



## Days of Wine and Rosewood

EVERY TWO YEARS IN AUGUST, THE WORLD'S FINEST GUITAR BUILDERS CONVENE IN THE BUSTLING HEART OF CALIFORNIA'S SONOMA WINE COUNTRY FOR THE HEALDSBURG GUITAR FESTIVAL. { BY ADAM PERLMUTTER }

**O**VER THE RECENT weekend of August 9 through 11, more than 100 of the best luthiers from around the world closed up their workshops, packed up a few of their recent creations, and set out for Santa Rosa, in Sonoma County, California. There they gathered at the Healdsburg Guitar Festival, where luthiers not only peddle their wares but also exchange technical and conceptual ideas about their art and socialize with their far-flung cohorts in Northern California's largest wine-country city.

The Healdsburg Guitar Festival has remained the West Coast's premier conference for enthusiasts of high-end guitars since its inception in the mid Nineties. (The festival outgrew its original location, in Healdsburg proper, in 2003.) It was conceived as a vehicle for guitar connoisseurs to interface with luthiers and examine their work—a brilliant plan, since at the time few guitar makers had web sites

on which to display their instruments. Since then, the festival has played an important role in the evolution of modern luthiery by giving makers a chance to closely study each other's work, resulting in the crosspollination of new guitar features and increasingly elevated levels of craftsmanship. Healdsburg was an annual event until 2011, when the festival joined forces with its East Coast counterpart, the

Montreal Guitar Show. The former is now held in odd years and the latter in even years.

The Healdsburg festival gives dyed-in-the-wool guitar geeks unique opportunities to witness six-string serendipity. Case in point: just outside the exhibition hall at the Hyatt Vineyard Creek one morning, a collection of guitar enthusiasts waited for the doors to open. Seated on the carpeted floor outside the entrance to

the main hall were two gentleman—clad in what seemed to be the show's unofficial uniform of Hawaiian shirts and short pants—who were singing and playing the Jackson Browne song "These Days" on their steel-string acoustics. Just steps away, chatting with the master luthier Kenny Hill, stood Jackson Browne sideman Mark Goldenberg, who was at the festival to give a workshop and perform.

When the doors to the exhibition opened, they revealed a hall packed with rows of long tables, each supporting dozens of the finest custom instruments imaginable. As in recent years, small-bodied steel-string flattops dominated the displays, but nylon-string guitars, archtops, solidbodies, and other fretted instruments ranging from ukuleles to mandolins were also well represented. The abundance of instruments was overwhelming, and it was nearly impossible not to succumb to the siren call of every single expertly crafted instrument. Despite being pulled in many directions at once by so many compelling offerings, I tried to work slowly and systematically through the hall and an adjoining smaller room that accommodated the overflow of exhibitors.

A diverse range of stunning flattops was on show—everything from the Martin and Gibson Golden Era-inspired traditional work of Schoenberg Guitars to more contemporary builds, like Martin Keith's standard and baritone guitars featuring sliding adjustable neck joints and archtop-inspired bridges and tailpieces. Kathy Wingert displayed two most unusual-looking, steampunk-inspired flattops with headstocks that enclosed tiny found objects, like watch gears, rivets, and curved piping, all of it arranged in multiple layers beneath the surface.

The various instruments at Healdsburg were made from the broadest palette of tonewoods imaginable: from the traditional choices of Adirondack spruce and Brazilian rosewood to locally sourced redwood and walnut. Rare wood from The Tree—a storied specimen felled in 1965 that yielded intensely quilted mahogany after it was found and milled in 1983—made an appearance in the form of the one-piece back on Harvey Leach's ultra-luxurious 40th Anniversary steel-string. Jayson Bowerman, who displayed an unusual eight-string tenor and a flattop mandolin, among other great instruments, reached into a bag and unwrapped some blanks of wood that he offered for inspection. "I've seen figured mahogany, but nothing



[left] Martin Keith displays a pair of his Auriole acoustics; Saul Koll's custom RE-6 jazz box has a headless design and a Charlie Christian-style pickup; [opposite] an alluring quintet of Schoenberg cutaway acoustics

quite so exquisite, with this amazing tortoise-like figuring," he said, unable to contain his eagerness to work with the material.

Several archtop guitars ranked as the show's biggest surprises. Dimitri Tenev and Lewis Santer presented what appeared to be a pair of beautifully unornamented 00-size flattops that were actually archtops—one with a traditional round hole and the other a side soundhole. The arch of these guitars was inverted, falling concave on the interior face of a carved spruce soundboard, which was supported by an embedded carbon-fiber rod rather than traditional bracing. Viewed face on, Tim Frick's lovely archtop dubbed Swift looked conventional but had a flat back and sides fashioned from rosewood, like a Martin 000-28. Erich Solomon exhibited a handsome cutaway archtop with a conventional outer appearance that concealed a domed, double soundboard—a tricky build. Solomon explained, "The hardest part of making it was figuring out all of the geometry and fitting the bracing to the ledge, which I had to cut to match the 3-D topography of the top and sides."

Electric guitars were sparsely displayed, but they were not ignored, as evidenced by the "sold" signs on several very expensive Jen Ritter solidbodies, one of which was covered with thousands of aquamarine crystals. Similarly

captivating was Saul Koll's custom RE-6, a modernistic jazz box with an ergonomic headless design and a Charlie Christian-style pickup made by Pete Biltoft. The guitar's carved solid Sitka spruce was finished with a richly textured range of opaque golden, green, red, and pink splotches. "I was given free reign on this build," Koll says. "The customer mentioned a favorite work by Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*. That painting features some gold leaf, so I used that as a point of departure for the finish."

Throughout the day, a series of demo concerts and player workshops by fine guitarists like Mark Goldenberg, Al Petteway, and Pete Madsen provided intermittent breaks from the intensity of the main exhibit. Performers included original American Primitive proponent Peter Lang and modern fingerstyle master Michael Chapdelaine, among notable others. Before playing his interpretation of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know," Chapdelaine, tuning his sixth string down to C, remarked on the forbidding difficulty of his arrangement. With the delicate flurry of layered counterpoint strands and percussive tricks that followed, he seemed to achieve the impossible and in doing so reflected the abundant mastery of the handiwork on display at the Healdsburg Guitar Festival. 