



In our third installment of the Guitar Insider with John Suhr, Ken Volpe spends some time talking with our Insider about wood selection and buying. Obviously, when you make as many guitars as John Suhr does, it becomes a complex process.

GJD: Do you select most of the wood yourself?

JS: Not personally but to my specs, we have guidelines for weight and grain. If it passes this we check for dryness and then we have a pretty complicated setup to measure the vibration of the actual wood. Any wood that doesn't meet the specs usually gets rejected before we even purchase it. We have a nice arrangement with our supplier, we usually return half of what we get when it comes to body wood, and my neck wood supply is always great. My supplier for the maple neck wood has been doing this for over 30 years, he knows his Maple. I never have any problems with the necks. Even still, after we go through all the sorting and checks, we then redry all our wood in our Kiln.

GJD: Do you have a lot of suppliers?

JS: I have a standard supplier for each type of wood I use, I have been using the same neck wood guy for over 10 years, and he is just the best. I also use some "sinker wood" which can be pretty funky looking, 300~500 years old and very stiff. Great for guys who want stable thin necks. Basically we have a different supplier for each species of wood.

GJD: Do you go outside the USA to buy a lot of your wood?

JS: Outside the US? No need to, I prefer northeast Maine, Vermont Maple compared to Canadian Maple for Neck wood. All our wood comes from the USA. Maybe the exception is some of the sinker wood could be from the edge of Canada.

GJD: How do the primary factors play out in the decision process? Cost? Appearance? Grain? Tone of the raw wood?

JS: Appearance, grain and tone are all important. Naturally my primary concern is tone but customers do have specific requests on visual aspects as well. The vibration of raw wood can be a hint but not a given. We have seen things turn 180 degrees after they are cut. Cost is not

an issue, quality is. If I pay more for something I think is worth it, I give the customer the option to pay a bit more if he wants it. You can analyze the structure of wood and its properties to a point. The only thing that is really going to matter is how it vibrates. We have made a major investment in equipment so that we can now measure the actual vibration response of the wood directly at any stage of the process without damage to the instrument. This has educated us to better match a piece of neck wood, fingerboard with the right body wood to create an instrument where all the parts talk to each other.

GJD: How is it different in comparing 2 companies. One making 100 guitars a month? And the other making 1000 guitars a month?

JS: That is a tough one; in my heart I would like to believe the attention to detail could stay the same even though this usually isn't the case. It is more dependent on the pay scale and money that is invested into the process and the people. When you deal with a relatively small company like mine, Steve and I are the only red tape. The quality of the product comes first, we do have investors but they are all into guitars more than seeing a return on investment. I think it is possible to become a large company and maintain the quality but so many other forces begin to come into play that sometimes larger companies are more tempted to start cutting corners. I'm happy with our size at about 140 a month, I'm only interested in making a great product for a fair price.