



* *Editor's Note - This is part four of a four part series. If you missed part one, two or three [click here](#)*

By Paul Schwartz - Peekamoose Custom Guitars

The following is a general overview of the philosophy that has evolved into the guitars I design and build. Ultimately, all my instrument designs stem from five things. (The order is not important; to me they all have equal value.)

- * Conclusions I've drawn over the past 27 years having done thousands of modifications and repairs on instruments manufactured by the major guitar companies.

- * Modifications and upgrades most frequently needed or asked for by my clients to overcome the limitations they feel exist in instruments they own.

- * Experiences I've had as a musician playing in bands between the ages of 16 and 26; and again later in my mid 30's.

- * Ergonomic considerations that stem from:

What I learned studying classical guitar, my years playing in bands, seeing physical problems encountered by many clients, things I learned about anatomy in art school, and the wisdom of many physical therapists. (I've had my fair share of sports and work related physical wear and tear.) I feel that as a musician our bodies are as much a part of the instrument, as an instrument is an extension of our bodies and minds.

- * What I think feels, looks, and sounds great.

The goal of Peekamoose guitars is to create instruments that remove ergonomic and sonic obstacles. The connection from head to hands should not be impeded by an instrument that fights back. An instrument is like a lover. It is a very intimate relationship. Caress it and it responds. Strike it and it speaks sharply. The best relationship interplay happens when there is an almost telepathic connection between two souls. These instruments strive to become part of the player. It should be as natural as breathing. Hear the sound in our heads, let it come out our hands. These guitars will do it. All we have to do is become sensitive to the tactile feedback that comes up through our fingers, and the sonic response from the amp. The subtle

changes of fretting finger pressure or picking attack have very clear and rapid effects in Peekamoose instruments. Every nuance brings a sonic result. Once a player becomes accustomed to this very sympathetic reaction, there are no limits to the range of expression available. The old Peekamoose T-shirts made a statement on the back, "Because your instrument is an extension of your body." I want that to be true in a very positive way.

When clients come in seeking a repair or an upgrade to their current production instrument, I often put one of our guitars in their hands as a barometer. I can tell by listening to how they play an instrument, that I consider neutral, where their own instrument is giving them problems. The exaggerated sounds coming from a Peekamoose Guitar in a client's hands exposes where they unconsciously work harder on their current instrument. This isn't a criticism of someone's technique. It simply points out where they struggle on their guitar. Their muscle memory has learned to do it. Overcompensating becomes ingrained in the player's physical approach. That wasted energy could be re-directed at expression when using an instrument that responds without a battle.

As a diagnostic tool, this blind test is a very effective information gathering exercise. Some players are confused because they expect I would need to watch them. Watching is only a very small part of the exercise. Tone comes from our hands. Any seasoned player can pick up any model instrument and it will sound like them. Muscle memory can be great, it can also tell where mechanical problems are hiding on the owner's instrument. So while I listen to someone play a neutral instrument, I do a visual examination of their personal instrument brought in for service. The physical condition of their instrument combined with the sounds created by their muscle memory clue me in. It's a little like playing Sherlock Holmes deducing the truth about a case by evidence left behind.

Guitars are functional art. They are machines that make music. They are most effective when carefully designed and adjusted to afford our bodies and minds a way to produce desired sounds without blocking the creative process. Instruments should not present physical obstacles. Instruments should open themselves to the will of the musician.

One thing I have noticed about the semi-hollow versions of instruments would be the low frequency definition is slightly diffused. Some people would say that the sound is warmer. My company tries to stay away from the decorative adjectives native to our industry like: darker, creamy, etc. We try to describe tonal quality in ways that are hard to misinterpret.

Strings: Typically the Peekamoose Custom Instruments set out for product demonstration will be setup with 10/13/17/28/38/50 using a pure nickel or nickel plated stainless wind. However, on any custom order, we will build an instrument using a client's preferred gauge. The neck will be allowed to settle under full tension before doing final Plek and buffing fretwork. We do a little post Plek hand finishing on our frets. It provides the characteristic look and feel that's identified my work since starting Peekamoose in 1983.

It's probably worth emphasizing... even though our stock gauge is 10-50; our philosophy is guitars are all about finesse. There are subtle little things I designed in with the intention of making an instrument very touch sensitive. If a guitar responds to every little nuance of your

hands, there are a lot of sonic possibilities. If needed, we can easily set up a guitar to accommodate the heavy-handed. But so far, an almost universal player response has been, "Oh man, I didn't know I could make those sounds so easily" or "I could get real used to this real fast." We apply this concept to all instrument work. The shop brand design premise sprung from classic design standards.

When I grew up playing electric guitar, everyone used 9-42 and action as low as you can go. We all had to learn the skills needed to control strings that choked or buzzed when hitting them too hard. If Jimmy Page could make 9's sound great, so how bad could it be? And he didn't look like he was babying the guitar....I gradually grew to favor 9-46 from my experience of playing and working on Steinberger Trans-Trem instruments. Properly tweaked Trans-Trem instruments have a balanced string tension that did not exist on electric guitars (circa 1985). It got me thinking and experimenting. I am very grateful to Ned Steinberger. Mostly because of his design I started trying to understand how string tension not only affected ease of play but also tone. The hybrid 10 set is part of transplanting that preference to accommodate the way many people play today, which is with slightly heavier strings. I can play 10-50 no problem, and I play 12-56 on my acoustics, but I will always be a 9-46 electric player. We don't discriminate about string gauge here. Whatever a player is comfortable with, we will accommodate.

Setup: Typically our setup is 4/64ths clearance across the 12th fret and .016 over the first. We do our fret dressing (also called a grind and polish) using our Plek machine to level and crown the frets. That setup is what we consider safe low action or neutral. We have clients that play lower and higher. That is a player's preference. But there has to be an established bench test to use as a point of evaluation. Over time, testing thousands of instruments and accommodating the variations of playing techniques for each owner brought me to what I think of as a neutral setting. We know if an instrument will perform properly at this adjustment, moving an instrument to accommodate the personal preferences of an individual player will not be an issue.

I know this is quite a brain dump of information. I hope you will embrace the spirit in which it was composed and understand the years of experimentation and client interaction needed to arrive at these basic conclusions.

Until next time, wishing you all great success...

Paul