

Interview with master luthier Roman Zajicek

By Wil Peters, august 2010

*When did you start building guitars?*

I started repairing guitars. That's about 30 years ago when I was in high school. At that time there were few good stringed instruments available in the Czech Republic. What was there looked more like toy instruments. Sometimes I succeeded in laying my hands on a damaged guitar from the west.

I bought them, repaired them and made a side earning while doing so.

*Why did you start building guitars?*

I am a musician and play country music and blues. Together with a friend I built the instruments for our band. For the bluegrass music that we played American instruments were needed because of their specific sound. In particular, mandolins and banjos were difficult to obtain in Czech Republic. My friend Pavel Janish built banjos and mandolins and taught me the art of building instruments. Thus we were able to make music that we wanted.

*How have you learned the trade?*

As I said before I learned the basics of my friend Pavel. To enhance my knowledge of guitar construction, I read many American books about guitar making. I have an uncle in America who occasionally sent me books on guitar building. So I started to teach myself the process of building a guitar. And that's been a long learning process. Under communism, it was difficult to get good materials, acquire knowledge and the right tools. The stores had almost nothing for sale. With the revolution in 1998, my development as a guitar maker got a boost. At that time I had the chance to play abroad a lot with my band. And I traveled to the United States. During my visits to American guitar makers I learned more. I also bought numerous books about the art and craft of guitar making. And of course boots. Yes, original cowboy-boots which I wear everyday from the time I get up until I go to sleep. While traveling I was able to build a network of English and German musicians. Through them I had access to better materials and knowledge.

*When did you become a professional luthier?*

In the first years that I built guitars I did this next to my original job as an building engineer. I built about three guitars per year. A few years ago I had back problems and had to undergo surgery. I could not do my old job and had to find a new way to provide my income. Around that time I met my current business partner Pavel Krajicek and together we decided to invest in a small workshop for building guitars. We produce hand-made high quality acoustic guitars. Machines are used for rough cutting, drilling and sanding. Since the establishment of the workshop, production went up to 5 guitars per month. The total number of production guitars is now at around 300 instruments.

*What makes someone a good luthier?*

First, you have to play the guitar. You must know how the guitar should sound in order to build it right. Next, you must understand how the sound is emitted through the various materials. I have learned the sound by listening to audio and then learned how to build the instrument. You must know the properties of wood, the finish and combine this knowledge into a good guitar. A famous Czech violinmaker P.O. Spidlen has taught me a many things about wood. Violin makers have a lot of secret knowledge about building violins they like to keep to themselves. I was fortunate that he shared some of his secrets with me.

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*Writer's note:*

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