



In this first installment of our Guitar Insider series, Ken Volpe spends some time with John Suhr of Suhr Guitars, Basses, and Amps and talks about the woods used to build electric guitars and the tonal qualities produced from each.

John Suhr started his building career some 35 years ago in New Jersey. Searching for the perfect tone during his bar band days, he began building his own instruments. In the early 80's John started working for Rudy Pensa at Rudy's Music Stop in NYC. It was during this time that the "Pensa-Suhr" guitars were born.

John built guitars under the "Pensa-Suhr" brand for Mark Knopfler, Eric Clapton, Peter Frampton, Lou Reed, Steve Stevens, Reb Beach, and many others. John left NYC to work with Robert Bradshaw in 91' and Four years later John felt his original calling and accepted a job as Senior Master Builder at the Fender Custom Shop. There he built custom guitars to order and was involved in R&D for new product development. His clients included and still include Michael Landau, Scott Henderson, Doug Aldrich and Peter Frampton. Making his true dream a reality, John Suhr opened up his own small factory building custom guitars to order in 1997. Partnering up with Steve Smith whose background is in CNC programming, John finally had total control over the entire process of building the ideal electric guitars and basses. From picking out the lumber to cutting the bodies and necks on the in-house CNC machines to painting and finish work to winding John's own-design pickups to final assembly and set-up, John was now able to oversee every aspect of the guitars being built with the highest quality standards possible and unflinching attention to detail. The company has continued to grow to where it is today in 2008 – building 100 plus custom instruments on a monthly basis.

John, please list the different types of commonly used body woods for solid body electric guitars.

Alder, Swamp Ash, Basswood, Honduras Mahogany, Basswood Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top, Ash Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top, Mahogany Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top.

Can you tell us about the specific qualities of each of these body woods?

Alder – Rich and full, Alder is strong in the lower midrange. This is probably the most widely used wood in the 60's for 3 single-coil style guitars. It is medium to light in weight and takes well to sunbursts and some transparent colors.

Swamp Ash – Popular in the 50's for electric guitars, this wood is alive and lightweight. Swamp ash just wants to vibrate. Bright and sweet at the same time with excellent grain patterns, all transparent finishes look great on Swamp Ash. One-piece Maple neck is a natural for Ash. Pau Ferro fingerboards also work well. Rosewood fingerboard on Ash body will give too much sizzle for many players.

Basswood – Strong in the midrange, Basswood has a balanced tone and is lightweight. Light in color with almost no grain patterns, Basswood is best suited for solid colors or is excellent as a backing wood for a Maple top. All types of neck wood combinations work on Basswood.

Honduras Mahogany – A popular wood used in set-neck guitars, Mahogany is strong in the mid-mids with a good high-midrange bark. Contrary to popular belief, Mahogany is not dark, that thought comes from the guitars that usually use the wood – just strong in the mids that gives it the aural illusion that it's compressed. Mahogany body is best when mated with Mahogany neck.

Basswood Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top – Okay, this may be the Holy Grail of tone. The Basswood response is extended by a 3/16" Maple top adding more clarity and grind to the fatness of the Basswood, this combination is our favorite! Usually colors chosen will be opaque on the back with transparent colors on the top – LP style. It's most excellent with a one-piece Maple neck.

Ash Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top – The Ash back has that open ring with good clarity. The Maple top seems to add another dimension – not harsh at all but very alive sounding in both clean and dirty modes. Also, it's an excellent look for transparent colors both on the back and front. This combination makes for a light guitar as well. It has a nice punch with scooped mids. Maple neck is also a killer tone for this combo.

Mahogany Back with Quilt or Flame Maple Top – This is another killer combination when mated with a Mahogany neck with various species of Rosewood for fingerboard material. Maple extends the range of Mahogany with more brilliance and punchy lows. The Mahogany back and neck combination works well in the bolt-on design and is highly recommended for those seeking a woody acoustic tone. Shorter scale lengths and thicker body set neck guitars will add midrange, which compliments the Mahogany. Warning though, Mahogany can get heavy.

Disclaimer...These are all generalizations. Obviously, no two pieces of wood will sound exactly the same. In addition, truss rods, tuning gears, bridges, body shape, chambering options and many other factors will change the tone of the electric guitar acoustically which does get transferred to the amp. You can also doctor things up with choice of pickups and

electronics. Everything has to be considered when choosing woods and is usually better off left to the maker of your instrument. There is also the issue on how does it fit in the mix? Lets say you spend all day dialing in your tones at home or at your rehearsal space and you think you have all your tones dialed in perfectly... The band comes in and the rehearsal or the gig starts... The first thing you do is run to your amp to turn up the treble, turn down the bass and turn down the effects... Sound familiar?

Next time, we will discuss tone woods for neck and fingerboards.

Find out more about Suhr at their [website](#)