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Montreal International Jazz Festival celebrates the guitar

MONTREAL - It's not just for the fine cuisine, the chance to shop in some trendy stores, or the opportunity to oil a rusty French vocabulary that brings one to Montreal. Last week, as a cap to the July 4 celebrations and a few days off from work, I traveled there to visit the Montreal Guitar Show, part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival.

Admittedly, this writer is a guitar-head. I've played guitar, mostly acoustic but some electric, since the days when Bob Dylan was a street waif in Greenwich Village. Back then — that's the early 1960s for those of you without a history book handy — finding a good acoustic guitar to learn and perform on was not easy. There were only a few choices.

For those with a job or good allowance you could buy a Martin, a Gibson or a Guild. (These instruments cost at least \$100 and could run to the princely sum of several hundred dollars for a really fancy model.) If you were without much funding there was Harmony and a few other low-price, high-action and poor-tone instruments available for much less than a Franklin. Handmade guitars were not available with the exception of those built for the classical guitarist. Otherwise you might find the odd guitar builder, often a folk craftsman whose instruments were somewhat crude.

The Montreal Guitar Show last weekend made it very clear that for those who want to purchase a fine handmade instrument, there are a lot of choices. The art of guitar building has reached a level that few would have thought possible even 25 years ago. Along with that elevated level of style and playability has come an elevated level of price. There were instruments displayed here that cost nearly \$20,000.

As it is, we now live in an era of wonderfully crafted, smartly designed hand-built instruments from luthiers who have turned guitar-building into an elevated art form. Once they establish a name and their instruments are sought after, their prices rise rapidly. There was at least \$500,000 worth of instruments on display here. I suspect that if the great Italian violin makers of the 1700s had gotten together for a show, it would have resembled this one in Montreal.

The show was part of the jazz festival, which ran all last week. Housed in the Hyatt Regency Hotel complex on St. Catherine Street, the guitar show, and a complementing music instrument/gear show in the nearby enclosed shopping mall, were perfectly situated for a day's visit. With a variety of eateries, and other retail shops in the mall, one could feed both body and musical soul without ever going outdoors. For another break from guitar ogling there were outdoor street concerts to attend.

One of the 70 instrument-makers invited to display his wares was Rick Davis of Running Dog Guitars, formerly of Bolton. Davis recently relocated his business to Seattle. Davis was in the midst of showing a high-priced instrument to a potential buyer when we made eye contact.

According to Davis, this third year of the guitar show was by far the best one yet. Appraising the quality and quantity of instruments in the salon showroom, Davis said such a show, with its many highly skilled builders, "legitimizes what we do to the public."

This year's show, he said, was a giant leap from last year's event, because last year "there were no customers." He said this year was "much more promising." He attributed the success to "great show organizers."

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Whether there was a lot of purchasing going on was hard to tell. What was happening was a lot of sampling of product by a primarily male clientele. Guitar-playing is dominated by men, as is guitar building. There was just one woman builder, the renowned Canadian Linda Manzer. Bruce Cockburn plays her instruments.

While the show was a Canadian event and many of the guitars were built there, several American builders, like Davis were also invited to display.

Those who came to the show were encouraged to pick up and play instruments that ranged in price from \$3,000 to the aforementioned \$20,000. For most it was a chance to play instruments by builders whose guitars almost never show up new in a musical instrument store. Most builders work alone and produce less than two dozen instruments a year. If you order one of these the wait is at least a year and sometimes several.

What Davis and anyone who visited the show comes away with is an awareness of the giant leap that guitar-building has taken since the folk revival of the 1960s. Back then there were few models to choose from. Martin, the leader in design, had its Dreadnaught guitars, which are the icons of bluegrass music, and other models designated as 00, 000, and OM. Gibson had its version of the Dreadnaught, favored by country artists and a few small-bodied guitars favored by blues players, but that was about it. There were also the large f-holed instruments favored by jazz players.

At this show there were enough new shapes and designs available to whet the interest of the most jaded guitar fancier.

Perhaps former Vermonter Charles Fox, who ran a guitar school in Stratford for several years, said it best. "Since the late '60s (guitar building) has matured from nothing to a level of refinement that is world wide."

Fox, who now lives and works in Portland, Ore., building a dozen instruments a year that start at \$9,000, said the Montreal show had all the resources of the best shows behind it and was at high level of lutherie.

It seems probable that the show will continue to grow and next year might find more guitar builders in attendance. Considering the fine venue, the jazz festival and Montreal's many amenities, visiting the guitar show is a wonderful window into the world of guitar building, even if your budget isn't up to the buying experience.
