



Dream Weavers

Paul Heumiller's guitar emporium unites world-class builders with enthusiastic customers

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In the late 1990s, Paul Heumiller, a guitarist accustomed to production models, took delivery of a custom instrument that would change his music and his life: a Stefan Sobell Model 1 with Brazilian rosewood back and sides. “My friend Martin Simpson encouraged me to order the guitar, and it’s the single best thing I’ve ever done for my playing,” Heumiller says. “Right away, I could hear nuances that I hadn’t heard before—it showed me what other guitars could not. And it just wasn’t possible for me to look at the Sobell and not play it.”

Today, Heumiller is the proprietor of Dream Guitars, a shop that focuses on luthier-built instruments. Located in Weaverville, North Carolina, a small mountain town near the liberal

enclave of Asheville, Dream Guitars has quickly become a vital hub of the acoustic world.

More than a mere salesman, Heumiller sees himself as an advocate of guitar makers, whose long hours at the workbench make it difficult for them to market themselves effectively. “Luthiers don’t really have time to maintain social media and blogs, and I try to help these artists, many of whom have become great friends, connect with their audiences. On the side, I’m a yogi, and so I really see myself as being in the service of this wonderful community.”

AN ALTERNATE PLAN

Heumiller grew up in a crowded New Jersey house with nine siblings. At ten, he appropri-

ated his sister’s cheap Yamaha nylon-string guitar and taught himself to play by reading Alfred method books. His older brothers supplemented his musical education. “Two of my brothers were college deejays, and they had massive record collections. Between them they played me everything from all the classic folk recordings to Jeff Beck and Alice Cooper, which probably explains why I’m slightly deranged these days,” says Heumiller, laughing.

Heumiller, like many of his generation, spent his 20s pursuing dreams of rock stardom. He sang and played electric guitar in clubs along the Jersey Shore, including Asbury Park’s Stone Pony, the club where the Boss himself, Bruce Springsteen, has jammed since his earliest days.

‘Luthiers don’t really have time to maintain social media and blogs, and I try to help these artists connect with their audiences!’

Paul Heumiller relaxes with his Jordan McConnell SJ, featuring inlays by Larry Robinson and artwork by Fian Arroyo.

But things didn’t go as hoped for Heumiller, and during a low point in the late 1980s, he realized the urgency of having an alternate plan. “After being a starving musician for a while, I had a week where I ate nothing but Häagen-Dazs I bought with a coupon book, as that’s all I could afford,” Heumiller says. “I knew then that I had to find something else to do with myself than play music.”

Heumiller set his guitar aside to focus on computer programming, from mainframe systems to PC to the Internet—he worked on the earliest online investment-banking systems and cellular-phone systems. Then, in the mid-1990s, he picked up the guitar again, focusing on the steel-string acoustic. In 1999, he

attended the first IGS (International Guitar Seminar) at Columbia University in New York City, led by Bob Brozman and Woody Mann, where he also encountered Martin Simpson for the first time. Heumiller says, “I heard Martin play a few notes and instantly felt that was the sound I was trying to make my whole life. We began working together; I built him a website, and he in turn mentored me on guitar.”

As their friendship evolved, Heumiller traveled with Simpson as an assistant to master classes around the United States and in Europe. More than a few attendees had beautiful custom instruments, and this is where the seeds for Dream Guitars were planted. “The people at these workshops had all these amazing handmade guitars,” he says. “Whenever possible, Martin and I would visit local luthiers, and we had a great time seeing how instruments were built, passing guitars back and forth and getting to know their nuances so well.”

GOING WITH HIS GUT

In 2002, Heumiller started Dream Guitars, selling custom guitars, mostly acoustic, on the Internet. He opened a small shop in Red Bank, New Jersey—the hometown of jazz luminary Count Basie—the following year. The retail space only lasted until 2004. “I quickly saw the shop as a hindrance,” says Heumiller. “It felt like I needed a whole staff just to deal with visitors—most of whom were unlikely to actually buy guitars. It turned out that the Internet was a better way for me to support builders, while helping players from around the world find their dream guitars.”

Around the same time, Heumiller, then a father of three young children, began to despair about the quickly rising cost of living in New Jersey. So he poured himself into finding a more livable place on the East Coast. After Simpson’s North Carolinian friend Al Petteway, the Grammy-winning guitarist and *National Geographic* photographer, showed Heumiller around Asheville, he was sold.

“I went with my gut. The Asheville area was the only spot on the entire Coast that felt right. It’s got mountains and natural beauty and, even more important, great people—like-minded artistic folks who live there for a common reason, to slow down a little and get down to what’s most important in life,” says Heumiller, who moved there in 2004.

A decade later, with a staff of eight, Heumiller, now 50, sells about 400 guitars per year at Dream Guitars. Most of the sales are still done online—the shop, part of his residence, is open only by appointment. Dream Guitars’ entire inventory—usually more than 200 instruments—fills seven rooms of Heumiller’s home and sits on stands, waiting to be played. The offerings run the gamut. Heumiller says, “We sell guitars from pioneering guitar makers like Ervin Somogyi, who many credit with lightening up the bracing of the steel-string for modern

fingerstyle playing, and from younger luthiers like Jordan McConnell, a Canadian maker whose guitars are off the charts in terms of their expressiveness.”

The shop also includes a full video recording studio, where Heumiller, Petteway, and other guitarists record demos of all of the shop’s instruments, and where a series of lessons is produced. Dream Guitars also hosts (and records) concerts and workshops on the premises; recent guests have included Alex de Grassi and the duo of Tony McManus and Beppe Gambetta. “I created Dream Guitars out of love for music and guitar,” says Heumiller. “Since the beginning, we’ve strived to be much more than a guitar shop; we want to be a community.”

MUSICAL TOOLS

While some luthiers like to deal directly with their clients, others prefer to let Heumiller—with the deep knowledge he gains from playing, in his estimate, a thousand guitars each year—help customers design their guitars. “I’ll guide a customer on everything from choosing tonewoods to helping them make the best decisions with respect to resale value,” says Heumiller. “Someone like Ervin will tell me, ‘You talk them all the way through [the specifications and options of a custom guitar] and just let me know what I need to build.’”

Many players and collectors consider prewar steel-strings to represent the golden era of guitar making, but Heumiller feels that today’s independent luthiers are crafting the best guitars ever made, while expanding the instrument’s tonal capabilities. “Not to take anything away from a 100-year-old Martin or a 50-year-old Gibson—we currently have 1930s Martins and 1940s [Gibson] L-5s for sale. I love vintage; it’s so inspiring to hold a guitar and know it has hundreds of stories in it. But the truth is, these guitars are not as well-made [as the best modern luthier-built instruments]; they’re not as easy to play and don’t intonate as well, even if you change the frets,” says Heumiller, adding that his inventory is typically less than 10 percent vintage.

It might be expected that a guitarist in Heumiller’s position would have a substantial personal collection, but he typically owns only half a dozen at a time. Currently, his go-to flattop is one made by Jordan McConnell, with inlay work by Larry Robinson. He also owns a Mountain Song baritone, a nylon-string fretless banjo, and a Paul Reed Smith archtop. (He’s the half-owner of a vintage Teisco that he bought with Martin Simpson when they rescued it many years ago from a pawnshop.)

“My arsenal includes tools for making music, only what I need for writing songs,” he says. “I’ll often keep a guitar for a little while and then sell it, even if I love it—like I did with the Brazilian Sobell. A guitar, just like love, comes and goes.” **AC**