



When a guitar is more than a guitar.....

some thoughts after 30 years of building

Building a guitar is more than selecting wood and using acquired skills, and after many years with the instrument I decided to gather some thoughts that go beyond 'the top is carved spruce and the fingerboard is ebony.....', there's more to it than that. For you and for the Slaman players' enjoyment, here are some thoughts I would like to share with you on 30 years with the instrument.

Guitar making is about celebrating nature and life itself.....

Making a guitar is a celebration of the gifts of nature; woods from all over the world, mother of pearl and abalone shell, mammoth ivory from the majestic extinct Ice Age woolly mammoth, or 50.000 year-old Kauri wood from New Zealand. Sitka Spruce from trees that started growing some 500 years ago when the New World was discovered.....I am thankful for these precious gifts of the earth and try to make responsible use of them. No woods from endangered species are used such as Brazilian rosewood. Up until now I have used Brazilian rosewood for the bridges but when my supply is gone I will start using an alternative wood. I try to minimize waste; for example cut-offs from the cedar or mahogany neck are used to make internal blocks and the kerfed lining. Even scrap wood that I have no use for, goes to carving artists that use it to carve objects, or use it in jewellery etc. for the enjoyment of themselves and others.

Guitar making is a celebration of energy and health; it's an expression of enthusiasm for the instrument and its music, and the joy and fulfilment involved in employing the physical and mental skills needed to produce the guitars. Every day I am thankful for having the ability to bring these guitars to life.

Guitar making is a celebration of relationships and friendship; the Slaman players have become friends and helpers to bring the guitars to ever higher levels in terms of design and craft. For many years now I have experienced their ongoing support in ideas, thoughts, input, time and effort, and even tools and materials.

Guitar making is an expression of creative freedom; every choice that is made for a particular guitar is made to achieve a unity in design. The result may not be to everybody's taste, that's a different matter, but the unity of design should always shine through in choices of wood, size, decoration and finish colour of the guitar. The result is always a unique one-of-a-kind instrument, made by one mind and set of hands

The Slaman connection....

The result is that Slaman players connect to their guitar(s) in a unique way. Over the years I have come to understand that to the owner the guitar has a meaning beyond physical aspects; there's always a bond or connection between the player and the guitar. This is not wishful thinking by the maker, there is corroborating evidence; there is no used Slaman guitar market, a player that owns one will not part with his guitar. Furthermore there are many players that own more than one Slaman guitar, 2,3 or even 4, and they are holding on to every one of them.

The guitars transcend the status of mere physical objects; they almost become a part of the family, an irreplaceable item of value both material and immaterial.

It's always *our* guitar....

People often ask me if it's not a difficult moment for me when a guitar leaves the workshop after spending so much time in creating it. My answer is that no matter how far the guitar is away from me, it's still '*my guitar*' and it will always remain so, maybe not in physical presence but more in intellectual parenthood. In fact I enjoy the idea that the instrument has found a good home with an owner that appreciates it and takes good care of it.

Old souls.....

Every Slaman guitar has its own history and future, and a unique personality that comes alive at the magical moment when it is strung for the first time and its voice is heard. Many of the Slaman players have commented that they receive an instrument that already feels played in with an articulate voice, indeed not a 'new kid on the block' but with the feeling of meeting an old friend. Some people have even said to me that (during the building process) they are already have a feeling of missing a guitar they don't even have yet.....

About sound and tension.....

Of course in the end it's all about sound and playability, and there are two points that I would like to mention in this regard.

The first is that over the years, several people have commented independently about the same feature of Slaman guitars; the high notes are particularly rounded, warm yet clear, where they are thin and shrill in many other archtop guitars. Before I started making archtops in 1995, I spent almost 20 years in making classical and flamenco guitars. In the classical guitar the difficulty for the builder is in the high notes; much effort and attention goes to designing and trying to achieve well balanced, warm and rounded high notes. Without being aware myself, my customers told me that somehow I must have taken this focus on the high notes to archtop production, as the high notes are well articulated in every Slaman guitar. It took observations from customers to make me see that, thanks !

The second point is string tension; invariably players seem to experience a string tension on a Slaman guitar that's actually one gauge below the actual strings on the guitar. So they say 'it's a 012 set, right? ' while they are actually playing a 013 set, and the same goes for 012

to 011. It seems that a given string, say an A tuned to 440 Hertz, can feel different in string tension from one guitar to another, regardless of scale length. It's a phenomenon also experienced in classical guitars and is not yet understood, there's no actual physical explanation for this. One explanation is that the thickness distribution in the top takes away some of the harshness of the impact of plucking the strings, much like the suspension of a car that takes away sharp impacts of unevenness in the road. Probably it has to do with carving the recurve into the top, anyway, I don't need to understand the scientific reasons for this, just so long as I 'know' how to carve this desirable feature of the guitar into the guitar top..... The good thing about this of course is that the player can have the feel and better playability of a lighter gauge string and at the same time have the better sound of the higher gauge string that is actually on the guitar.

The future of Slaman Guitars

Slaman guitars have always been the product of one mind, heart and set of hands. Everything is done by me, from choosing the woods to finishing and set-up. Having had offers of sub-contractors, employment vacancies and even outsourcing production, there's only one way to go; it will remain the way it is, a one-man business, but with regard to the thoughts above, with many free lance contributors.....

When a note is not just a note.....

Looking at all this, it's not hard to imagine that every note you play on your and my guitar is more than just a note; it is the result of combined effort and love in both making and playing the guitar, contributing to those magical moments in time called music.....

May 2009
Daniel Slaman