

SOUND ADVICE Gearhead



Montreal Guitar Show

What instantly separates the Montreal Guitar Show from all other guitar shows is the absence of any corporate kiosk during the six-day, six-city tour of the border. No Fender or Gibson or Yamaha kiosk on any headstock, no promotional posters or slick point-of-purchase displays. Instead, this annual showcase is for individual artisans who craft unique handmade guitars and deal in one-on-one relationships with their customers. No facemask, no automation, no mass production. It's strictly a pure bang. As luthier Edwin Serrano puts it, "Montreal makes guitars for a mass audience, luthiers make instruments for individuals. To compare them is analogous to comparing a painting with a refrigerator or toaster ... or a custom-made suit to one bought off the rack."

The second edition of the best-run guitar show in North America, held in conjunction with the Montreal Jazz Festival, took place June 27-29. For those three days, guitar enthusiasts could find a mere \$10 admission charge enter the Grand Salon of the Hyatt Regency, gaze upon the hand-crafted headstock object and, with a few polite inquiries to the luthiers, actually play them—either in the open space or in any number of soundproof booths located throughout the exhibition hall for more private inspection of the goods. For guitar enthusiasts, it was a quintessential 64-in-a-candy-store occasion.

A hundred luthiers came from Quebec and the rest of Canada, throughout the United States and Europe, including a delegation of 17 from France. Stefan Hahl, from Frankfurt, Germany, displayed several of the superb handcrafted Maccaroni-style guitars

he built for Gypsy guitar guru Bill Lagrime, along with two gorgeous arched-top models that were signed by the artist himself. Hahl confided that 60-year-old German Alps spruce was the secret ingredient to getting the incredibly resonant quality of these beautiful guitars. hahl-guitars.com

More Serranos, from Kingsbury, Quebec, is a handcrafted-necked luthier. As he likes to say, "I get a kick out of chopping the tree and seeing what it can be." He has a stand from the custom workshop near Montreal, where Adirondack red spruce ("the Holy Grail of spruce") is plentiful. A carpenter by trade, he builds furniture and houses for a living. "Building guitars is something I love but it's not my main source of income," says Serrano, who opened his guitar shop in 1996. He takes great pride in producing natural-looking Maccaroni-style guitars and sculpted arched-tops that don't have any lacquer or other cellulose for that shiny, glossy effect.

"That stuff is very toxic and I choose not to work with those things, although more luthiers do," he says. The orange shellac that he uses on some of his red spruce instruments gives the guitars a distinctive natural color. He also fits together scraps of cherry, poplar and burrwood wood into intricate mosaics around the soundholes of his instruments while using



pieces of the wood for subtle coloration on the fretboard. serranoguitars.com

John Kraglight, from Fortage, Mich., craftily hand-builds his acoustic guitars using Alaskan Sitka spruce for the top, rosewood for the sides and back with cherry binding, an ebony rosewood headplate and ebony fretboard. He applies KTM-9 19-01 finish to give a natural look to his instruments, which resonate with superb tone, project with incredible volume and play like a dream. Along with his regular cutaway and dreadnought models, Kraglight also offers a deep-waisted baritone 12-string model, which has a 28 1/2-inch scale-length neck instead of the usual 25 inches and is tuned to a low A using an .080 gauge string rather than a new E with a .056. He also makes a hazy-spruce-necked fusion acoustic bass guitar with visible fin scratches on the neck to help with intonation. kraglightguitars.com

Judy Thayer has been building individually hand-crafted acoustic guitars at her shop in Calgary, Alberta, for 16 years. She uses another of great fiddles, white, gold for her beautiful inlay work on the headstock of her instruments and fuses nature's wonders for her inlay designs, ranging from images of grass, polar bears and owls to turtles, lilacs and nautilus shells. She also specializes in small-bodied guitars. "I love little guitars because they're so comfortable to play and they're fun to build," says the former philosophy teacher. "The trick is to make them loud." thayerguitars.com

Native New Yorker Otto D'Arboreo learned his craft while apprenticing with luthiermeister Flip Scipio at the famed Masada's Bowden on Staten Island. After a valuable apprenticeship with luthier John Moonstone, D'Arboreo moved to R.I. to work at the G&M factory, where he got an amazing education in the difference between European woods (stiffer, more projection) and domestic woods (softer, better sound). D'Arboreo opened his own shop in Providence, R.I., in 1997 and continues to produce uniquely handcrafted instruments like his Model O-Two (pictured at left) with overcast woodholes for great projection and increased bass response. D'Arboreo has also designed a trio hollowbody electric guitar with Seymour Duncan Humbucker pickups that is surprisingly light and produces one of the warmest natural tones I have ever heard from an electric guitar. darboreoguitars.com

Some other eye-catching ones at the show included Ken Zelen's elegant arched acoustic that looks like Zelen's sophisticated simplicity and play like better (see parlorchairs.com).



ern), Wade Sylvester's ornate Julian Zotti-styled archtop guitars and unique mandolins (www.7s.com). Electric Lebanese's stunning ribbed-back acoustic that projects incredibly well (electriclbanese.com) and Fred Faux' hi-tech electric guitar, which he created for the French Kopo Lutherie (kopo.fr). But the single most attractive guitar I encountered was the scintillating, internet-famous Casassa archtop made by Peter Hopkins of British Columbia. At the brochure for this gorgeous \$6,500 instrument, "Its visual purity is echoed by its purity of tone," hopicguitars.com BILL MILKOWSKI

Summer NAMM

The low-key little brother of the sprawling winter-time tradeshow held every January in Anaheim, Calif., Summer NAMM, held this year June 20-22 in Nashville, Tenn., featured a surprising number of honest-to-God product launches and some bona fide innovations. (Country) Music City ain't so bad either—if you like chicken-pickin' Telecasters, baritone and light beer, it's something of an *Avatar*. The weekend's jazz highlight arrived via Larry Carlton, who received a Lifetime Achievement award from *Guitar Player* magazine onstage at the Ryman Auditorium. He thanked them and played a solo piece, and it was all very touching. But enough sentimentality already, here's the gear.

Without a doubt the biggest and best launch of the show was a guitar (pictured at top left and right) by the quartet (pictured at Moog, namely increase Paul Yb. This alien instrument (not a synth guitar) might make noise even without the groundbreaking electronics. It's a snaring guitar with an 80-ma solid-body vibe, a head-cuffed wrap-up ash body and maple top, and a maple neck with an ebony fingerboard and a sharp Moog logo (only at the 12th fret). The Moog-designed single-coil pickups look and sound unprecedented, and an added piezo can stand alone or be blended with the Moog pickups. But what makes this so special—and it is, even if the pre-NAMM video

demos wasn't jaw-dropping—is that its "effects" are being created optically on the acting level and not, as with MIDI, synthesizers and rack effects, through post-processing. (Moog actually manufactures their custom strings over regular strings, and they might be pushing it.) All that translates to better real-time control: Just picking and noodling around on a demo model, the sense of manipulation is astounding. The audio tweaks are controlled via switches and knobs on the guitar; a Moog ladder filter can also be operated via an accompanying foot pedal or CV input.

So what are those fascinating sonic options? The ability to sustain pitches acoustically, for as long you like, then mute them, then apply a "controlled sustain" function that causes all strings except the ones you're sustaining, and, finally, to create otherworldly harmonic overtones by blending the main sustain and mass functions.

For the jazz guitarist, those steady capabilities help realize what most players post-Charlie Christian have been after all along—the ability to vividly impregnate the long, true, swirling lines of the saxophone (and without EBows and pedals). At a morning press conference, one Moog exhibitor played the theme of Ellington's heartbreakin' "In a Sentimental Mood" on one string without breaking the pick. With the mass function software, all sorts of mass tones can be created, from a Japanese lute sound (with the right amount of finger tremolo) to—in the instance a Dixieland standard pops up as an aside—a sprightly harp comp. Moog has already received up approvals and testimonials from guitar innovators who generally don't bend over backwards for gear manufacturers, among them Lon Rozd, Vernon Reid and Nels Cline. Kenny Vaughan, the artist of Nashville session players and an acolyte of Bill Firth, was also present at the press conference demo, and announced controlling pedal-own tones. (Firth himself needs to get out of there in his head piece.) The instrument, with a case and four pedals, is one-of-a-kind—\$6,495 retail—but the invention is revolutionary. Don't believe what you see (and read) on YouTube.

JustKat, the company that made super-portable solid-state amps expertly voiced for archtops a trend in amp design, incorporates Alek's effects and a



table in two new models, the TwinKat (featuring two 10-inch Celestion speakers) and the TwinKat (see 10-inch). Sell to guitarists who Bose speakers are too indulgent in need of space, these new models offer a stylistic versatility not available in the earlier JustKats. The tube is especially effective and can be turned on and off when not operating, you get the responsiveness and intense clarity of a solid-state amp—push a button and the amp instantly gets your grip and decay.

Another quiet revolution came at Summer NAMM with Peavey's ReVibe: MK III software, an incredible program that allows amp



gists (and out-of-work engineers) to pull up schematic diagrams for classic amplifier models (not just Peavey) and stretch out virtual tubes and electronics and hear the results expertly simulated, in the studio or onstage.

Other tops of note include Roland's new Jazz Stage and GW-8 (pictured above) synthesizers. With 76 keys and an extra-large LCD display for data steps, the Jazz Stage is expertly suited for live settings, while the GW-8, a new addition to Roland's line of workstation boards, a 128-voice sound engine, an extensive store of pre-recorded play-along songs and the ability to download MP3s and CD tracks, then remove the vocals for backing and karaoke. (Perhaps most singular is the song bank's emphasis on ethnic music, particularly Latin styles.) Korg unveiled the Pa-500, an outgrowth of the company's Professional Arranger technology and an 88-key digital piano. The board features weighted keys and genuine-sounding acoustic piano tones sampled from a concert grand. Finally the Alek's ProTrack recorder (pictured at left) allows for straight-to-mp3 (and iPod) recording. A versatile, go-anywhere machine for musicians looking to document jams and ideas, it comes equipped with condenser mics, works with XLR and 1/4-inch cables, and can operate on batteries or AC power. Not bad, Nashville. **DANN HAGA**

