

01 — Panormo internal construction

02 — Rod playing a Sequoia top concert guitar

03 — Concert guitars internal construction

Making Music

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Nothing moves the soul quite like music. Nothing stirs the emotions or rouses memories quite like some long since forgotten melody. Whether through chants of war, tribal cries, ceremonial singing or acts of celebration, mankind has long experimented with sound. The very first instrument was, of course, the voice. Likely then, some form of percussion followed as our natural sense of rhythm (some have more than others) looked to set some beat — hand-clapping, the drumming of logs or perhaps stone banged upon stone.

It's widely accepted that the very first purpose-made musical instrument was probably the flute. Examples have been found in China and throughout Europe, all carved from hollowed-out animal bones that are perhaps as old as 60,000 years. One of the most well-known examples is the Divje Babe flute, which was discovered in Slovenia in 1995, crafted from the femur of a young bear some forty millennia previous. Two Greek marble statues dated 2,900-2000BC depict not only a flute-playing musician, but one plucking at the strings of a harp-like structure. Actual stringed instruments dating from 2,500BC have been found in the Middle East, as has a stone carving, one thousand years older, portraying a man playing a wooden lyre — a precursor to the guitar, which itself came to prominence in 12th century Europe. Nowadays, such instruments are also made from an array of modern materials, including carbon fibre and even aircraft-grade aluminium.

"For me, timber's the only way to go," says renowned Auckland guitar maker

Rod Capper. "It's something beautiful, something that has been provided by nature to be transformed into this gorgeous thing with the loveliest of sounds. I just can't see how that can be done with man-made materials. It seems so alien. From a building perspective, you lose some of the tonal quality, plus it doesn't arouse the same passion. I know that many players don't feel the same connection as they do with wood, either."

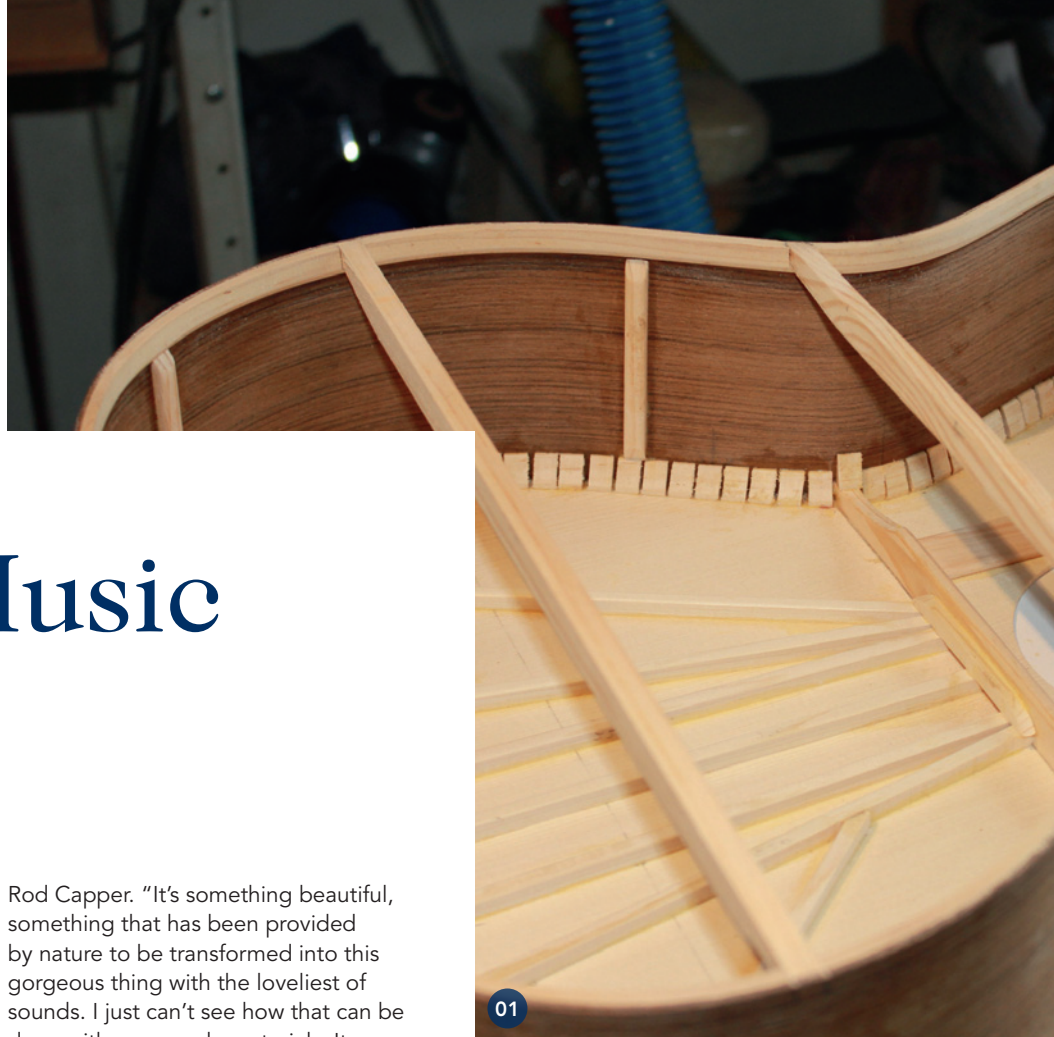
Walnut and Solomon Island Rose woods are among Rod's favourites to work with, and he sometimes uses reclaimed timbers too: "I once got about twenty necks out of a mahogany headboard! I'll use anything that's reasonable, it's all wood. Providing it's dry and stable, it's okay." Capper specialises in Spanish Flamenco and Classical Concert guitars, and has sold pieces as far afield as America, Brunei, England, Japan and Dubai. Each one is handcrafted, numbered and unique. His clientele list includes the Italian classical guitarist Giuseppe Ficara, Wellington-based guitarist Cheryl Grice and legendary classical Kiwi player, Bruce Paine. Rod certainly knows his way around a fretboard too. "I learnt to play as a teenager in the sixties," he tells me. "My mother was a piano teacher. She had a recording of the Flamenco guitarist, Sabicas, and the first time I heard that sound, I knew it was what I wanted to do."

Rod built his first guitar when he was just 17, which, he proudly tells me, his daughter still has. He later played and studied with Jose Luis Gonzalez and headed to Europe to hone his craft. But it was not to be. The Spanish back then, Rod laments, were not too keen on

teaching foreigners their ways. He then spent some years in the United Kingdom.

"I studied physics and worked in the electronics industry for a long time," says Rod. "It helped with the engineering side of things and my understanding of acoustics. For a while I built speaker-boxes and turntables for a hi-fi company and one thing I learnt early on was that a badly assembled structure soon loses energy. As it's energy that produces sound, it's obviously something that you must preserve as much as possible."

Rod builds up to eight guitars each year, working on two at any given time. It takes him around ten weeks to finish the pair. "It's strange," he tells me as he guides me to his workshop, "you can get two different makers, give them the same wood, plans and tools and tell them to build the same instrument, and the final products will be like chalk and cheese." The difference, he believes, is energy: "I can't really explain it any other way." Like some composer come carpenter, what Rod does, truly is an art, and like any true artist he leaves a little bit of himself with each and every one of his creations. It's a spiritual journey. He pauses as he stands among his array of woodwork tools and



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clamps covered with the slightest trace of sawdust. “I’ll sometimes stay in here until the early hours,” says Rod. “It all depends on how I’m feeling because your energy affects the way you work, your hands and your movement. If your energy’s not right, then your work’s not going to be right either.” You’ll never get rich building guitars, he tells me. It’s a real labour of love. If that’s the case, I later think, Rod’s the wealthiest man I know.



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