

Brian Monty: Guitar Maker

By Susan Pinker

First you pass navigate the overlapping highway access ramps. Then vast swaths of industrial park go by before snow-covered farmland and the occasional silo take over. When you pass the Welcome to Ontario sign, you may think you're getting close to the studio of guitar-maker Brian Monty but it's an illusion. You still have twenty minutes of country roads to drive before a right turn at the blinking light. By the time you hit Monty's workshop in an outbuilding behind an 1840's farmhouse, you wonder, how on earth can a guy run a business in such an isolated place?

Easy, says Monty, who has been making his own Monty brand guitars and repairing high quality Gibsons and Les Pauls behind the scenes for 27 years. With clients like Bruce Cockburn, Liona Boyd, and the guitarists for Cheap Trick, the Dwight Yoakum Band, the Late Night with Conan O'Brian and Saturday Night Live shows, Monty has developed a name in a business that has reached almost cult-status: maintaining and rebuilding vintage guitars.

He says he doesn't know how to turn on a computer and does no marketing. Yet the phone rings steadily with orders and repairs from around the world. There is a stack of new Yamahas still in their boxes, sent by the company to be fine-tuned by Monty. Rows of newly painted archtops – convex at the top -- are drying outside his paint room. He's hand-carving the neck for a guy who's building his own guitar in upstate New York, and has ongoing requests for hand-made instruments for a music store in The Big Apple. And the phone just rang with a big order from Sao Paulo, Brazil. "They find me by word of mouth," says the grizzled musician and craftsman, leaning up against his cluttered workbench. "I've been in this racket for 27 years – lots of famous people play parts of my guitars. What they like about the necks is I make them the old-fashioned way – by hand. Now they're all made my computer. At one point I was making 75 necks a month. It nearly killed me," he says wryly.

Monty shows me one of his hand-carved guitars-in-progress, the grooves of his tools still evident on the maple surface. "My favourite is an archtop. It's real

craftsmanship,” he says, fondling one of his curvy beauties, the finish glowing warmly like a tiger’s eye. “I use cello-tops, all maple or spruce, nice and dry.” He pulls out a wide roughly V- shaped example from the line of guitar bodies leaning up against a wall, and blows the fine sawdust off before handing it to me. It’s roughly bowed and pretty raw, with splinters lifting off – it’s hard to imagine how this plank gets transformed into the refined, sensual shape of a guitar body. To choose just the right piece of wood, Monty will spend the afternoon in a specialized woodshop for violin-makers, “tapping on it to get the sound I like. It comes alive in your hands. Then for the neck you get a chunk of curly maple and just work at it. Then I get ebony for the fingerboard, the bridge, the tailpiece...” For a gruff survivor of the 60’s and a self-taught do-it-yourselfer, this is about as rhapsodic as Monty gets. If you’re looking for a romantic luthier in a stained apron, a-la-Red Violin, look elsewhere. Unlike his instruments, Monty is a crusty, no-frills kind of guy. Even if, as he says, he could be “making guitars seven days a week,” if you ask him how he is, he’s likely to respond “still grumpy.”

Demand has been growing steadily since an old Gibson could be had for a hundred bucks on Craig Street in the early 60’s, says Monty. The brand nearly went bankrupt in the mid-1980’s, before it was bought out and revitalized by Harvard MBA graduate, Henry Juskiewicz. Now everybody wants a Gibson again, especially the coveted Les Paul solid-body model known as “The Log, ” played by guitar icons like Mike Bloomfield and Eric Clapton. The guitar’s recent popularity is spurred on by the nostalgia of baby-boomers heading towards retirement, along with their kids, who are picking up the instrument in a folk-roots-blues revival spurred on by young artists like Ben Harper and American Idol. Gibsons are now selling at the rate of \$250 million US a year, double their sales of 2000, according to Hoover’s Company Profiles.

Someone has to repair and maintain all these Gibsons floating around, and they wouldn’t trust just anyone to do it. Monty’s the man to restore them to their former glory. “Now if you had a Les Paul or an old 335 it couldn’t be played – you’d have to hide it in a vault somewhere,” says Monty. And, his own Monty- brand guitars “sound terrific,” says local blues guitarist, Andrew Cowan, who owned a Monty guitar and played it for ten years. “I loved that instrument,” he said wistfully. What made it so

special? “It’s just in the hands of the maker – Monty knows how to make a guitar sound good.”

Aside from building archtops like Cowan’s by hand – a 150-hour project that ultimately sells for about \$8000 US -- Monty crafts hand-made guitar necks and parts for old Gibsons that have been ravaged by fire, water and time. A lot of them have their necks sheared off – the weakest point in the instrument, says Monty, and are now just shapely guitar bodies, like headless Venus de Milos, waiting for a Monty-style restoration. Other guitars hanging from hooks and leaning up against the plywood walls look like they’ve been through major natural disasters – they’re charred, bashed and badly bruised. Their battered state, the piles of instrument cases stacked up and waiting to be attended to, the piles of sawdust and raw, winter isolation of his rural spot don’t phase him. “When I walk into the doors here, a certain peace comes over me. I’m in a certain world, of wood and guitars, and it’s seen me through thick and thin. I know that this is just a recession-proof business.”

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