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John McGuire Guitars

If you aren't familiar with John McGuire, perhaps you have heard of his father, Mike, one of the original co-founders of Valley Arts Guitars in Los Angeles, and production manager for the Gibson Custom Shop in Nashville from 1993 until his recent retirement. John's brother Mike Jr. is also an extremely accomplished artist who works in the finishing department at the Gibson Custom Shop in Nashville. Mike Voltz, production manager at the Gibson Custom Shop in Memphis initially introduced us to John McGuire, he sent us one of his Tradition guitars for review and we asked him to share his story. Enjoy...

TQR: Well John, being the son of Mike McGuire who just recently retired from running production at the Gibson Custom Shop, we can kinda guess how you got into the guitar building business, but give us the details. Where did you grow up, did you start out by learning to play the guitar, did you pursue music first, and when did you initially become interested in doing repairs and building?



I grew up in Southern California, and I used to go in to work with my dad pretty often. I bugged him with new designs all the time that were just not for the Valley Arts

brand. You could say I was into pointy guitars back then. He allowed me to pull some scrap parts and I reworked and built my own guitar (with help of course) when I was 12 years old. I guess you could say that was when I figured out that I really

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liked working on guitars, and I would help friends out with mods. After that guitars became my life at Gibson Custom, First Act, and now with my own company. As far as playing goes, I have messed around with guitars since I was five, but I never really got into theory or anything. I was always just interested in having fun. I got bored initially with the whole practice thing, so I can play, but I have no idea what I am doing.

TQR: Describe your early adventures and most memorable experiences working with guitars.



I guess the first CNC program I wrote and ran at the Gibson Custom shop was pretty memorable. It was a Flying V pickguard and truss rod cover – not so awesome an accomplishment to most, but I was pretty impressed with it. There was also a time I crashed the CNC pretty seriously there as well, very memorable, but not such a

good memory (laughing). Other than that, while I was at First Act I met with High on Fire's Matt Pike to talk about his first custom 9 string and he ate a steak with his bare hands. That sticks out in my mind....

TQR: His guitars must have some funky spooage on them... Have any mentors played a significant role in your life as a builder?



Well, my father of course. Other than that I would have to say Matt Klein and Lynn Mathews at Gibson Custom. Matt taught me a ton of stuff, even when he thought I wasn't listening or watching. Lynn also taught me a lot about keeping a level head throughout production

issues and would also make sure that I would correct myself and get jobs done the right way. I would also have to credit my brother, Mike Jr. He is probably the most knowledgeable guitar finisher with the skills to back it up. I can't tell you how many times I had to ask him how to do certain types of finishes, what coatings can go over other coatings, etc. I would also have him show me techniques over and over. Growing up with him was definitely helpful in my guitar building career.

TQR: Which guitar models from the past appeal to you the most and why?

If you're talking about models I have worked on, I would have to say the Flying V Custom I worked into production in 2002. That, and the 9 string (DC-9) we did for Matt Pike and a few artists at First Act. It was something I thought nobody would really get or play until they were done, and Matt used it as his main guitar for a long time. It had become a pretty popular model for our shop. In general I am really into the standard stuff like the Les Paul, Strat, Flying V, Explorer, and I also like a lot of the strange looking models that came out in the sixties....

TQR: When did you begin building the guitars we see today, what was your vision and what did you want to accomplish as a designer and builder?

I started building the Tradition, in late 2012. What I wanted to accomplish was a design that can be perceived and appreciated as just a straight ahead, good guitar that feels like it will play itself – as simple as that. I wanted to create a guitar that guitar players and enthusiasts would appreciate for its feel, sound, and playability. I have incorporated some improvements that you really have to look for, and some not so hard to find. I am one who believes that as cool as the improvements and innovations might be, if it makes the guitar look silly, then it is just a silly looking guitar. So it is important for me to not stray too far from tradition, finding ways to incorporate new innovations with established concepts .

TQR: Do you have any particular favorites among specific pickup designs?



The Vault pickups are just amazing. My father and I actually went to their shop in Kennewick, Washington and they put us to school. We spent a lot of time

discussing different pickups, sounds and possibilities. We also played through various amps and guitars and just about every combination. The coolest part was they were able to show us how the pickups were made and why they sounded a specific way. It all seemed to make sense.

TQR: How about wood – what do you like to use and why?

I am pretty traditional when it comes to wood. There is nothing like a good light piece of mahogany with P-90s or hum-

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buckers. I also use a lot of swamp ash. I just don't think you can beat the weight and sound of it, and the grain can look pretty awesome as well. I also like a nice piece of figured maple. I tend not to get too crazy with other exotics. After all, it's a guitar...

TQR: What role does the weight of a guitar play in its tone and resonance?

Well a lighter guitar tends to be a bit more live acoustically, and I believe you can tell a lot about what your guitar is going to sound like just by playing it unplugged. Weight up or down alone however doesn't always make for a better guitar. Everything you do makes a difference.

TQR: Regarding the guitar we received, what inspired the Tradition design?

Well, a few things actually. I wanted to appeal to the guys who are really into the way the guitar feels. I wanted them to feel like they could play better on my guitars. I also wanted them to look and sound somewhat familiar. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel.

TQR: You have developed a very interesting design for the bolt-on neck. Please describe its construction and how it functions.



Yeah, the "Tone Socket." I always dug the way the ol' interlock worked and wanted to do it in a way that would be a bit easier to use and a bit more of a traditional wood to wood joint. It consists of brass pieces that are placed flush in the neck and body,

male on the neck and female on the body. It goes together like a dead bolt almost. They are inset so that the wood is making a connection, but the socket keeps it secure. It also allows for fast removal, adjustments, and replacements (multiple times) without having to worry about stripping any holes.

TQR: What type of P90s did you use?

Vault Pork Chops. I did have them wound just a bit hot, however.

TQR: The hardware on this guitar is also unique – the design of the bridge and tailpiece, and the open back tuners.



OK, the Hip Shot open back 18:1 classic tuners are just phenomenal. I have worked with Dave Borishoff at Hip Shot for a while. When I told him I was wanting to do my own thing he sent me out samples of those tuners and I was sold. They're just a completely cool looking and precise tuner,...

The bridge... I had been looking for a bridge and tailpiece combo that was just the right fit for a long time. I came across the Gotoh 510 TOM and stop combo and decided to try it. In my opinion it is really slick. The adjustability of the bridge is amazing and the design of the posts and stop bar is very smart. It will actually adjust itself to your string angle off the bridge. The weight of the stop bar and bridge is amazing as well.

TQR: How many different models do you build and can you briefly describe them?



Right now The Tradition is the only one in production. I have multiple bridge and pickup options though, including a T-style, a double humbucker TOM/stop bar, a double P-90 TOM/stop bar, and a humbucker with 2 single coils and a Hip Shot tremolo. I am also working on a few designs for some new models to come out soon.

TQR: What kinds of optional finishes are available?

I will pretty much do any traditional finish including metallics and specialty jobs. I also have a burnt finish that looks fantastic, where I actually burn the wood and finish over it. I do that with color or without and it gives it a really striking, rustic look. It really makes the grain pop, especially with ash. Other than that there is not much I won't do upon request.

TQR: How does your ordering process work?

You can order from any of my dealers: Music Machine Guitars in Kennewick, WA, Carter Vintage Guitars in Nashville, and in Europe you can contact QGuitars.nl. If you are interested in becoming a dealer you can contact me through sales@johnmcguireguitars.com

TQR: What would like to accomplish in the future?

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I would definitely like to keep the McGuire name going as it started with my dad in the guitar world. I would also like to someday bring John McGuire Guitars to a level where the name is common knowledge to guitar players and enthusiasts as being a solid high quality instrument.

McGuire Tradition



In a traditional sense, it is hard to be uniquely different as a guitar builder when the majority of your potential customers remain attracted to familiar shapes from the past. Guitarists are very finicky about what they will play – perhaps more so today than ever before. Some builders choose to unapologetically render their take on classic Fender designs. It's the obvious path of least resistance, and that's fine, just don't wander

too close to the Fender peghead shape if you don't want to receive a 'cease and desist' letter... Set neck guitars typically require more tooling, time, skill and imagination, but it is also difficult to create a distinctive body style that won't resemble classic Gibson shapes with contrived departures. In this regard, making guitars is tough enough, but designing a unique guitar with visual appeal may be the most elusive trick of all.

John McGuire's Traditional certainly won't be confused with another design, and this is a good thing. The body shape suggests inspiration from both Fullerton and Kalamazoo, but



the appealing shape is McGuire's to claim as his own, and we like it a lot. McGuire's slogan reads "Guitars for the working musician," and we like that sentiment, too.

McGuire currently builds one Traditional model with plenty of pickup, hardware and finish options on a mahogany or ash body. The 24.75" scale length maple neck features a very comfortable, round and full shape with a beautiful Indian rosewood slab fingerboard and perfectly dressed

6105 frets. We also really liked the 18:1 Hipshot open gear tuners, and the traditional nylon 6/6 nut is the very same slippery stuff originally used on late '50s Gibson electrics. The Gotoh 'tune-o-matic' bridge and stop tailpiece are modern variations on the original concept. Easily adjustable and a practical change from the usual vintage design, the unique Gotoh hardware looks like it belongs on McGuire's guitar. The 7.5 lb. Tradition we received for review was eventually headed for Belgium, displaying a nicely figured ash body and a beautifully executed cherry sunburst finish. From a builder's perspective, the Tone Socket is an innovative and simple approach to joining neck and body, and the string energy transmission from neck to body was excellent.

Tone

It's a given that human beings tend to 'eat with their eyes,' so when guitarists see a couple of P90s, assumptions and preconceptions create varied expectations based on past experience. If you are one of those players that associates P90s with every track on the *Mountain Climbing* album, think again. Well, wait a minute... perhaps we should hit pause here and



strongly suggest that you reacquaint yourself with that album cranked if only to be reminded how lame and repetitive "rock & roll" has become. How about playing "Silver Paper" at your next wedding party? Now back to those Vault P90s... The 8.1K bridge P90 on the ash Tradition sounds closer to a fat Telecaster, very spanky and bright with good clarity and an equally great tone through overdrive pedals or an amp turned up. McGuire's guitar with the Vault P90s seems to have a lot more *lift* than a typical mahogany Junior with a P90, with more air and shininess in the tone.

The 8K neck P90 is heavy and thick but not muffled or indistinct – a great neck pickup tone. Overall, you can expect a bright and lively classic single coil tone on the bridge, a very useful combined tone that is both bright and deep on the wound strings, and a fat and smooth, wide glide vocal tone on the neck. Very agreeable and equally unique among other styles of guitars loaded with P90s. The top and back contours, light weight and single cut body style create an extremely comfortable feel for an uncomplicated and well-made guitar entirely built by the man whose name is on the headstock.

www.johnmcguireguitars.com

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