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Early Experiences Led MacPherson to Produce World Class, Hand Made Guitars ...

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Interview

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When Dennis MacPherson, owner and founder of MacPherson Guitarworks in Ringwood, NJ, began working at the Oscar Schmidt company in 1978 among his first jobs was tuning marimba blocks. That experience--of shaping tone by shaping wood--served as a “grad school” of sorts and taught him what would become an invaluable skill for a luthier making his trademark “Black Pearl” guitars, as well.

The work done shaping blocks of wood to produce a specific note is painstaking and centuries old, as is the luthier craft. And when done properly, each can produce a breathtaking tone. MacPherson, a man with a ready smile and a workshop full of hand crafted artworks, said that his passion for woods and woodworking sprang at least in part from his experiences at Oscar Schmidt building not just xylophones and marimbas, but flat top Harmony guitars as well.

“Making xylophones out of wood, you really get a feel for them, bringing them to pitch...I learned this even before building guitars,” MacPherson said. “It gives me something in my guitar building that would not have been there, had I only started working on guitars. I don’t think I would have approached them the same way, had I not been a xylophone maker.” He said that the scalloping techniques he used tuning xylophone bars were very nearly the same as those used to tap-tune the tops of acoustic guitars by carving the braces.

“Where I do my scalloping, it’s like making my xylophones,” MacPherson said. “I’m taking wood off the center (to make the top’s sound lower) or off the end (to make it higher-pitched).”



How a guitar’s top is tuned has a large degree of influence on the instrument’s sound, since the top translates and transmits the sound. And the bracing techniques MacPherson has learned over the years, and lessons learned at Oscar Schmidt, where Harmony archtops and flattops were built, has helped him by occasionally showing him what not to do.

“They made sterile sounding, ladder-braced guitars, but for me that was a benefit,” MacPherson said. At the same time he was working on his own guitars, first electrics and then flat-tops.

“I started experimenting continuously. I’d watch how the bracing was done—there wasn’t any internet, so I’d go to the library and look up in books how to make them,” MacPherson said.

His shop does repairs on all brands of guitars, and MacPherson even conducts classes to teach people how to build their own guitars. He does that to show that “people can build a good quality guitar in their own garage.”



He originally began repairing guitars at 16 after what could have been a disastrous experience.

“A friend of my mother’s gave me a National, a Dobro,” MacPherson said. “And my sister threw it out the window. That was actually my first repair job.”

A family man, he wasn’t always able to completely devote his time to working on guitars, but he has continued, over the years, to produce high quality instruments in his off hours.

He has now graduated to a commute of less than 150 feet (his workshop is located on his property, near his house), with a list of clientele including the Jonas Brothers and Delta bluesman Little Toby Walker and a comfortably full production schedule.

Yet despite the all-star roster of artists using his instruments, MacPherson says his goal is to keep his hand-made, custom guitars within reach of most musicians.



“I try to keep my guitars in a price range that’s at the most around \$2500—if you want a lot of inlay work that changes the picture—but I want my guitars on the street,” MacPherson said. “I want them to be played, in peoples’ hands. I want people to play my guitars, I want them affordable. Otherwise, I’m not going to be eating regular and I’m going to have a room full of guitars that I can’t play.”

He said that having a rent-free workshop makes it possible to keep his prices low enough for working musicians to afford, adding that when he had a shop in a town near his house, “I’d have to make three thousand dollars a month before I ever saw a nickel.”

His instruments are all hand made and his use of high technology is limited to a silicone heat blanket used by NASA to keep satellites warm in space, which he uses to help bend the sides of his guitars.

“Man, I’m pretty much an old school guy,” MacPherson said, showing some of the tools he uses daily. “Only because it costs a lot to be high tech.”

While his primary tonal influences are Martin and Gibson flat tops, MacPherson learns a lesson from most of the guitars that pass through his shop—even the lower priced ones.

“I noticed with Takamine that their intonation at every level was spot on,” MacPherson said. “I get lots of guitars through here, some really high end, and while Martins sound great, their older instruments have less than ideal intonation.”



He also said that it is a guitar builder’s duty to his clients to take the best of what is in the musical world and put it into a guitar, while at the same time keeping out the worst elements. As an example, he pointed out a guitar that he is building for Local Music Gear Magazine. The guitar will be displayed at music trade shows for a year, and will then be donated to a high school music program.



For that guitar he used design influences from Gibson’s J-200 to a Martin OOOO, and a Franklin guitar.

“For the jumbo for Local Music Gear Magazine I made it like a J-200 but it’s a little thinner,” MacPherson said as he lifted up the dreadnought body. “Aside from the aesthetic things, I tried to be practical. It’s going to be plugged in at a high school eventually, so my thought process in making it was to give it a sound system with a smooth sound. I wanted to use something traditional, that had some newer characteristics.”

While he is most noted for his acoustics, his electrics are the most popular sellers. His M-2 (double cut-away) and Delta, which is similar to a Les Paul only with a Telecaster bridge pickup and a P-90 in the neck, are each priced under \$1500 and are his best sellers. He also winds his own pickups for electric guitars. But for acoustics, he prefers Fishman or K and K pickups.

“I sell a lot of pickups when people walk in,” MacPherson said. “Since I’m not well known as a pickup maker, I sell a lot more pickups than people know because I sell them in the guitars.”

He has tried Lindy Fralin pickups to add variety to his pickup line and is even reaching out to a Local Music Gear Magazine favorite, Zexcoil, to try their noiseless Telecaster pickups in his Delta electric guitars.