

Sweetwood Guitar Company

By Ward Meeker

Glenn Sweetwood started building guitars as a hobby when he was in junior high. It was the late '80s, Guns 'N Roses was all the rage, and he wanted a Les Paul just like the one Slash played... but, "My mother would never buy me something that expensive – she's the queen of bargain shopping!"

So, to fill the void, Sweetwood rounded up various parts, including necks, and would spend his time in woodshop class routing bodies. "My perennial A+ grade in that class would offset

Sweetwood Comet Signature

some of my other grades!" he said. He first carved a neck while a student in high school, as part of a neck-through design, then spent several years focusing on improving his guitar-building skills.

"After college, I moved to Silicon Valley during the dot-com explosion, and worked in the high-tech field while continuing to build as a hobby. My friends would play my gear and ask me to make them a guitar or buy one I'd already made. I'd charge them for materials and a tiny extra to cover rent at my shop in the garage of a friend, Loretta – \$75 a month... and I probably used \$150 in electricity!"

Soon, friends of friends were asking for guitars. "So I started charging real money, and in 2002 I sold a guitar to someone I didn't know."

Sweetwood continued to build on the side, honing his craft. His final stint in tech was with Yahoo, where, he says, "I saw the writing on the wall and started getting serious about manufacturing guitars." With some money from stock options, he bought a second hand CNC, and quickly had a grasp of its programming.

Did you focus on just one model of guitar to start?



Yeah, our flagship, the Comet. I'd focused on since its first incarnation, which I built in high school, when I called it the Frog. I kept refining things – profile, neck joint, etc. The pictorial documentation of it is like the ape-to-man evolution chart!

But my intuition was never to copy other designs, and the Comet seems to appeal to a wide audience, as it has somewhat traditional lines. Vintage and blues guys love it, but it's a guitar you can take to a jazz gig or play rock and feel equally at home.

Which model came next?

Pretty early on, I received a commission for a guitar from a Nashville guy.

He sent this drawing – it was pixel art – just awful. I would've turned

him down, but he said something about Mosrite, and that's a special place for me. Being a lover of surf culture and all things Ramones, I was in like Flynn. I have a special place for '60s surf guitars. So I drew something and sent it to him. I dubbed it the Rock-Rite, and he loved it. It has since gone through a few iterations, and actually grown to become my secret favorite. It's got woman curves!

What, do you think, most sets your guitars apart?

People comment on how comfortable our necks feel; the hand isn't a C or a V or a U – it's organic, and the way you play changes from position to position. We dubbed our necks "compound asymmetric." The shape is rounder at the nut and gets more progressive toward the heel. It allows you to play faster and more accurately in all positions, with less fatigue, thus removing the barriers to creativity. We also use some non-traditional lumber, which has been the most interesting part of my career, learning about different wood combinations and tone.

We also air-dry all our wood, which is almost a non-topic in discussions about why people perceive vintage as being better. It's not nitro versus poly,



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in my opinion. It's air-dried versus kiln-dried.

Do you work alone in the shop?

Technically, it's only me on the payroll, yes. But my wife gets involved with marketing – she's not the "sawdust" type. We outsource most finishing, and my mother helps with assembly and wiring. We recently added a salesperson/distributor.

What are your hopes for the future of the industry as it affects independent builders like yourself?

Well, given the state of the economy, I simply hope our industry survives. And I see a few problems moving forward. The way we mass-produce guitars today is unsustainable, and poor-quality imports drive me crazy! There are only so many resources the planet can provide, and to see these resources get used for inferior products – disposable products, morally gets me down. There is going to come a time where scarcity of wood becomes a real issue. Collectively, as a society, we need to reject

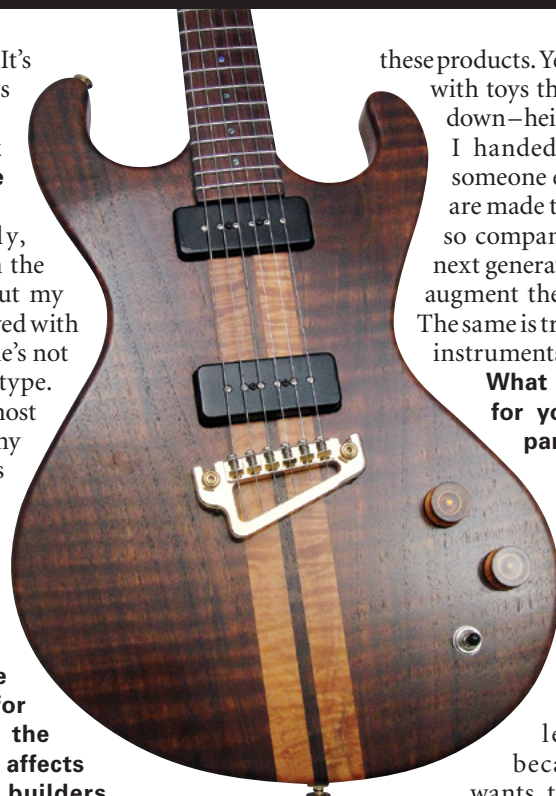
these products. Years ago, I played with toys that were handed down – heirloom toys – and I handed those toys to someone else. Today, toys are made to be disposable, so companies can sell the next generation new toys to augment their bottom line. The same is true with musical instruments.

What are your goals for your own company?

The short-term goals are to expand the dealer network and sales channels, and that has been the hardest challenge so far, because everyone wants to be different, but they all want to play a Tele! We need to get

guitars in peoples' hands; once they play one, they can't deny the quality, playability, and tone are much higher than what they see in a large-box guitar store.

In my opinion, Paul Smith is a great businessman who has carved a nice niche. There are differences in our models – for instance, we build for other shops – but he has the template for a great organization; a strong sales network and delivering a high-quality product every time. We are devoted to doing the same. **VG**



Sweetwood Rock-Rite