

BunnyBass interview: Michael Spalt, luthier

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Harry & Michael at the 2003 NAMM show.

BunnyBass: Hi Michael. Thanks for agreeing to doing this interview with us. If you don't mind, I'd like to start with a question about difference, 'otherness'. Your basses, quite literally, make just about every other bass on this planet seem remarkably similar to each other. Obviously your basses don't have to be like this, you choose to make them this way on purpose. Why did you come to create basses so far away from the rest?

Michael Spalt: Thanks for having me. I appreciate the opportunity. Otherness... well, actually, if you look at the variety of forms the bass has taken during it's long history I don't really think I'm all that radical. From the enormous Upright Bass to the simple stick-like KYDD or Steinberger, to all the different shapes out there today, I think basses have been a testament to human inventive spirit as much as any other object/tool/instrument. But I also think that there is always a "conformist" tendency, where, after the impact of new technologies and ideas results in wild creations, designs over time will congregate around a more conventional "ground zero", become recognizable as a species, so to speak.

I didn't start out making basses. The first instruments I built along these lines were guitars. These found no acceptance, since they strayed too far from the two basic models guitar players could envision themselves slinging about on stage. But they had exceptional tonal range, especially in the lower registers.

Bass players and designers have always seemed to be more open and adventurous in terms of how their instruments look (and play - witness the differences between 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 etc. string basses, techniques etc. - nothing quite like it in the guitar world) so I decided to build my first bass. A friend had given me some parts, pickups, tuners etc. and an old Guild fretless neck. It turned out well enough to pursue the design further. My idea was to reduce the instrument to its essentials and to make it as ergonomic and modular as possible. I've always liked the combination of materials and the freedom this design approach gives

me in playing with purely sculptural forms while remaining totally functional. This may also be one of the drawbacks in terms of making them popular instruments... The question "Are these design exercises or are they built for musicians to play them?" has recurred frequently. I would have to answer "both" - I believe there is a tonal quality and a playability there which makes them great instruments, and I also admit I'm having fun with the design and building process... What was the question again?...

BunnyBass: Well, many of the builders out there just offer a body or headstock that's a little differently shaped, and that's the extent of their contribution to expanding the gene pool. They are not experimenting with meticulously sculpted aluminum structures, or modular, movable organic elements, and so on. Are you drawing from influences that other builders are not? Are you applying concepts from other fields?

Michael Spalt: It may be I'm coming from a different angle. I think a lot of builders essentially just want to build a better version of an existing design and due to trademark constraints they have to play around with the headstock, make it look as close as possible, but different enough to avoid trouble. Most players and most builders have seen and desired these instruments since they were kids, but could not afford them at the time. So now they can... I remember when Japanese copies were coming on the market and you had to look closely at the headstock to be able to say: "Hey, that's a not a REAL one..." I think that helped establish this mystique.

For a builder it's a question of survival. I know a lot of people who have started out with different designs and eventually figured out they could not make a living that way. So they end up doing the same old thing over and over again. I've talked to some guys who worked at the Fender Custom Shop and they are highly qualified luthiers. You would think it's a dream job - but all they are allowed to do is the same thing over and over again - they get a LOT of money for it, but it's really frustrating on a creative level. Yet, that's the market. Ultimately it's the customer who's being conservative. Rebellion and Rock (or whatever popular mainstream music you care to name) don't really have anything to do with each other these days - it's a myth promulgated by a highly structured and thoroughly conservative industry. This obviously also plays out in the instrument building field. Everybody asks: "Why does everything look the same? It's boring." But then they go out and what they BUY is: same old, same old (obviously I have a beef here). Music has become extremely formulaic and consequently the SOUND people look for has been confined to a small traditional section of what's possible. I see very few players actually interested in exploring new musical territory these days. Those are the people that excite me, and one of my goals in building instruments is to open up new areas of sound and playing style for musicians to explore...

I started making guitars because I was bored with the usual designs and their limitations. I also have some background in design outside of instrument building, and that certainly is evident. It's not an easy road - acceptance of any new design is very difficult (check out any chat room where players tear into anything that is not a slavish copy (not just my designs)... some of the invective and vitriol coming our way... get a life, please!) - Sometimes I do think: "Why not just make another conventional instrument, it would be easier to sell and the profit margin would be four to five times as much!" I just can't help myself I guess, and there definitely is a price to pay for this. I don't think I could envision myself working in some corporate environment like Fender and turning out the same old stuff day after day, no matter the money. I've been lucky enough to survive and be able to go to work in the morning, all excited about some new stuff I'm doing. It is an enormous privilege! I remember when I was in elementary school a teacher asked us what we wanted to be: doctors, firemen, train conductors etc. I wanted to be an inventor. The teacher said "That's not a real job!" But I guess some of that desire stuck with me and it's still one of the things that give me great satisfaction - to come up with new things...

BunnyBass: Besides other basses and guitars, what other sources do you think you've drawn concepts or design sensibilities from?

Michael Spalt: My father is an architect and professor of interior design at the Academy of Applied Art in Vienna, Austria, and I grew up surrounded by examples of design of all kinds. Some of the early influences may be a book by Colani - this was in the '60's - he pioneered a lot of the industrial design which is only now beginning to emerge into the mainstream... His melding of organic shapes, designed to fit and complement the human body while being functional were very influential. I studied art, sculpture, and painting, and I guess my approach to making an instrument is colored by this.

The first instruments I made were quite traditional - it was a development over time, and after learning the craft the traditional way, I found myself looking for new avenues. I also grew to appreciate the use of different materials, the way they interrelate, create different textures. I was instilled with a great respect for craftsmanship - the understanding of materials, their properties, the right way to use them.

Michelangelo was said to have looked at a block of marble and see the sculpture hidden inside, waiting to be revealed by his hand. At its highest level, the making of instruments, as any real craft, can get pretty esoteric. Our capacity as human beings to perceive nuances in the world around us is enormous - and part of the work a luthier has to do is to train himself, open his eyes to this, to the quality of the woods and the structure of the resonating body. If you look at instruments, no matter how close the tolerances, how exactly they may look the same, each one will be different - each piece of wood has a different potential and unlocking it is where the true art happens. All traditional high-level crafts are aware of this. Old Japanese carpentry texts deal with the art of finding the right tree, grown in the right spot, harvested the right way, used the right way, etc. It all culminates in a piece of work where

respect and understanding for the material and the beauty of it's functional interpretation feeds the soul. Temples were built this way for a reason. If you want, it is a way to communicate with the world, its divinity. You can find this all over the world - an echo of it is the phrase "old world craftsmanship". I think today we see a flowering of the art of making instruments and a renewed awareness of these matters.

I don't pretend to be anywhere close to really embodying any of this in my work yet - I just see it as the path I'm on. There are luthiers out there which are much farther along and still - if anyone tells you they REALLY know what they're doing, they're bullshitting you or deluding themselves. But that's the beauty of it: it remains a journey of discovery, of surprises and it's always a fresh adventure when you look at a piece of wood and imagine what it will sound like, what it will feel like, what it will look like, years from now.

BunnyBass: I'm very interested in this idea: "[understanding] materials, their properties, the right way to use them". Can you please give some examples of how you apply these ideas while designing the Spalt basses?

Michael Spalt: Different kinds of wood have distinct tonal characteristics. Even pieces from the same tree will sound differently, for instance, wood cut from the bottom of the tree is under much more stress during its lifetime, bearing the weight of the upper part of the tree - it affects the cellular structure (along with a lot of other factors). The problem with production work is that you can't really pay attention to things like that, because of the sheer volume of wood you are using - you have to design the instrument in such a way as to find a (lower) common denominator which allows you to maintain some consistency. Even so, any J-bass you pick up will sound differently. A custom instrument, built one by one, is a different matter. This is what they mean by "hand-selected woods". You can look for and pick the best piece of wood for the job. How good you are at this is largely a matter of experience and of paying attention.

The body shape affects tone - not just neck-through, bolt-on, etc. In guitar building a Tele shape will sound different, all other things being equal, from a Strat shape. You may think of it like an irregularly shaped pond - if you drop a stone into it, the ripples will reflect off the edges and create different patterns of harmonic interference and reinforcement... and then there's bridge type, materials, pickups, etc. etc...

I don't want to get too dry and academic here, the upshot is this: for a player it's easy: try the instrument, see if you like its sound, don't worry about WHY it sounds good (or crappy). For the luthier on the other hand there is a bewildering array of variables that have to be taken into account, many of them pretty ephemeral. But they all add up in the end. If you try something new, you go off into uncharted territory. I also think that's one of the reasons why a lot of people like to hew close to the traditional model - there's a wealth of experience there which does narrow down the ball park quite a bit. You can figure it out to a high degree of consistency.

In my work, as I said earlier, I'm still exploring - I try new things and new materials and shapes and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Over the past years I have been able to narrow down the window a bit - I just try and absorb whatever I can on all levels -

reading, talking to other builders, and also on a purely instinctual level, by trying to open up and letting the different instruments I encounter speak to me. There's better days and then there's not so good days obviously.

The metal plate basses evolved out of an experiment. The initial success was enough to warrant work on refining and developing the design. It's pretty much hit and miss at the beginning. By now, I have a fairly good idea as to what a bass will sound like and how to influence this. I've tried different woods for the neck, different shapes for the body, different bridge types, etc. Even so, each one has its own personality, which can be a surprise when you plug it in for the first time. When I look for a piece of wood I let my instinct guide me as to what piece is good in combination with other pieces and for the particular instrument I'm making.

BunnyBass: When you are building your instruments, do you find yourself consistently returning to certain ideals or personal preferences in terms of sound? I'm curious if you feel you have different (expanded?) options available to you in terms of voicing your instruments, since you can work with several variables that other luthiers don't have - a metal frame, smaller, multiple pieces of wood, and so on.

Michael Spalt: Different voicings yes, expanded mostly in the sense that they will also sound different from more traditional types of basses. They have their own range of sounds and while they will be able to cover most of the generally useful sounds produced by other basses, they will not replicate say, the sound of an original '62 Jazz Bass. But then, neither will a Ritter or Alembic. I tell people that my basses are not for everyone, but they can mean more options for someone interested in going into a new or specific direction. There are as many ways of voicing these instruments as there are with a traditional wood construction. Some of these will overlap, some will have a character completely their own.

BunnyBass: Three of your instrument lines - the metal plate basses, the vViper bass, and the Totem instruments - have about as much structural differences between them as any other bassmaker's line I've ever seen. Actually, I remember seeing your Totem line of instruments a while before coming across your metal plate basses, and to be honest I didn't make the connection until much later that they were both from the same builder. How did you come up with three designs so different from each other? Do you see these three designs as sharing any 'common sensibility'?

Michael Spalt: Actually I've also built completely traditional basses - I'm making a Jazz-Bass copy right now for someone...

Except for the vViper, which started as a bass design, my stuff came from my guitar building. Both the Totems (which still are almost exclusively guitars) and the metal plate designs started out as guitars. The metal plate design didn't really resonate with guitar players, as I described earlier, and it lent itself to the making of basses. The Totem basses came out of people asking "when will you make a bass like that?" after seeing the guitars.

In terms of sensibility - I guess they represent different aspects of my approach and range of interests. Totemguitars are the most playful and definitely the closest to stand-alone pieces of art - they developed as vehicles for my artistic impulses - I went to art school (both in the US and in Vienna, Austria) and have painted, done photography and sculpture. There are quite a few Totem bodies which will not be turned into guitars - they are intended as art objects. The metal plate (I have to find a good name for the design) instruments are more concerned with the functional and materials-oriented aspects of design. They are sculptural and represent a search for an ergonomic and beautiful solution to the old: "Form follows function" dictum, where materials are used in such a way as to best embody their potential - i.e., the metal skeleton, the organic quality of wood etc. The vViper came out of yet another different approach - it was simply a way of incorporating some new exciting options into an otherwise traditional package.

People do find it hard to categorize what I do. I guess today we're so trained to see everything worthwhile as a 'specialized skill', and any cross-over as some kind of flakiness. This flies in the face of our historical record as far as artists and innovators etc. are concerned. Most have excelled in more than one field. I like older cars and motorcycles in part because I can fix pretty much everything on them. Today there is an impenetrable barrier between technology and the end user - and even if you are some kind of prodigy, you will not be able to understand, let alone manipulate all the specialized technologies out there, the very ones we take for granted and use in our daily lives. I'm a throwback, I guess - I tend to want to fix everything myself and to be able to be self-sufficient. When my digital camera broke, I opened it up and tried to see what was wrong - some chip had fried. It's designed to be thrown out after it has outlived its "usefulness". I never liked that - it seems to me to express a lack of respect for the work and for the resources that went into making the thing. I collect things and then I try to find some use for them - my Totemguitars, made from recycled wood left over from traditional projects, from found objects, etc. are an example. "Total Trash Recycling!", a visitor at a guitar show quipped after seeing our company sign "TTR" and taking a look at the guitars. The things I try to consistently pursue in the making of my instruments is great playability, beauty, functionality and (whichever sound is embodied by that particular instrument) good tone. I don't subscribe to the notion that there is only one valid good tone - that of an old '50's Fender (also I've seen too many that sounded like dogs!)

Mostly I find it very hard to just do one type of thing - inevitably things get messy and start taking on a life of their own and suddenly I'm confronted with something quite different, something new. I also love to figure out things, to make them work. Musical instruments are a wonderful arena for this. They speak to people and people speak through them. There's nothing for me like the thrill when a good musician takes one of my instruments and it comes alive and responds and they make MUSIC! Having Michael Manring play one of the vVipers at the last NAMM show was great - he understood the concept and worked with it and gave us a little concert. That's really when all that work gets validated, because without being played, an instrument is pretty much just a piece of wood (or whatever, in my case).

There's a whole universe out there - a whole world to dance in - and especially in our time, when people seem to have a tendency to lose touch with the what they are and where they came from (I don't mean that culturally, although that also applies), anything that wakes them up, makes them listen, rediscover the beauty of discovery, is precious. That's kind of what I try to do, make things that will do that.

BunnyBass: From what I'm hearing it sounds like your position has been a difficult one, having to overcome a lot of conservative bias and misinformation in order for players to accept or perhaps even try your instruments with an open mind. But on the other hand, it also places you in an enviable position - you don't have to shy away from new ideas, for fear of it clashing with the rest of your product line. I'm assuming monotony is also not something you need to struggle with. And your practice also potentially situates you as a good teacher-figure - the kind that leads your audience (and the audience of the musicians using your instruments) towards openness rather than closure...?

Michael Spalt: It has not been easy as far as general acceptance is concerned, no. It's unfortunately become one of the main topics whenever we are engaged in public discussion. And to me it means that the point is being missed. I know a lot about instruments and their history (I peruse any source I can find) and I don't see my place as a particularly exceptional one within that framework. There have always been a lot of tremendously talented and creative people working in the field generating breakthroughs and innovations. And we all feed off of the genius of past designs.

I'm not making these instruments because I want to do something differently from others - the motivation to build them is simply to make something that sounds good, looks cool and can be played well. I'm just following my own path, doing something that is exciting and interesting to me while I'm making it. It does mean that I have fun most days (though even the most exciting project involves plenty of drudgery - sanding, cutting, grinding, dust and sweat - any luthier can tell you that, at least the ones using their hands and not a CNC). I'm excited about instruments that are vaguely taking shape in my imagination - about stuff I'd like to try, about colors, shapes, sounds...

Most people I talk to are actually quite open - they are interested, inquisitive, and a lot appreciate what I do. That's always encouraging and positive. Musicians are always looking for a new sound, for some new playing experience, even if all it does is lead them back to their old instrument where they feel comfortable and where they can express themselves best. I can't really teach a musician about music and sound - that's not my position - but they can teach me about what they need, what to look for, what makes something work for them or not. Some players take the time and make the effort and for that I'm grateful. It helps me refine my craft and advance. We can talk about the color of a particular sound - how a note decays, what harmonics are emphasized or suppressed, what neck shape feels best, what bridge type or pickup would give a certain attack or tone, etc... All this can happen once we get past the "otherness". That's where the dialogue starts.

As they approach my instruments, sometimes it will click, most times it won't. I don't take that personally, it's a pretty normal aspect of making things which are after all vehicles for personal expression by a lot of very different people... Looking at some of the old instruments which have been handed down from generation to generation of musicians, giving audiences enjoyment over the centuries, and which are still considered some of the best ever built, I do think we need to put things a bit in perspective. It's really more of a storm in a teacup than anything else, this "difference thing". As long as someone plays and someone listens, there is music. And that is what gives an instrument it's *raison d'être*. It doesn't really matter what it looks like.

BunnyBass: Where are you headed to next? Is there anything you are currently working on that we can be expecting from Michael Spalt soon?

Michael Spalt: The biggest project currently in the works is the development of the vViper as a production model. The vViper was conceived from the start as an instrument which can be built in series - we're aiming for a multi-tiered line, with inexpensive import models, then the American-built models, and finally the custom-shop models which I will continue to build personally. All will incorporate the vViper pickup design. So I will get to explore and test a lot of the issues which drove me into building custom instruments in the first place - quality, playability, tone etc. in a production line-type environment. We'll see how all that plays out - certainly it seems the interest is there on the part of bass players and I think a lot of them will find the movable pickup design very useful in achieving a wide range of different sound characteristics. It's new and exciting territory for me.

I have some other projects also. I built a 6-string fretless LightWave true-midi capable bass for Roland for use with their V-bass at clinics and shows. There seems to be a lot of stuff happening in that sector and the LightWave pickups are really great for these kinds of applications. I've built some guitars with a lot of sound-altering capabilities and I think some of these gadgets will work well for bass players too. So there's some interesting possibilities there. I'm working on a neck-through/metal plate hybrid and some really off-the-wall models which incorporate ideas I have had for a while but haven't had a chance to explore. Also some more traditional looking basses which will have hidden qualities...

There's just not enough time to do it all, that's the biggest problem for me. I'm glad of the attention these instruments are starting to generate, it affords me the chance of making more of them and trying out and learning more stuff. I really enjoy when musicians come to me with "whacky" ideas and we get to explore new territory together. My main focus will always be on pushing the envelope of instrument design and if a commercially successful line spins off from there, all the better - that's the best of both worlds!