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Who's Got The Chops? And why do you care? It's important to do a fret leveling which delivers a sympathetic alignment across the variations of four seasons and several years. This points back to the concept of an 18 to 36 month arc for most necks. Let's say from a practical point of view starting from virtually perfect frets, that most necks under five years old will need some corrective fret dressing every two or three years regardless of the actual wear in the frets. Board compression alone can completely change how an instrument sounds and feels. Older necks can often go longer, but this is also tied to how low someone wants their action, what gauge strings, how imperative it is their intonation is as close to perfect as possible, etc.

So how much discrepancy is too much? Generically speaking discrepancy of .003" to .005" from fret to fret will affect: tone, sustain, and intonation. But that being said most of the fretwork in circulation is nowhere close to that level of precision and most players these days tend to favor heavier strings and higher action in the name of tone. So most shops and builders get off easy. There are a handful of luthiers that can hit the mark of $\pm .003$ when they take the time. That's an error margin of .006". The part of this that is rough on luthiers is the amount of time it takes to deliver that type of accuracy is several hours. That is assuming the person doing the work has the chops to execute at that level. Sadly there is no way to accurately bill for that type of work. So most people bill fretwork at a flat rate based of parameters of construction materials and hardware.

The Stainless fetish....At the moment many players are hot for stainless. EVO is an alternate similarly hard material for fret wire. It's gold, you'll see it on the Les Paul Supreme. Both materials are dramatically harder than 18% nickel. But regardless of the hardness of fretwire, fret alignment will change due to board compression. So with that in mind you have to take into account that every person doing instrument repairs who is not a complete masochist charges more to work with the harder wires. It's crazy not to. Stainless and EVO are harder on tools and take longer to manipulate. Let's say for the sake of averages, in cities where there is a high concentration of musicians and the cost of running a shop is not cheap, we generally see prices for Stainless or EVO fret dressing being \$100 to \$150 higher than working on 18% nickel, and re-frets running \$150 to \$200 higher. So is there an upside?

Here's my take on it. If you are the type of player who puts huge dents in 18% nickel wire over a period of six to twelve months, paying the extra money for work and materials to have harder wire might make sense. Because with harder wire you will then be doing a fret dress every two to three years like everyone else. Or, possibly go longer if you have higher action, heavier

strings, things that would make minor fret alignment errors less obvious. But if you think using stainless or EVO will remove the need for regular fret care because it will take a long time before you put dents in the frets....That assumption is not accurate unless you already play with heavier strings and reasonably high action. If you are playing with action of 3/64 at the 12th fret and 9-42 or 9-46....You are going to know as soon as those frets drift a hair off line.

Why are there exceptions? Or how about.... Why is it you've been playing your guitar for years, the frets are kinda beat up but it doesn't seem to buzz? Most players have learned to accommodate the shortcomings of their instruments. We all do subtle almost unconscious things to exert control over how an instrument sounds. And there are players who favor high action. As a result they can go longer because the strings will have greater clearance over the frets, which in turn hides the smaller discrepancies. Some musicians do not immediately recognize subtle changes in playability. I've found that is often true with owners who have always played instruments that required more muscle to control. However, in most cases, once exposed to instruments, which are more supple and responsive to subtle changes in grip and attack, a person's awareness becomes more sensitive. Recognizing the physical manifestations of subtle changes in how an instrument feels and performs gradually increases over time.