

Frets Visits GIBSON Custom Shop Nashville Tennessee BY PHIL HOOD

Imagine a banjo with a bright orange paint job and ghoulish visage air brushed on the resonator. Throw in a peghead logo in red letters that resemble dripping blood. Oh, heavy-metal banjoso aren't your style? Then how about a Florentine F-5 mandolin with a blinding pearlescent white body, tortiseshell-style binding, and intricate multi-colored street scenes and skylscapes drawn on the pearloid fretboard? On the other hand, you might be the type who appreciates a banjo with a black and blue snakeskin pattern on the body. Or a legend that never was, such as a Gibson Bella Voce mandolin.

These and many other wild creations are the stock-in-trade of the Gibson custom shop, located at the company's Nashville, Tennessee, manufacturing headquarters. There, five young luthiers spend their days turning out one-of-a-kind instruments, product prototypes, and custom-ordered guitars, mandolins, and banjos.

The five are supervisor Jim Triggs, Greg Rich, Phil Jones, J.T. Riboloff and Terry Atkins. It's a young group - the oldest is 32 - but they average nearly ten years experience apiece in instrument design, construction, and repair. (The custom shop also relies heavily on the skills of two outside specialists, Tennessee-based inlay artist Brian England and southern California airbrush expert Jim O'Conner.)

The shop has responsibilities in important areas besides building custom instruments to order. "Half our time goes into developing new models or working out any bugs in the old models, to improve them," says Triggs. "For instance, this year Phil and J.T. have added new flavor to the SG line and the Explorers [electric guitars] with modifications to the hardware and some new colors, basically updating the line for younger players. Then on the acoustic end, we've been working on the Bella Voce banjos, and some of the wilder mandolins and banjos."

The custom shop staff has been particularly challenged in the past few years by the rapid growth of Gibson's product lines. Since the company was bought in 1986 Gibson has acquired the Flatiron Mandolin company, O.M.I. (makers of the Dobro), and other firms. In addition they have released several new lines of instruments, including the Nouveau acoustic guitars and mandolins, and reissued some classic models from the firm's storied past.

At this past January's NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) trade show in Anaheim, Gibson displayed dozens of new prototypes including electric guitars, customized Dobros, banjos, and mandolins, and re-issues of several A-model mandolins that had been out of production for many years. They also showed a Bella Voce banjo re-issue and the aforementioned "Florentine" style mandolin. (The Bella Voce and Florentine originally were banjo models introduced by Gibson in 1927. The former stayed in production for three years; the latter for ten. Each one was offered with a variety of ornamentation options. However the basic Bella Voce design called for a cream-colored body with a lyre carving on the resonator and flowery fretboard inlays. The Florentine featured a pearloid fretboard lavishly decorated with depictions of Italian street scenes.)

The custom shop staff dreams up many of these projects on their own and are given wide latitude to pursue their creative ideas. Triggs attributes this, in part, to the management of Henry Juskievicz, the firm's president. "Henry is really great about it," he says. "If we have an idea for something that looks halfway good, he lets us go for it."

Triggs was hired in 1986 to build mandolins, instruments he has loved since he first built them as a teenager. The first mandolin he ever constructed, an F-style model he still owns, was crude; but it inspired him to try again. He built another one and promptly sold it to a local musician. Then and there he decided to become a luthier.

Triggs has reworked the Gibson's F-5L, bringing it even closer in design to the originals. (The F-5 is Gibson's top-of-the-line mandolin. The L designation refers to Lloyd Loar, the acoustical engineer who designed and supervised the constructions of the first F-5s from 1923-1925. Loar F-5s are widely sought by collectors today. In 1978 Gibson issued the first F-5L, assembling the mandolins to the same specifications as those originally built under Loar's direction.)

Triggs feels it's possible that today's instruments will ultimately be as desirable as those of the past. He says, "The F-5 has really been up and down over the years, as far as quality. There were definitely some questionable instruments built between the '30s and the '70s. But I actually think the ones we build now are better than the ones Loar made. They just need to get broken in."

To execute many of the custom designs, Triggs relies on Greg Rich, 32, and old friend from southern California, whom he brought to Nashville in '87. Greg's particular specialty is banjos. He is a master at building - and engraving - them in the classic style of the '20s. Greg got started engraving as a teenager when he and a friend took a class from a gun engraver. He made his first banjo from a kit, at age 15, and afterward decided he wanted to learn how to build fancier banjos. He began patterning his work after the Gibson Bella Voce.

The Bella Voce re-issue that Greg builds now is essentially a Gibson Granada with a much different ornamentation scheme. Greg hand-engraves the elaborate florentine patterns in the metal parts, and he hand-carves and paints the resonator and neck heel.

"when he built the first one, it was merely to test the waters to see if there was still a market for ornate banjos," says Triggs. "It turns out there's a bigger market for the fancy banjos than we thought. We could re-issue this stuff and not satisfy the whole market for years." Today the Bella Voce is available by special order, just as it was 61 years ago. The price, however, has changed considerably since then. It now retails - depending on option - for about \$5,000. In 1927 it cost around \$450.

Much of the credit for the Florentine F-5 mandolin also goes to Greg Rich. Back in the '20s and '30s only banjos got the Florentine design treatment - doing it to a mandolin was the staff's idea. Greg describes the assembly process: "First Jim basically builds the mandolin by hand. He finishes the 'white' woodwork, that is, the body is assembled and sanded, but not painted. Then he attaches the binding. I put the pearloid on the fretboard and we decide on a final design scheme for the instrument. For the fretboard I start with pen and ink and draw the design freehand on the pearloid. A lot of people think it is engraved but it is not. I use various alcohol stains to color the fretboard drawings - it really soaks into the pearloid. Then we paint the body white." He estimates that it takes up to 160 hours to complete one.

Now that Gibson owns the Dobro line, Greg Rich is also spending more time working on custom engraving of the steel bodied models. The engraving is done by first painting the surface white and then drawing the pattern, with a pencil on the surface. using fine chisels and engraving tools Greg follows the pattern, working freehand. Once the engraving is complete, he applies a lacquer thinner to remove the paint. Then the body can be buffed out before being sent to a plating shop.

The other staff members - Phil Jones, 32, J.T. Riboloff, 26, and Terry Atkins, 29 - work on electrics, through Jones devotes at least half his time to acoustics as well. He got his start in the mid '70s apprenticing under classical guitar builders Harley Day and Michael Battelle in Florida. Today he handles most of the custom installations of the Gibson S.O.R.S pickup system (stands for Symbiotic Oriented Receptor System), and does a lot of work on the company's arch top guitars.

Satisfying the needs of touring professionals is a big part of the work for any custom shop, and this is particularly so at Gibson. The staff builds plenty of instruments for Gibson endorsers, and for the clientele Gibson draws from the Nashville scene. On the day of our visit, the staff was at work on several different projects. Phil Jones was putting the finishing touches on an L-5 mandolin belonging to Elliot Easton (guitarist for the Cars). Jim Triggs was finish-sanding an A-4 mandolin destined for Chris Austin of the Ricky Skaggs band.

There were at least a half-dozen other projects in various stages of completion, including a revamped version of the Earl Scruggs banjo and a guitar for country star Waylon Jennings. And at mid-day Jeff Hanna of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band stopped by to test two mandolins that had been shipped in from Flatiron for him. While Hanna was there, he also had a chance to discuss with Jones a proposed new guitar. In appearance it resembles Gibson's J-200 (the firm's largest model) but it has a slightly smaller body. It's an idea that was first suggested to the company by Chris Hillman of the Desert Rose Band, who requested that they build one for him.

Hmmmm. Wonder if he'd like it in orange?