

JOHN Le VOI - LUTHIER

After reviewing quite a few CD's last year for Music Maker on the Jazz Manouche style of Django Reinhardt, I thought I'd offer our readers an insight into one of the World's leading luthiers who specialises in making that style of guitar.

I first came across John le Voi in 1980 when I was making my Romantic Guitar LP that charted for K-Tel. One of the guitarists I used on some sessions was Kevin Peek of Sky fame. Kev's a great all round player and he had a beautiful sounding nylon strung guitar that John made. Kevin gave me John's telephone number and I asked him to make me a **double neck**, nylon strung 6 and 12 string. He came up with a beauty. The 6 string neck is strung with La Bella classical strings and the 12 string neck with La Bella Lute strings (mixture of). It produces a great and unique sound and I still have it to this day, as it was the only one John made. Here's an in depth interview I did with John.

Brett - When and why did you start making guitars?

Le Voi - I started making guitars for a living in 1970, but my first guitar (a twelve string) was made in 1962 when I was 13, with some help from my father. He had made a couple of Spanish guitars, so the idea was not daunting. As to 'why make one', quite simple, I could not afford to buy at the age of 13. However, the enthusiasm for making had taken root and I made a classical in 1967, with my first guitar for sale in 1970. That was a flat top steel string which was sold to the then roadie for King Crimson.

Brett - Did you initially learn your craft from anyone or are you self-taught?

Le Voi - Basically, I am self-taught. In those days there were no courses like there are today. The guitar in principle is a simple instrument if you break it down to its component parts. Certainly there are many subtleties to the completed instrument, but I have always said that anyone with O level woodwork is capable of making a playable instrument. You learn a lot from the first efforts!

Brett - What made you specialise in gypsy style guitars?

Le Voi - These days I am know mostly for

gypsy style guitars which stems from a love of the music. I can remember hearing Reinhardt recordings in my early teens and when I first saw the Selmer / Maccaferri guitars I was intrigued - they looked exotic. Then in 1976 I was presented with two to refurbish. One was a 1932 D hole which had been repaired several times and finally butchered by the owner,

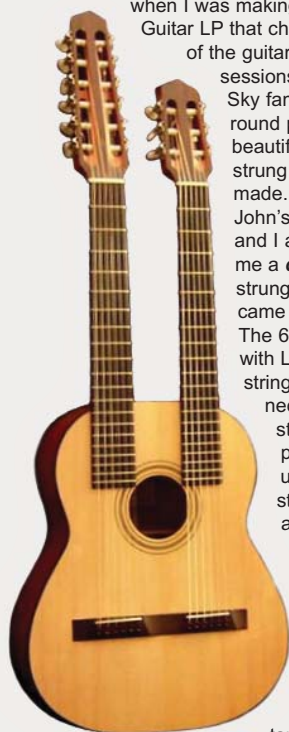


who had taken a spoke shave to the neck because he didn't like the profile. He then discovered that there were dural bars therein!

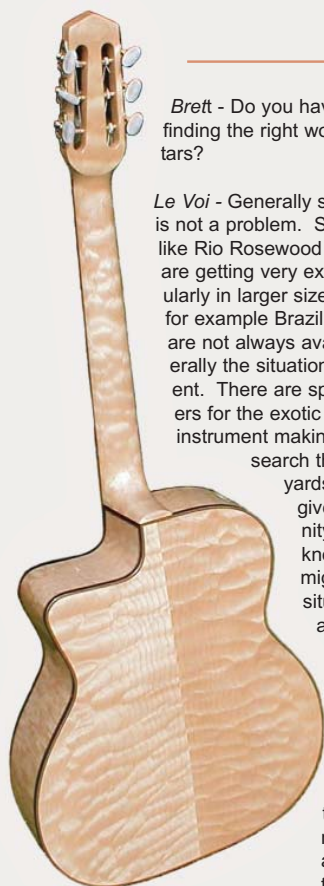
The other was an Eddie Freeman Special, which had been stored in a garden shed for many years. The glue had all gone and the instrument was in kit form. However, having these two to work on enabled me to study the construction, and to see the areas that had caused problems. I still have some of the irreparable parts in my workshop.

Brett - Do you work alone?

Le Voi - I work alone. I do occasionally get asked if I would take on an apprentice, but the general experience with luthiers in my position is that when the apprentice produces work of a high enough standard, they leave and set up their own workshops, so you are training your competitors! Don't get me wrong, I am not being secretive. I am happy to discuss the whole business of guitar making with anyone including other makers. In fact, I don't think I have come across one who has been anything but helpful when asked. There is a sort of kinship.



Quilted Maple oval 14 fret



Quilted Maple oval 14 fret back view

from furniture, old pianos and the like. This can be excellent wood. Articles made many years ago tended to use more naturally grown material (rather than plantation grown) and is often better than new material bought today. I hate to see wastage and unnecessary use of scarce materials so try to use as much reclaimed material as possible. I have an all Mahogany guitar at home, which is made from all reclaimed material except for the fingerboard. It sounds great. Some of the timber came from a piano and the rest from an old bed head-board!

Brett - What's the best guitar you have ever made?

Le Voi - I don't know. Firstly, they change (usually for the better) with age and secondly, I have made more than 450 gypsy style guitars. One which stands out, which I see occasionally, belongs to a friend in Gloucestershire. It's a 14 fret to the body D hole with all the internal constructions - false back and sides plus reflector etc. The 14 fret to body D hole configuration was never made by Selmer, but this guitar is considered to be quite a monster - I know he will never part with it.

Brett - What guitar shows do you exhibit your guitars at and do you find them a useful tool for selling?

Le Voi - I don't use guitar shows as such, but I

Brett - Do you have difficulty in finding the right wood for your guitars?

Le Voi - Generally speaking, there is not a problem. Some timbers, like Rio Rosewood for example, are getting very expensive (particularly in larger sizes) and some, for example Brazilian Mahogany, are not always available but generally the situation is OK at present. There are specialist suppliers for the exotic timbers used in instrument making and I will search through timber yards anywhere, given the opportunity - you never know what you might find. The situation changes all the time.

Twenty years ago American Black Walnut was unavailable except as a veneer or veneer cutting remains, but now its available as a bulk timber. The other source of timber is material reclaimed

do go to the Samoia festival in France almost every year and the Gossington Gypsy Jazz Guitar festival in this country. Also L'Esprit Manouche festival in Birmingham. For the last few years the pressure of orders has not enabled me to amass enough stock to mount a decent exhibit of the sort needed for guitar shows as such, but the festivals do allow players to see what I do and discuss the guitars with me. Even if I do not have instruments for sale at the festivals there are usually examples being played around the sites or on stage.

Brett - What problems do you encounter the most and how do you overcome them?

Le Voi - with just about every luthier of my acquaintance, I find the least enjoyable part of instrument making is the finishing. By that I mean lacquering and all the work associated with it. There are firms who will do this work for you, but it means losing control over an important part of your work. Giving customers reasonably accurate delivery times can be difficult particularly when the waiting list is more than several months. Repair work is constantly coming in and juggling this with orders can be a problem.

Brett - Do you do your own promotion and marketing?

Le Voi - I do my own marketing and promotion. The introduction of the Internet has been a very useful tool for all luthiers I would have thought - certainly for me. My website has brought in a good deal of business. With that and word of mouth, I am kept busy. I have been making professionally for 35 years so my name is known, plus every guitar of mine out there is an advert. One way of marketing guitars is to give guitars to famous players for promotional purposes. I have actually been asked for guitars on several occasions over the years but it is my view that the instrument is not valued by the player, and if they really wanted one they would be prepared to buy.

Brett - Do you sell your guitars through dealerships or are they all sold via your outlet?

Le Voi - I make mainly to private order, but I also supply Francois Charle in Paris, who is a gypsy jazz guitar specialist, and to Elderly instruments in America. In the last few years I have also supplied a few guitars to Stringphonic in Osaka, Japan.

Brett - Have you made any other style of guitars?

Le Voi - Although about 80% of my work is gypsy jazz guitars, I also make steel string flat tops, the occasional archtop and all the mandolin family. Nearly all my acoustic instruments

have pickups fitted these days. As for electrics, I will make if asked, but the market is so well catered for, it doesn't happen often. However, repairs and upgrades to electric guitars is a sizeable proportion of the repair work I do.

Brett - Is your business growing?

Le Voi - The business is growing at the moment. If I allowed myself, I could be working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. The interest in gypsy jazz seems to be bigger than ever (as is evidenced by the number of individual makers and the interest of the mass producers) - long may it continue. I think that many younger players have been excited by gypsy. It is a style which can be highly demanding in terms of technique and ability, but which is so approachable. Its happy music!

Brett - How long did it take to establish an international market for your guitars?

Le Voi - I sold my first instrument overseas back in the mid 1970s but the Internet has helped a lot with this area of business.

Brett - Any advice, tips for would-be luthiers who are thinking of going it alone?

Le Voi - Be aware that it's a risky business. In my early years I was fortunate to be married to someone who was also working, so income was assured.

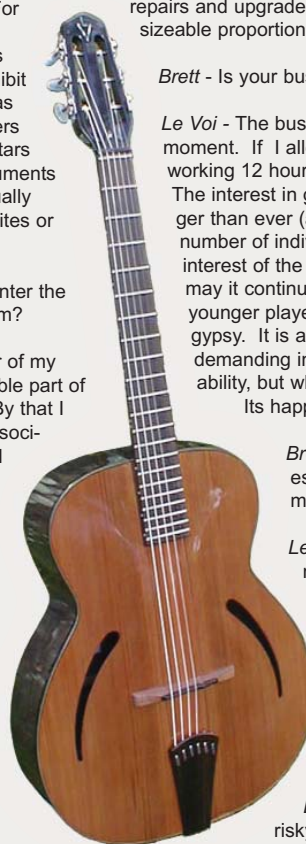
However, making musical instruments is a hugely rewarding occupation and if you are making to a good standard, there is always room.

Brett - Finally, who have you made guitars for ?

Le Voi - Famous players of my guitars have included:-
Kevin Peek (Sky)
Robin Nolan
Andy McKenzie
Paul Vernon Chester
Nick Mellor
Nev Willis (Djangos Mangos)
Paul Bailey
Dean Bradfield (Manic Street Preachers)
Phil Gripso (Hot Club of Kings Cross)
Ed Benson (editor of Just Jazz guitar magazine)
Paul Hares and of course , Paul Brett !

So there you have it, if you've got a Gypsy in your Soul visit John's website and check out his great guitars. He also sells Argentine and Galli strings from the site.

www.myspace.com/johnlevoiguitars
<http://www.johnlevoiguitars.co.uk/>



cats eye