GRIT LASKIN –
TORONTO LUTHIER

There’s a serious attempt on the part of most luthiers to bring to guitar construction changes and innovations to improve the product, changes which benefit all guitarists. William (Grit) Laskin is a gifted and articulate luthier. He is thoroughly familiar with the areas of guitar construction, the woods and their properties, and the history and construction methods of the famous luthiers of the past. His enthusiasm is contagious and youthful; the youthful aspect belies the fact that he has a mature and professional attitude towards his work, and that he has certainly put in the hours to learn his trade.

Grit learned his trade as the famous Jean Larivée’s first apprentice. He is the first to acknowledge the work done by Larivée and Edgar Mönck (a German luthier with whom Larivée was closely associated) in developing possibly the first steel-string guitar which differed from the traditional steel-string guitar in design and construction. The Larivée/Mönck guitar provided a viable alternative to the well-known Dreadnaught design. Until Larivée and Mönck’s work the only Canadian luthier of note was Frank Gay of Edmonton (see last year’s March/April Bulletin), who had been producing excellent alternatives to Martin and Gibson guitars since the mid-fifties.

Grit Laskin spent two very intensive years (1971-1973) with Larivée, working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. After six months he had built his first guitar. From this point onwards the workload was shared equally between himself and Larivée—not a bad achievement for somebody whose previous woodworking knowledge was limited to a Grade 8 shop class! He had entered the world of guitar making with little more than an intense desire to learn the art. That he was an accomplished musician, performing equally well on a variety of instruments, may well have helped him develop the ear to work with the raw materials. It is generally thought that the good luthier recognizes the tonal potential of a certain piece of wood while it is still in the rough form. This ability to recognize minute tonal and structural nuances in woods of differing species and thicknesses has to be a great gift.

The emergence of the Laskin guitar has taken six years. The guitars now produced are excellent, but Grit, like most perfectionists, is continually seeking to improve even further. The years which have passed since the opening of his own shop have seen great changes in the guitars he has produced. The Laskin guitar differs totally from the Larivée in dimensions, strutting, appearance and sound qualities. It has taken the construction of over four hundred guitars to develop what may well become an internationally known Canadian guitar.
There are many contributing factors to the sound and performance properties of the guitar. The major components are the woods used for the top and the body, the thickness of the woods, the bracing design and materials, the body dimensions, the string length or scale and (and this is the intangible factor) an awareness by the builder of the exact type of sound for which he is building. A bluegrass guitar maker will work to bring out the desirable timbre for that form of music: a classical guitar maker will stress the desirable attributes necessary for classical guitar music.

With so many variables with which to work, it would appear that the development of a unique guitar would be fairly straightforward, but this is not so. There are basic rules of guitar construction which were established many years ago. Most classical guitar builders follow the rules established by Torres, one of the most famous of the early luthiers. His dimensions, strutting design and scale length have been regarded as standard for many years. Such guitar manufacturing companies as C.F. Martin and the Gibson Organization have also been very influential in the basic building and design principles of the steel-string guitar.

It takes an able and confident luthier to lay these rules aside, but this is what Grit has done. An examination of his classical guitars shows that he has completely rethought the process of building classical guitars, with methods diametrically opposed to some of the building principles established by the early great Spanish luthiers. The extent to which he has been successful is shown by the fact that a major supplier to the world’s leading classical guitarists has ordered a number of his instruments. For possibly the first time a Canadian luthier has his product regularly displayed, and ranked equal to, the Kohno of Japan and the Ramirez of Spain. To my knowledge the only other Canadian luthier who has attracted the attention of world-famous classical and flamenco guitarists is Frank Gay of Edmonton, who has built guitars for Alirio Diaz and Carlos Montoya.

Most folk guitarists are interested in steel-string guitars. It takes a very versatile luthier to produce equal quality guitars in both steel and classical models, but Grit Laskin’s steel-string guitars provide further examples of his creative and analytical thinking. His guitars are characterized by a unique shape, dimensions, strutting and extremely high quality craftsmanship.

There are many high quality steel-string guitars now available. Some of the better makers and instruments have already been described in past issues of the Bulletin. It is my opinion that the large-bodied steel-string Laskin guitar satisfies a need previously unmet, namely that for a large guitar more suited for finger-style guitarists than flat-pick guitarists. This may seem to be splitting hairs, but in my experience there has not been until now a guitar which completely bridged the gap between the smaller bodied models like the Martin 000 series and the dreadnaught - sized flat - picking guitars. The Doc Watson model made by Gallaher Guitars is the most versatile guitar I have played, and while both the Larivée and Gurian guitars are excellent instruments, I
believe Grit Laskin may well be the first luthier to achieve this very fine and subtle quality of sound. I'm not suggesting the Coke-v-Pepsi type of test for Laskin guitars; the differences are very subtle, but they are most definitely present. I must also admit that my own collection of high-quality guitars has helped me develop an evaluative system—but my taste may not be that of others.

Five different models of Laskin guitars are made: the classical; a large-bodied six-string; a small-bodied six-string; a twelve-string; and a cutaway model six-string. All guitars are made either of East Indian or Brazilian rosewood, Alaska sitka or Bavarian spruce tops, mahogany necks and ebony fingerboards and bridges. A prospective buyer is well-advised to talk over particular needs with the luthier; Grit welcomes this chance to make sure the buyer is aware of what is being built. Of special interest to western Canadians is the news that Sitka spruce may be better suited to their climate (because of its greater elasticity and ability to absorb climatic changes) than Bavarian spruce. It really is an educational talking to this luthier! The smaller Laskin guitars—classical and steel-string—serve to explode a popular misconception that smaller guitars lack the power of the larger models. It is Grit’s experience that a smaller body combined with a longer scale will produce a very powerful instrument with great projection.

The cutaway model is worthy of some comment. There appears to be a great deal of interest in this addition to the acoustic guitar group. Whether it is a fad or an indication that guitarists are now using the whole range of the guitar is a debatable point. Some luthiers feel that the tone and perhaps the volume may be adversely affected by the changing of the airspace within the guitar. No doubt this idea will have its proponents and its detractors.

A feature of Laskin guitars which is perhaps more aesthetic than practical in character is the very fine inlay work to be seen on headpieces, fingerboards and the rosettes. Each guitar bears a unique rosette, handmade from the raw materials. There are available a number of patterns for fingerboard inlays but the headpiece is considered Grit’s “easel” upon which he likes to have free scope to improvise. A recent headpiece inlay presented a sailing ship, correct in detail down to the vessel’s rigging. Custom inlay work can be incorporated into the guitar, the only qualifying factor being Grit’s taste. He speaks of some strange requests which he has turned down!

I can state without reservation that Laskin guitars are a steal at the present price (I hope this doesn’t persuade Grit to put the prices up!) I also would hope that only serious guitarists and those who appreciate fine instruments would wish to own a Laskin. There is at present a waiting list of a year. All orders are placed on a booking system, with three or four guitars being completed each month. Prices start from $750 for the standard six-string, $790 for the twelve-string and $900 for the cutaway and classical models. Extra inlay of headpiece or fingerboard is approximately $85, and custom inlay can be negotiated. The guitars can be supplied with good Harptone hard
shell cases. Enquiries should be sent to Grit Laskin, Luthier, 192 Dupont St. (rear), Toronto, Ont. M5R 2E6 Tel: (416) bus. 923-5801; res. 461-1864.

Two final notes: Grit has now installed climate control equipment in his shop, permitting the construction of instruments throughout the year. A number of long-necked mandolins are also available by special request. These are ideal for the performance of Irish and British traditional instrumental music.

Mansel Davies

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