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Guitar

the magazine for all guitarists

BB King

Norman Wood

Plus regular features





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ALL ENQUIRIES TO — MR N. WOOD. SUNSET VIEW. SENNEN.
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For years now the stories had been coming in from the west country concerning a luthier of great originality. Nothing concrete — "I saw a guy down here who's invented a new type of fingerboard." ... "Dear all, Having a great time. Weather lovely. Went to Land's End yesterday and came across this guitar maker who's got revolutionary inventions." — That sort of thing. During the hot summer of '77 the tales were coming in fast; this summer, only one or two. And still nothing definite, and because we're a curious crowd we began to lose hope. We'd had a picture in our collective mind's eye of a Merlin-like figure building, according to second hand reports, guitars with almost magical innovations, bending his ribs, fitting patented frets year in year out without a word of recognition or a whisper of encouragement. Then in August, a letter with a postmark from Penzance and the legend 'Sunset View' on the letterhead and underneath Mr. N. Wood, Maker of handmade guitars and mandolines. Silver Cup and Award winners. Patentee of the new stainless steel roller type fretting system'. We read the enclosed three sheets so quickly that in our excitement we haven't read a word. Again, slowly. The letter is from Norman Wood telling us about his views on guitarmaking, of his inventions, and asking us to quote for a full page announcement "setting out the scientific and technical details of these instruments, so that the playing public may be made aware of the situation. "All without a hint of irony or the frustrations he must have borne in evolving what he now considers to be the ultimate in guitar making technology. We telephone and speak to the luthier, suggesting that, rather than print his letter we would like to make the journey to Land's End and talk to him in his own workshop. Thrilled we were when he agreed.

Next morning we set off early on the long drive from London to Penzance, stopping briefly in Honiton to eat delicious Lardy cakes, and then on without a pause to Sennen Cove, arriving hot, dry and dusty around lunchtime. We found our inventor in his workshop holding a mug of tea and he immediately impressed upon us his zeal and singlemindedness by his answer to our enquiry as to where one could get "a cup of tea and a bite to eat around here?" "Go back up the road the way you've come for about two hundred yards and you'll see a cafe — but don't you want to look at the guitars first?"

He was right of course, and feeling a little guilty we agreed and straight away set out examining and exploring Norman's unique world of guitar making. "You see, George," said Norman, as I picked up what I took to be a model of an Aztec pyramid, "I predicted in the BMG in 1969 that science would bury the tradition of musical instruments and promised I would come up with some of the best instruments on earth. I have. What you're holding is a guitar back; an acoustically and scientifically designed resonator without struts." Feeling foolish for the second time we asked Norman where and when it all started.

"See that mandoline hanging there? That's where it all started. I was a solo mandoline player and I never had a good instrument to play on so I decided to make my own. I went to Wallesey, Cheshire for a competition, everyone playing Windsors, Gibsons and Neopolitan mandolines. I took that one and won the silver cup — the first prize. Just like that! And they all came up afterwards and said where did you get your mandoline from? — we could hear it all over the place.

"And there's the back, see, the same back as my guitars have. Look at the theory of it. There's a little area that doesn't touch your body and so prevent the vibrations from being absorbed as they are with the flat back. It was accidental to start with. The idea came when I was making the mandoline — I tried to make a Neopolitan back on it and I didn't succeed — I couldn't get a smooth surface. So I thought 'Oh, blow it, I'll leave it like that.' And Lo and behold, I played on it and it had a marvellous sound, so I decided to patent it. But it's not just a good resonator; For a start, you've got very prominent harmonics — listen." So saying, Norman crossed the workshop took up one of his steel string guitars, produced a plectrum and played a very nice medly beginning with Fur Elise. "You know" said Norman, as he finished the first part of Villa Lobos' Prelude No 1 with a flourish of harmonics at the soundhole, "I had a young lad here yesterday who was very dismayed with his Epiphone when he played on this — yet he liked it before."

Norman Wood

Unsung Revolutionary

by
George Clinton



Norman passed the classical guitar over to me to play, which I did, noticing at once two things: easy to play frets, and a tone that to me lacked bass. Could this be because of the lowness of

the strings over the soundboard I wondered?

"This is technical now George; we're dealing with sound. As you're probably aware, sound is generated by the soundboard and you can dictate the sound you're going to produce by merely modifying the soundboard. Let's say, for instance that the thickness on the steel string guitar is exactly 100,000 of an inch in thickness. Now, if I vary that and reduce it to 95 or say, 80, you'll find there's a difference. It'll go down in brightness or up in volume accordingly. Down in mellowness, up in mellowness; Similarly with loudness. But you're going to have to sacrifice something in order to get what you want out of it; You can't have everything. You can only have a limit of mellowness, richness and volume before you begin to sacrifice one of the other qualities.

"Another thing, I've just found out that I don't need to strut guitar tops. Now, people may disagree about this statement, but I'm going to say this: Your soundboard is only strutted for a purpose and that is to strengthen it. Why strengthen it? If you use hard wood like I do for tops you can work thinner than you can with spruce or pine — and the top oscillates better! That probably explains why people prefer my guitars. And I'm talking now about a lad who came in only the other day and said he'd spent £600 on a Ramirez. He actually preferred the one you've got in your hands!"

Although my respect for the luthier was growing by the minute this last confidence made me look at the guitar with new interest. True, it was solid enough. And clearly, the eccentric back made for less impingement of the body but ... Further thoughts on the matter were swept from my mind as Norman went on persuasively "And that's not really a test. It's got the wrong strings on. I'm merely conditioning it. It's not even finished!"

Ah, yes, conditioning. "You mean the humidity," I ventured.

"No, no, Conditioning applies to the neck and fingerboard." Norman continued patiently. "You see the way I tension the fretboard and neck — give it equilibrium. My classical necks tend to be very thin in depth, therefore the guitar's easier to play. I've got a neck down to nine sixteenths of an inch. That's terribly thin. And it's done with mechanical engineering. The tension of the strings is calculated. Let's say there's an 180 pound pull on the guitar. Well, I give the neck that pull. I'll soon have the thinnest neck in the world! That's why professionals like them. I think you'll agree that the features people look for are ease of playing and the sound, and you don't necessarily have to have a good sound if you can get the action very easy."

I wanted to ask about those professionals but even more pressing was the desire to learn Norman's secrets of the soundboard so I said "But surely people want a good sound above all else Norman?"

"Quite right. Everybody uses spruce for soundboards? That's because there was once plenty of it at one time. Now my guitar is made totally from walnut. African walnut for the soundboard and another species for the body. The views of guitar makers generally with reference to tonewoods are ennoereous — rosewood has no better tonal qualities than many others, if they insist, why don't they use it for soundboards instead of spruce?"

You can't argue with that, I thought. But why walnut, had Norman experimented?

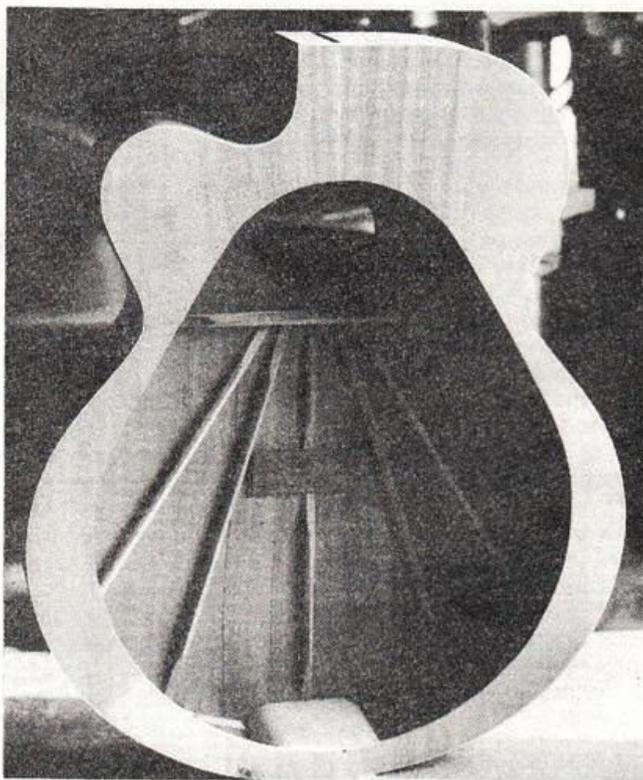
"It was after experimenting with every known timber. I rejected pine for steel strings because it's not good enough. You see, if 99 people out of a hundred all say the same thing obviously they like what they hear. Then, obviously it's better than what they've already got. I could show you loads of testimonials where people have said 'I've thrown my Gibson guitar away; or my Martin away. Here's a typical instance: A lad with a Martin and his brother with a D35. But listen, I don't really need to mention any particular make, almost every known make of guitar has been rejected in favour of these scientifically designed guitars.'

"So far I've made five guitars without struts and they rave about them. The last went to a lady in Australia who said 'I wouldn't sell this for a thousand pounds Mr. Wood, although I've only paid you £195 for it. Wait till I get back to Australia and show them what I've bought in England. They're all going out now with no struts. You see I can now make my tables 85 to 75 thou thick. And I get twice the volume.

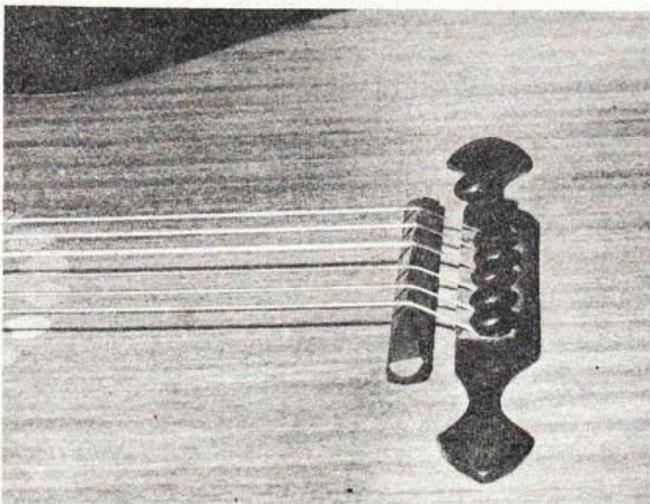
"I think pretty well every guitar maker in England has been



Wood mandoline



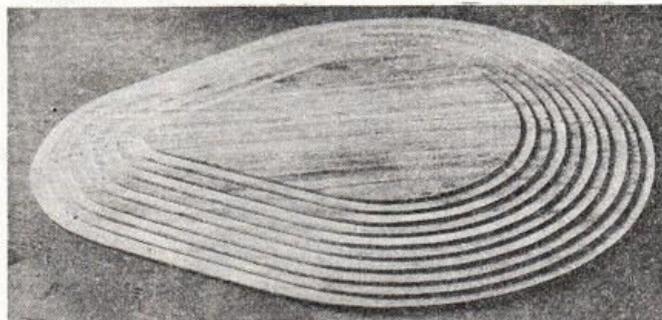
View through the back. Soundboards are no longer strutted



Bridge system showing floating saddle



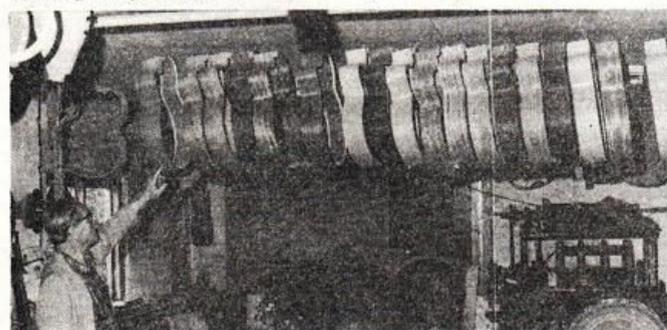
Fitting the frets. Shims in place. 1 fret in position for photo



The back of a Wood guitar



Fitting the frets: jacks in place to provide pressure.



Ribs. Norman Wood uses 270 varieties



"I never make an identical guitar"

here to see me; or they send their apprentices — which to me is a compliment. I had a lad in here I would have sworn came from Rubio because he picked up the guitar, strummed it and said this to me 'You're not comparing this with Rubio surely?' and I said 'I've not compared it with a Rubio at all; this is a steel strung model and you're talking about classical.' But I'll take Rubio on if it's necessary, by making a guitar without struts. I can go a multitude of ways. I can get what sound I want out of these. There's no problem because it's purely scientific now.

"Supposing Ramirez had six guitars for you to choose from? How is it that you can pick the best one leaving five, and then somebody else chooses the best of the five ... and so on till one's left, which should be the worst, but still it can be sold. Now, you can't do that with mine. If I had fifty guitars — and I never shall have — you couldn't pick out the best; you'd be spoiled for choice. Because they all sound the same — or so near to it that you're going to need special equipment to decide for you.

"And that's done scientifically, controlling the sound by the thickness of the table. You have to get down to rock-bottom precision then you can make guitars no matter what they are — classical, steel string, 12 string, solid — anything. But your ordinary guitar maker doesn't stand a chance. You need calipers, micrometers, surface gauges. You need depth stops on every piece of equipment — it's no use sanding and hand-finishing a soundboard and using a pair of calipers because you can be 20.000 of an inch out! Can you imagine the difference if this was 105 thou. here, and 102 here, and 90 here? How could you predict the sound of it? It would be impossible. And then how could you hope to match that to another guitar? Never — but with science you can."

Okay, I thought, so much for the sound, which I didn't really think a lot of, but the frets seemed a genuine, real McCoy idea. I knew too that Norman had a flair for engineering and had, as he put it "Invented pub football which Europe now enjoys playing on." What is more his frets are accurate, big enough to be comfortable and above all they make the guitar easy to play. (I should mention here that Norman had sent me a page out of his visitor's book showing dozens of comments about his frets, all of which praised the fretting system to the skies: "Fantastic improvement on my Gibson." ... "Really amazing, a vast improvement." We telephoned a few of these and the one's which we could trace confirmed their written comments). I mention this because at that moment we heard a knock on the door and a young couple came in saying they had seen the welcome sign. Norman pounced. "Now, he hasn't seen one of these before. These are stainless steel and you can't wear them out. The features of these are such that when that lad plays on that guitar he's going to say to you that it's the lowest action he's ever played on." Turns to lad.

"Am I right?"

Lad: "It's certainly low."

"Is it lower than anything you ever played on as an acoustic guitar?"

Lad: "No, I wouldn't say that, but then again I haven't heard it yet."

"No, well play on it."

Lad plays on guitar.

"You see George" said Norman turning to me, "these frets are embedded in a material which never goes hard. That's why you can take them out and turn them round. But they won't wear — so you can forget about having a re-fret. That's been eliminated. They drop by 1000 of an inch at a time from 35,000 right down to the nut which is 15,000 of an inch exactly. That's how the action can be brought so low over the fingerboard. And if for any reason the fret distorts or becomes proud, you can press it back in merely with finger pressure. You can't press them out of the true depth because they're put in with such great pressure — 20 tons — that it's impossible for you to press the fret lower than it was originally."

Norman then proceeded to show me the process. Placing the fingerboard on a steel bar — ("Look at that fingerboard George — greenheart — the next hardest wood in the world. An agent of Selmer came in and wanted to buy it. He said 'I'll admit you've beaten Gibson's action with this, but they'll come up with something as good or better.' And look at this neck George. A lad brought this in for me to modify. He threw a Fender Stratocaster away when he got this off me. It's laminated like a Rickenbacker.") Next, Norman fitted in the

stainless steel frets, carefully putting the appropriate shim next to each fret. Another steel bar is laid across the fingerboard. Two jacks are installed into the jig to provide equal and massive pressure squeezing each fret down into the slot to the height of its shim. Ingenious.

"I patented that in 1973; cost me a fortune. It's like the football machine. That's getting all over the world now. That's why they've written in the newspapers, how to make a million with an idea like that. But I'm not impressed, I didn't do it for money. So now you see how easy it is for me to attack the guitar family.

"It's the same with my bridges. When I started out seven or eight years ago, I found that my guitars were out of tune six months after I'd made them — by about one millimetre, so I thought I'd better try and make the bridge mobile. There's your result. So again, patented. There's a mass of patents on the guitar.

"George Love says science doesn't matter. The whole thing is science, so I'm afraid I've got to disagree with him. I've got recording equipment on which I've recorded every instrument I've made and that backs up what people say about my guitars. Would you believe it if I tell you that a lad came in with a Martin 12 string custom built and said 'Mr Wood, I've paid £850 for this, I want one of yours. He's got one now!'

"Still" I pointed out, "I would have liked some more bass response."

"Well, the strings are only Cardiff Music Strings." Norman offered, lamely I thought.

"What strings do you normally use?"

"Martin — when I can get them. I suffer from what you might call professional jealousy. I only need two items for my guitars, that's strings and machines, and I have the greatest difficulty getting them."

"Really" said I, sniffing a bit of scandal (even our visitor stopped playing. Incidentally he turned out to have once worked for Marshalls and read the magazine — true). "Why do you think that is?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Norman said levelly, looking me straight in the eye. "Every time I've sent for them they're out of stock. These people all sell guitars of course. I don't know whether they've heard about me. Obviously it looks as if they have. It's quite likely they think if there are any tales going around that I'm going to commercialise something that's going to make their guitars obsolete, well . . . Look, if everybody says Goodbye Gibson, Goodbye so an so, Martin, or Hofner, or Epiphone — you name it"

"That's a bit below the belt" I said, mentally mounting my charger, "Do you think firms are taking action against you, not supplying you?"

"I don't know whether they are taking action against me" replied Norman cautiously "I can only assume that, because I have great difficulty getting supplies."

"Would you say that they think that this is the end of guitar making as we know it — like someone inventing a rubber tyre that never wears out?"

"Yes."

"Gosh"

There was a heavy silence during which I looked around and spotted about twenty guitar ribs hanging from the ceiling, all made of different wood, judging from the colours. Norman followed my gaze and said "Years ago when I began to experiment with wood I had fixed ideas about how guitars should be made and I wasn't very happy with the traditional methods so I decided then and there to change things. This was long before I ever made them. I knew I would have a struggle to get to the state where everything was ironed out. However I knew that if I had to buy timber at the price it was then I would be charging £500 or more each for the guitars. That's ridiculous. So I got the timber I needed but at the same time I developed a technique. Look, how I bend the sides dry. I don't need steam, heat, or water."

Intrigued, I asked "How do you do that?"

"It's a trade secret" said Norman "but look at the different timbers I have hanging here: Pearwood. Afrormosia. Agba. Padouk. Indian Satinwood. Indian Rosewood. Brazilian Rosewood. Fiddleback Sycamore. Beech. Satin Walnut. Paldao. Honduras Mahogany. African Mahogany. African Walnut. Maple. Teak. Lignum Vitae. Greenheart. Birds Eye Maple. Cherry. Lacewood. Bubinga. Ebony. Sitka Spruce.

Columbian Pine. Purpleheart. Zebrano, etc, etc."

"That's impressive" I said "but Norman, getting back to your thicknesses. No two bits of wood are alike, how can you gauge which thickness to give which piece of wood?"

"Characteristically. I can tell you that timber will never alter. I'm going to bring Stadiovarius into this: The guitars I make, like violins and guitars of Stradivarius, are mature before you actually put them together. Look, if you put that soundboard in the window it will curl up in ten minutes because of the moisture content, and drop to atmospheric level. Turn it round and it will curl the other way — proof that it has been acted on simultaneously. Now, when I've made the guitar it's already mature. I can't give it maturity, — it's already taken place. The moment it drops to atmospheric level your timber's mature. What I do do is make sure that each guitar I make suits the humidity of the country it's going to. If it's 8 per cent in California, then I'll make the guitar in accordance with that.

"And another thing — I think the reason Stradivarius' instruments sound better now is because the varnish is probably rubbed off after 200 years. Nothing to do with formulas. What happens is that the wood soaks up the varnish, impregnating the fibres, and prevents the soundboard from oscillating properly. What's the point of putting an artificial substance on a virgin timber that you know is going to sound good before you varnish it? I put my own secret spirit base formula on which dries quickly — just to keep the top clean. It doesn't penetrate the wood and you can wax it, silicone it, and it won't harm it."

Tempus fugit, just a couple more questions. "How many do you make at a time?"

"I cut the parts out for about fifty but I make them one at a time."

"And how do you get your customers?"

"Just by talking to people like this young gentleman. Ask him; he's not really interested in buying a guitar — none of them are, they've already got one, so why should they change? But they do. That lad with the J50, he said 'Wait till I tell Ralph McTell that his guitar's obsolete!'"

We bade our farewells to Norman and set off. As the car ate up the miles — we stopped at Jamaica Inn for the traditional Cornish Pasty — I pondered about Norman and I suddenly realised how Pickwick must have felt when he presented his Tittlebatian Theory to the world, and that in a funny sort of way we would never be the same again.

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