

The Perfect Guitar

I used to wonder why hard rock groups and performers were fond of referring to the guitar as an “axe.” Discussing this enigmatic topic with my friend Sal Raeli (who sometimes uses a dime for a pick and always seems to have one more guitar than I do), he suggested that the pop expression had to do with the predilection for wielding the guitar like an axe and smashing it on stage, a gesture given currency by Pete Townsend of The Who, among others. A Google search confirmed Sal’s hypothesis. These musicians like to conceive of themselves as born-again Vikings or Visigoths, plying their edged instruments and wreaking public havoc. They have come on the scene to take over the culture. They are a source of energy and “creative destruction” (to quote economist Joseph Schumpeter), redemptive heroes burning pianos, blowing up drum kits, and brandishing guitars with, ironically, self-splintering effect. Briefly, they are idiots.

I think of the guitar far more domestically. After all, it is shaped like a woman, and it is an exacting if beloved companion. It can be just as temperamental, is affected by changes in weather, and can produce sounds both dulcet and ear-splitting. I can’t say if I am promiscuous or merely eclectic, but I possess several guitars distributed in different dwellings – a mistress in every port – all of which I play with varying degrees of difficulty. The relationships I maintain with them are inevitably complicated: almost all are sternly imperious, and some close to impossible.

Thus I continue looking for the perfect guitar, by which I mean not a high-end Gibson or some unaffordable vintage specimen but one that is kind, hospitable and forgiving of my errors of execution. My three relatively inexpensive Fenders are viragos, buzzing like a nest of wasps unless my fingering is absolutely impeccable. My La Patrie is a real beaut, but don’t try to bar in the key of F unless your wrist and index

finger have developed muscles of steel. When I venture on my Epiphone, my playing can sound like a poor man's version of Jimmy Nolen's "chicken scratch" technique, grating and chunky. Of my two (now discontinued) Ibanez lovelies, long the favourites of my seraglio, one has grown a little testy and unpredictable over time, but the other still treats me with approximate tenderness, taking my technical waywardness more or less in stride and generally accepting my peccadilloes with grace. When I cue her up, a song will sometimes sink deep in the pocket. Yet even she has her unresponsive moments, exacting her nuptial revenge when out of sorts. Perhaps, as Jimmy Buffett warbles in "Margaritaville," "It's my own damn fault."

I recently came across a third Ibanez bashfully secluded on the rack at Steve's Music Store in Ottawa, of different shape and glaze from her predecessors but with the same sweet action. Naturally, I could not resist her appeal. The quest for an ideal consummation, of course, is asymptotic, but the search continues.

As does the buying spree. I have just acquired a cigar-box guitar, a venerable Norma, built by my innovative friend and bricoleur-luthier Chad Clark, but haven't quite decided where it fits into the household. Its sound profile resembles something like a hollow resonance mixed with radio static. Chad describes it as a "raw 1920-ish sound." Its relationship to a real guitar is like that of a corncob pipe to a Peterson briar. Interesting, for a change of pace, and rather wonderfully cray. And as for Chad's most recent construction, a four-string bed-pan guitar that sounds like a Dobro lap slide resonator (minus the cone) and is played with a bottleneck, I suspect I'll take a pass on it. (Chad jokes about forming a band called The Pisspot Boys. I suggest a chamber music quartet would be equally appropriate.)

American maestro Steven Hancoff points out that in transcribing cello music for the guitar, the difference

between the two stringed instruments shows the often unappreciated *virtu* of the latter. Unlike the guitar, the cello is “a one-note-at-a-time instrument – you can play separate, concurrent melodic lines and you can’t play chords. In short, this means a cello soloist can play melody but not harmony [whereas the guitar] is idiomatically suited, or even designed, for the musician to do all these things.” (Personal communication.)

Writing of Hancoff’s transposition from cello to guitar, music critic Tom Schulte [points out](#) that “The timbre of the guitar brightens the intensity of these melodies and the guitarist’s techniques of harmony and syncopation, so natural to that instrument, amplifies a sonic bouquet of colors within that light like a prism or kaleidoscope does sunshine.” It takes a magician to pluck these chromatic timbres from clavier-like steel. Nonetheless, the guitar is often regarded as a proletarian instrument anyone can play with a modicum of effort. Playing it well, of course, is another matter; it then becomes clear that the guitar is no less demanding than cello or violin. Though the fact remains that an amateur like me could never have picked up a violin and taught myself sufficiently to write songs, record CDs, and acquit myself passably in gigs. Only the guitar could have made such an unlikely event feasible. So I am profoundly grateful to this iconic and all-encompassing instrument.

But I am still searching for the perfect guitar. Hancoff, like the professional he is, had one built for him. “I need a guitar that’s a jumbo, not a modified dreadnought,” he [said](#), “because I wanted a sweeter, deeper bass.” My ambition is far more modest, as is befitting. My perfect guitar might even be a much-used cheapie I find in a Whatnot Shoppe somewhere, like Richard Gere falling in love with a prostitute in *Pretty Woman*. It need not be built for me, only found, or met by happenstance when the stars align. She would be weather resistant, would not need a humidifier or dehumidifier to

placate her with seasonal attentions, would neither buzz nor twang when I irritate her strings, and, at least most of the time, would let me be my fallible self like the flexible and magnanimous wife every unreconstructed man seeks. And I would never refer to her as my "axe."

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