between a factory made guitar and one that is built by hand by a guitar builder that knows what they're doing. From fret work to the finish work, a handmade guitar is most often far superior to one that's built in a factory setting.

Have you ever heard that your car has a better chance of being a good one if it was built on Wednesday? I think that theory probably holds true in most large corporate manufacturing situations. So if you want to purchase a nice, well built guitar, that sounds good and plays well with meticulous attention paid to every detail, scrutinized throughout the whole manufacturing process, take a look at handmade. Get to know the maker. Shop around and ask a lot of questions. Listen to, look at and feel the difference between factory and handmade. You'll be glad you did and probably be a lot happier with your investment. Most small shops that build guitars by hand are a lot easier to deal with when it comes to warranty issues, and have much faster turn around times on any repairs that need to be done.

Remember, you're only as good as the limitations of your instrument!