

the originals, and best yet, you'll find these new AC30's to be far more consistent in terms of their balance, overall tone, and dynamic response than the available crop of vintage AC30's on the used market. The old ones are all over the place in the tone department, they are often hideously noisy, and they invariably need the kind of skilled restoration that not every amp tech can handle, so we can state with confidence that the new AC30 is truly "better than vintage." To Korg's credit, we should also remind you that it really makes very little financial sense for these amps to have been built at all. Chalk it up to professional pride and a pure reverence for the amp that shaped the sound of the British Invasion like no other in history. Forty years later, the AC30 lives on. **TQ**

Chris Swope



Over the past 20 years, Kansas City native Chris Swope has developed a fascinating resume, as Production Manager at Sadowsky Guitars in New York, and Pro Shop Tech and Engineering Department at Gibson Custom, Nashville. Chris has

also won *Guitar Player Magazine's* "Editor's Pick Awards" for both his Geronimo and GTO models, and Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones recently purchased two of his instruments. We caught up with Chris in early August and we look forward to featuring reviews of his guitars for your pleasure. Enjoy...

TQR: How did your interest in guitars develop, Chris?

Like a lot of us, for whatever reason, from the time you're a little kid the guitar turns you on. I remember the episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* where Steve Austin is playing the classical guitar in the restaurant so fast the strings start breaking. That's the memory I have. I would watch Hee Haw for the guitars. It's always turned me on. I started playing in the 1980's when I started taking lessons as a kid around Junior High. I bought what was at the time called used, a '60s Guild Starfire. I paid my lawn mowing money and within the year I bought a 335 out of the paper. All my friends were buying strats and stripping them and painting them and it was the age of the brass nut when people really started dropping in this pickup for that pickup... it really thrilled me. I wasn't about to strip my 335 so I would go over to their houses and watch what they were doing and eventually I got an Epiphone bass at a farmer's auction. I think I paid \$18 for it. It was one of those '70s Japanese coronet basses. I stripped it and painted it and it just kind of evolved from there. The big thing for me was when I went off to college. I went to KU and I was behind a store there called Mass Street Music. You may or may not have ever crossed paths with Jim Baggett but he still owns the store. He's a big Martin guy and he did Antiques Roadshow for a long time. I just hung around the shop and pestered him about stuff so much that eventually it was like, "Go upstairs and start working." He kind of apprenticed me. I don't think I ever formally worked for him but I had carte blanche after a while to go in there with my projects and all the guys there were super supportive. They kinda got me



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going on my first wirings and fret jobs. It always went hand in hand with being a guitar player and gigging and being on a budget trying to get more out of what I had.

TQR: When did you become seriously interested in building?

When my then girlfriend now wife moved back home to New York and I didn't, Jim Baggett asked me one day, "What's



going on Chris?" and I said I don't know. I graduated years before and I was still playing in the band in this slacker town. He just stopped me in my tracks and said "Okay lemme get this straight. You've got a place to live in New York City?" Yeah. "And you don't have kids?" No. "Why are you still here?" I said well, that's a good point. You know anybody? He said "I know Roger Sadowsky, and Larry at Mandolin brothers. So he gave me their addresses in the days when you wrote letters so wrote to both of them and they both gave me a shot. I went out there for a week and I worked for Mandolin for a day and for Sadowsky's for three days. It was an eye opener, big time. In Kansas I had a '60s Jazzmaster and a 335, so I knew more about this stuff than anybody. And then I went to Mandolin Brothers and it was pretty apparent right away that I didn't know the world of vintage guitars. So that didn't happen, but with Roger I think I knew just enough not to get myself into trouble. He saw that I had hands and gave me a shot. It was just awesome. I was there for 7 years. At that point I was basically the number 2 guy and there was nowhere else to go which worried my folks, my dad got cancer, and we're thinking of having kids, and we're in New York city, and my wife went to grad school in Buffalo, so I'm here alone



trying to figure out what to do with my life and all these reasons to leave. I left Sadowsky in 2002 and moved down to Nashville to work for a Gibson custom shop. That was awesome in such a different way. At the boutique level you're building things that have to be these great hot rodded instruments or else they're not gonna sell. You're going up against major brands; in a way you have to be better than them. So there's that "nothing leaves its bench until its perfect" discipline. The dude that I shared a room with about the size of a shoe box was this Japanese guy Norio Imai who still has a repair shop in New York City. When Roger moved his shop out of the city Norio stayed and kept the repair side of the business. I just saw so much wonderful vintage stuff. Having that Japanese "sooner slit your stomach than have something leave your bench that isn't perfect" training was just fantastic. I walked into Nashville and within 30 seconds I realized that a production facility was a whole different game. There are things I learned there that make me so happy I got to have that experience, but it was also eye-opening about production guitars in general and price points. The difference between to price points may not be huge, but what a difference the materials make. I remember at Sadowsky when we heard about the Plek machine we laughed and laughed. It costs how much and it takes how long to dress frets...? Everyone in the shop prided themselves on their fret work. People would buy custom shop guitars and would bring them in to get the fret work redone before they took it home. I had that notion about it

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and then I went to custom and saw how they did fret work pre Plek days. It was a process. You had people there who maybe applied for a job at the bread factory down the road and the guitar factory and got in on a number based thing just mowing down frets moving it on to the next guy. You never knew until the guitar was strung up and ticketed if it was gonna play. At a certain point there's that shrug of "have we hit our number for the day?" And, "we'll deal with it if it comes back." In that regard the Plek machine was revolutionary to me. I felt so much prouder about every guitar going out the door. It could isolate and point out problems in a neck at the point where it was more cost effective to pull the neck out and send it back through before finish. They were both wonderful gigs and I was lucky enough to get in there starting out. The first two years I worked for Ernie King, and until they moved to the



Ernie King

new building I was still physically in the custom shop but I would report to my supervisor who was Lynn Matthews pretty much once a week. For the most part I was their man on the floor so I would do a lot of cool stuff and I'd get to build prototypes and if anything was required for an instrument that wasn't production friendly that would fall to me. There was a time where they started doing frets over the binding for certain models like the Larry Carlton model when it was still a Nashville model. Nobody knew how to do that so suddenly I would get a stack of 50 fingerboards and get to fretting them over the bindings. Mostly I worked for engineering and I did really boring ho-hum corporate stuff too. I would build those out but mainly the whole thing with that was putting a big sticker on a Les Paul body and poking holes and getting things through production. There were a couple of guys there who were superstars. I think Matthew Klein was one and Doug Culberson. There's nobody better. Doug is essentially the guy who ran our department even when Hutch was there.



Hutch was really just the guy who signed the labels. When Hutch passed away Mike McGuire was the guy who started overseeing the whole thing but then Mike retired. I think Doug signs all the labels now and he has been for several years. Those two things gave me a really well-rounded worldview. Today I got to learn the whole Fender style of build, and a hot rodded Fender at that but then Sadowsky's shop was 50% repair. So the stuff that would come through there in New York City at Times Square right around the corner of 48th street, it was the dream stuff. By the end of

those 7 years I could've gone back to Mandolin brothers and gone toe-to-toe with any of those guys because I'd just been exposed to so much. He's got a D'Angelico New Yorker in his hands and he says "Chris, I want you to take this guitar into the amp room" which was a dead room. I want you to play this guitar, I want you to look it over from head-to-toe, I want you to see all the wonderful craftsmanship in this, I want you to find all the stuff that could've been done better... you just don't see that. You don't get to experience that. That type of stuff and rock 'n roll dreams and getting to play Keith Richards' guitars... I'm sure when I'm on my death bed I'm gonna be looking back at those years.

TQR: What appealed to you most as a builder and when did you start building for yourself?

I was the guitar player in the band but I was also always the songwriter in the band. I think it was that creative thing. You wanna modify stuff when you're of that 1980's fathead

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brass nut world. You start doing that and you try and make your guitar special. As years have rolled on it's become more off-the-shelf for anybody to grab this or that part and make their guitar special... well then your guitar's not so special anymore. I think as I worked on and on at Sadowsky, I started getting exposed to a lot more than just a Tele and a Strat and a Les Paul. I started to dream more about what-ifs. You get into what-if shapes, and what-if woods, and what-if pickups and it just starts to kinda compound. I built a couple things when I was at Sadowsky, but it took me about a year to figure out how to get to Nashville and what I was gonna do when I got there. I didn't know if I was gonna have a job or if I was gonna make my own way. I started to work on what eventually became my initial model, the Geronimo. In my head it was "what-if I get to Nashville and start building guitars." Well I didn't want to just be another tele builder, so I had to figure out what I could offer to Nashville based on what my preconceived idea of what a guitar player in Nashville would want. It evolved to be quite a different guitar by the time I came out with it twelve years later.

TQR: At what point did you achieve your identity as a guitar builder?

That first Geronimo I built was in 2002. I didn't come out as Swope guitars until 2014. I've only been doing this as my



own gig professionally for about two and a half years. I learned a lot over that dozen years and that initial model had evolved. I had a lot of other stuff going on. My first job when I moved back to Kansas City was selling high end guitars and that gave me a whole other window into the whole thing. I felt like I was really prepared but it's still a thousand times harder than I dreamed to get this going. I came out in 2012 and I had one dealer but I had been around a long time and met a lot of people. I wasn't necessarily able to cut to the head of the line but honestly I think I've got the past to merit it but a lot of guys are really talented



and start out building stuff but just can't get it going because they don't have that whole history. In 2014, I started doing my own thing and part of what I did from the get go was try and find guys who were way better than me to play the guitars and give me feedback. I didn't know him but I met Kenny Vaughan and hooked up with him at the side of the stage at sound check. He played a couple of my guitars and said some really great things, some really straight up honest things that needed to change

in his mind and I'm like "Okay that's what I want." I want guys who would tell me what needed to change and what was great. I got into a really cool thing with him where I asked "Will you be a test pilot? I can't give you anything but if you like the guitars I'll indefinitely loan you and we can work through this." Once I had him, I felt like I was on the right path. That was still in 2014, probably six months into it. I just keep trying. I've got four or five guitars out right now and I don't know if any of them will pan out but... If I want to have an identity it's that real pros look at it and think "yeah man, there's a reason I'd bring that to a session." It's really hard to cut through all of the great builders out there.

TQR: What are the key features in your mind that distinguish your guitars.

Honestly, it has to be that the pickups are my own thing. I have a unique body shape. So what? There are guys doing beautiful things with exotic wood and marquetry and inlays but that's not me. There are so many pickups, just like I was alluding to before, that it took the specialness out of it for me. Anybody can go and buy this pickup or that pickup. Do I take the route where everything is done by me by hand with a pocket knife? No, because I know that's bunk. I just had to get out of that box. The way I see it there's a million wonderful guitars but someone comes out with a goldfoil, the next week they all come out with goldfoils. How do I pick? How do I

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cut through that? So when I was at Gibson. In the engineering department I started to mess around with stuff and (I'll say it did not work out for me) I was trying to create a position at the custom shop that would be product development. They were just building reissues. Every year it was "What are we gonna build this year? What are we gonna dig up this year?" I wanted to do something different. My uncle, the guy who brought me to that auction where I bought the \$18 Epiphone bass, he found at an auction an old lap steel that didn't have a pickup. I started looking around on eBay for lap steel parts and I started noticing the Gibson stuff. I started realizing there's this whole history of pickups that nobody really pays



much attention to. The guitar explosion of the 1960s was not the first electric guitar explosion. The first one was the lap steel explosion. Some of those pickups may have been put on a Spanish style guitar at some point but maybe it's like one out of ten. So I started looking at all of those things and there were some examples at Custom. I wanted to come out with something to go toe-to-toe with that end. Almost by default I became a pickup guy. They wouldn't give me a budget to do anything new but they would let me tear apart everything.

I got to look into some of these things and say "Oh, well that's different." It got me thinking about why we would want to come out with another model with Humbuckers or P90s. I started working on some designs that were mashups essentially of Gibson lap steels and Spanish guitars. I came up with three different things and I pitched to Rick and he said go for it. They allowed me for about a year and a half to really try and develop some stuff. A couple of them got approved for the NAMM show, one of them twice. They took orders on one of them, but they never released them. Once I left and got involved in the retail side I totally understood why. It would've been very limited appeal and competing at a price point where they already had something. That's what really got me going on that outside the box thinking. I didn't necessarily copy any

of those pickups but I was inspired to start messing around with materials and different coils and things. It grew ultimately into my own pickup designs on my guitars.

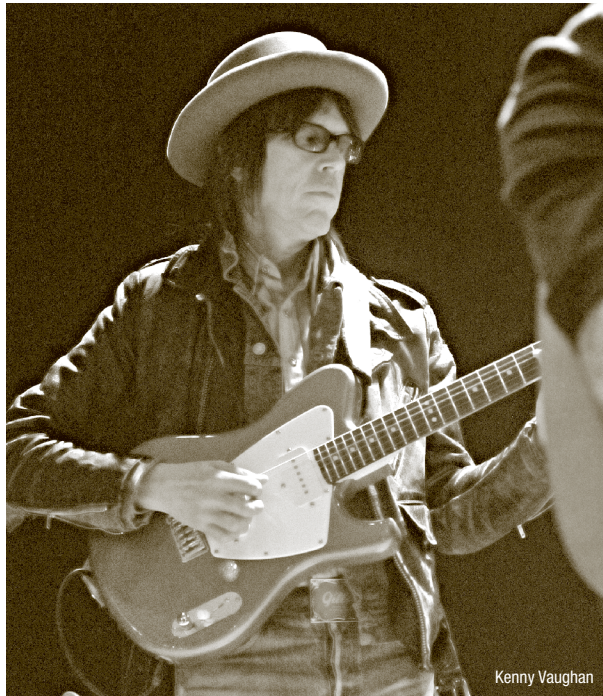
TQR: In a nutshell what do you do differently as a pickup winder that distinguishes your pickups?

To think out of the box is to get out of the box. Everyone who's winding their own stuff, all these companies, they're using the same coils and the same wire with the same magnets chasing the same sounds. You start to mess around with the geometry of the coil, whether it's a wider coil or a taller, nar-



rower coil or changing the pole piece spacing, or you start to mess with materials. What I'm doing is getting out of the box that everyone else is in by having my own unique footprint. I didn't want to have something that somebody could come along and put in their guitar and make it look just like it or sound just like it. I'm not trying to change the world or do a Parker Fly thing as cool as that is. I'm a traditionalist. I still think there's things that can be done to change the sound with something that's really unique and different that gives you a different color on your palette rather than just being another "here's my filter" tone. They're great, but they're everywhere. I could have the best PAF in the world, and it's like "Get in line." Everyone says they have the best PAF, so how are you as a small guy gonna get people to notice? The big thing for me is to try and come out with something that's really unique sounding and versatile, but just damn good without being complicated. Ernie Ball came out with something called the Gamechanger that was this circuit board that goes in the guitar and allows for infinite numbers of signal path switching, so instead of being locked into your five signal paths I think there were about 2000 different combinations of your four coils in a two Humbucker guitar. You could go series

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Kenny Vaughan

into one coil series into another and run that double thing parallel into another etc. Think of the possibilities! In all honesty there were probably about 15 unique sounds. Maybe 5. You eventually had to put it all back on a five way switch. I haven't gotten too complicated. My first thing, the Geronimo was probably a little more complicated. I'm just trying to do beauty and simplicity and something that can get you through the gate and cover a lot of ground; something that's a little bit special and will keep you playing the guitar.

TQR: Well that's it: you've gotta keep people wanting to play it.

That's my theory on a lot of the clean vintage guitars. They really weren't very good and they didn't inspire the guy to play so he put it under the bed. I know that's not true but, that's the way I like to look at ones that have been run through the mill and they're just tugging at you because you know it's a good one. You've gotta play it.

TQR: Let's talk about construction for a second. Do you use the standard woods that are available and make sense?

With these models so far I've been Fender tone woods. I have my rules. I do target a certain weight and I definitely want consistency. Every little thing makes a difference; every single wood is different. I want to narrow things down as precisely as possible so that I can get the most consistent result at the end of the game. All my guitars are two-piece, center-seam, clear-cut, no paint grade, even if it's just going

to be one color I want it to be all the same spec. I do subscribe to the theory that not only does the wood make the difference but where the wood is glued up makes a difference. I want both sides of the guitar to be anchored to the bridge. I don't want a 3/4 cut and one piece hanging off that's dead weight. I want every piece to be responding to that string energy. That one 3/4 cut guitar may be the best sounding guitar ever, but it's not gonna be the most consistent thing ever. I've gone with that center cut and I just like the idea. I've never tested it, but it seems to me if you've got the wood anchored with the bridge then you're distributing that string energy the same way and the guitars are gonna ring as consistently as possible.

TQR: What kind of wood do you use?

I use alder, I use ash, I have done some maple tops. I used some lumber from a family farm and it ended up being figured once we got the whitewash off of it. I have built some stuff out of sugar pine at Kenny Vaughan's urging and so far I've been really pleased with it. I'm not sold that it's the best thing but it's super lightweight and so far the few guitars I've built have been really resonant. That's the stuff that my neckerchief slides were made out of that I carved in Boy Scout camp. I know how soft it is and runs kind of counterintuitive but Kenny said he liked it a lot. For now these models are that recipe. I don't see myself making any of these things less words. I don't like mahogany body with a maple neck for some reason. It just doesn't ever work for my ears. I've got something in my head to come out with after the base that may take every single thing that might take all my theories I have now and turn them upside down. I've been thinking about trying something really different in that regard but that's down the line. These models were designed with that in mind. I love them all. I love a great Fender and a great Gibson and a



great Gibson J-200. These were definitely designed from that Fender California state of mind. I can mix and match down the road but each model I've come out with I've had a unique

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pickup for it. That's what Leo did.

TQR: Well I would think that your pickups are a big selling point for your guitars.

They are in my mind THE differentiating feature. There's a lot of guys out there who make stuff that feels great and sounds great, but sounds like here's my Tele sound here's my Les Paul sound, whatever. At the end of the day you just use your ears, and if there's something that makes it a great Telecaster, it's still a Telecaster. You could buy one of the million great Telecasters, or you could buy mine. The pickup thing is huge. Exposed coils are just not that sexy looking. I did invest in a mold for a cover, and the nice thing about my initial design is that it was bigger than anything else on the market. I couldn't find anything it would fit under so I had to make my own. The saving grace about the whole thing is that I've got room for anything under it. I'm coming out with a bass right now, same cover. I can fit lots of different bass pickup designs underneath that cover. There's a lot of room to create which is great.

TQR: What are your thoughts on bridges and saddles?

A lot of it has to do with neck pitch, depth of your neck pocket, how far you need to be off the body, and the string spacing that you desire. Everything I've used right now is a steel saddle. That's another consistent thing and I'm not saying it's the best but it's what I started out with. I love the Gotoh 1099T tremolo bridge we used in the Sadowsky days.



I bought up every one I can find. I have a stash of them. At some point I'll have to go a different direction. They're not making them anymore. The thing I love about them is that it's a two point. The way that the posts thread in, there's a circle cut out of the plate. It feels great as a trim but when it comes time to change strings every guitar repair guy knows that if there's a trim bridge he's not paying attention to you clip all the strings and the bridge flies off the guitar. It's one of those things that's really player friendly too. I think it's actually been discontinued a year ago. There's enough of it

out there that it's still in catalogues and people still had it on their shelves but I'm not aware of any out there anymore. I also prefer that it's a 2-1/8th spacing which I also prefer. The modern 2-1/16th spacing... to me that's just too tight. It's very production friendly, you don't have to be as tight on your tolerances because it's not going to fall off no matter what. In vintage spacing even with the best fretwork you get taller fret wire other than vintage wire, and you've got a beveled fret, you decrease the area where you're playing. You run the risk of throwing off one side of the neck or the other. Two and one-eighth inches is ideal for me. So this is the trim I've chosen, now I need a hard tail with that spacing, but I also need a hard tail where the plate is the right thickness so you I don't have to change the depth of my neck pocket. I'm a guy who can't keep much on the shelf. If I have an order for a trim and I've just got a hard tail there I'm gonna rout it out for a trim. I don't want to have to rethink the neck pocket. That's another important thing at this level; finding things that complement each other for the different models. That's how I ended up on steel and with a thicker plate. If I had gone a vintage route, that would have opened up a whole other set of options. I am trying to keep things as open ended during production as possible. It's a cash flow thing and a time concern. I want to be able to put guitars together easily.

TQR: Speaking of necks, what kind of necks do you like? Do you like maple? Big? Medium?

That gig I had after custom shop selling stuff, I had my hands on a lot of necks. I was brought on to this company mainly because 85% of what they were selling was Gibson custom shop, and here I was: a guy who knew an awful lot about Gibson custom who never had a sales job in his life. I would work with people over the phone, I would grab gui-



tars, I would play guitars through different amps, and answer every possible question I could. It's hard to point and click on a five, six, ten thousand dollar guitar. I got to feel a lot of things. I don't like too thin and I don't like too fat. Nothing

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translates to a Fender world, but when custom shop had their R0 and their R9. The R0 was thin and not graceful. The '59 was big and round. Then in 2009 when they redid the 50th



anniversary and they sculpted that '59 neck profile a little more and almost gave it that same impression of a soft V but it was really just an open mouth C. That neck was like, "Okay this is my neck." I offer two different profiles. Both are the same thickness center of the fingerboard to the back of the neck, but I have one that I call a pearl dot because the dots are pearl. That profile is a little bit more shallow, longer scale maple which makes it stiffer. You don't need quite the beef. Mine tapers generically. 8.5 at the first fret to 2.95 at the twelfth fret. Whereas in the R0, R9 world right in the middle, the "tweener." But it's shaped more like that '59, kind of soft in the shoulders. The clay dot is the same thickness but has a little more cheek for guys who like more meat. I bring my bevels down all the way below the fret tang before they get finished and then do the rolling of the board with a razor blade when I'm prepping the neck. I do not like when your C ends where the fingerboard starts and you have a hard edge. That drives me crazy because I have no technique. My thumb is hanging over the side all the time. I do love that kind of rounded profile on the board as well. Short answer is, I'm shooting for an everyman neck. I probably am gonna come out with thinner profile, which is another Kenny Vaughan thing, and another vintage thing. His ultimate profile is a '59 so he thinks my neck is too big. I used to own a '60, and I measured it to find that it's almost the same thing. The reissue stuff doesn't support it, is what he's telling me. I reached out to Norio and asked him if he had taken measurements on '59 strats. He said measured one for me and it was pretty much exactly what Kenny had said. So I went to the profile on the guitars that Kenny had been using, and it's 800/1000 at the first position. It tapers up pretty quickly but at it first it's crazy. I think that pearl dot that I do right now is my own personal ultimate neck profile. I really have to build what I like. It has to be something I really like. If a drop D guttural singing band ever plays my guitars then more power to them but the cosmetic style that

is, is something that even if you paid me a lot of money to make it I'm not sure I could do it. I don't feel it.

TQR: What are your thoughts on frets?

I like taller than vintage. Again, to thine own self be true. I'm not a brute, because I'm a 90 pound weakling, but I'm not a technique guy so I grab the neck. My left hand is just wrenching. I don't like jumbo wire because I want to feel the fingerboard under the pads of my fingertips. I'm not gonna have a light touch. To a degree I'm bending it out of pitch with how big the wire is. Also if you do go for that bevel that I like on the fingerboard, then the taller the wire the narrower the playing surface because you keep bringing it in on that bevel. I use a Jescar wire. Industry standard seems to be 6105. They're a little tall for me and they're just a little narrow for me. That tall narrow combination can give you kind of a bumpy ride when your hand's rested like mine. This Jescar wire is a little bit lower and a little bit wider than 6105 so the arc of the fret wire is a little bit more graceful. It's a .047 by .095. Vintage wire is kinda cool sometimes but I find that it's not that friendly in the long run. You're gonna have to have to



get a fret job sooner. In theory it shouldn't make a difference but somehow it does.

TQR: Well that's really where the guitar comes together.

Yeah. I have not yet done anything with stainless steel wire. I don't know that I've even played stainless frets, but I'm curious to try. It's the same sort of thing as "this is the recipe for this guitar." Maybe a model down the road I'll try steel. I have a couple guys I respect who just rave about it, but I have no experience with it.

TQR: What's the number one thing that's most important to you when you're building a guitar? I would imagine it's the way the pickups sound.

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Well at the end of the day I'm gonna plug it in and I'm gonna play it. I want it to be as consistent as possible. No matter what, you're never gonna have two guitars that sound exactly the same, but if your tolerances are tight every step of the way, you're gonna be damn close. The most important thing for me is that I feel really proud of whatever I put in that box to ship out. It does go back to that Sadowsky thing. It doesn't



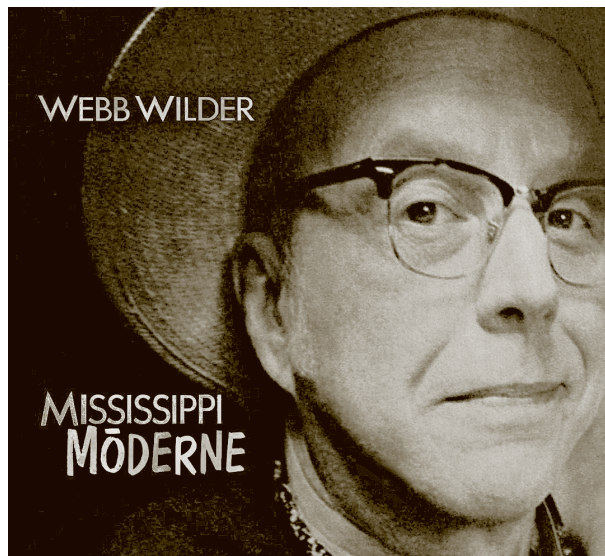
leave your bench until its right, whereas at the manufacturing facility they'll tell you to hit your number. That is the beauty of boutique builders. They have the curse or luxury of not letting something go if they don't feel

good about it. So it is the sound, I am gonna plug it in. The playability has to be there and the sound has to be what I think it should sound like. I want it to be as representative as possible of what I want it to be.

TQR: Well ideally what would you like to accomplish as a guitar builder?

I just want to pay my bills for a while. I would love to have something to pass on to my kids. I want to at least be able to help them get through college. I don't want to be another wannabe that guy out in the cabin in the woods making one guitar at a time. This thing that I'm doing right now, I've shut myself off from the world and I miss people. That's why you can't get me off the phone. I have someone to talk to about guitars and it's awesome! I would love to grow to the point where I could hire a small group of guys but at the moment I just want to grow my brand and get out there in front of more people. I would like to stay in the dealer world as opposed to direct to consumer. In the long run I think it's a much more productive way for me to build than having to deal with the customer side of things. So yeah maybe if I can hire a couple guys and get a bigger space that would be awesome. **To**

Webb Wilder



We have known Webb for a long time and his music just keeps getting better with time. His latest album is exceptional and we recommend it highly. Enjoy...

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