



By Paul Schwartz - GJD Contributor - Peekamoose Custom Guitars NYC / Part II

A Guy Comes Into A Bar With A Duck On His Head*: The punch line being: Instruments change incrementally from day to day or week to week. If an instrument's fretwork is true enough that the amount of "fret alignment drift" experienced as subtle changes in relief occur is almost impossible to measure, then the instrument's owner will not notice a change in performance.

The result is an owner feels an instrument is "stable. To say it in a slightly different way: Stability is the result when incremental changes of an instrument due to temperature and humidity have no noticeable effect on tone or feel. (* The bartender says "what'll ya have bub?" The duck says... "Get this guy off my ass.")

Evidence from Support: It's happened so many times I've lost count.... A client comes in convinced a neck is a lemon. Then after it's frets are corrected, the perception becomes wow this neck never moves. From my perspective, there is no question the neck is still moving. Nothing magically turns to granite. The difference is, the movement is no longer pushing the frets far enough off alignment that the problems are heard or felt. That part of the puzzle is as much about accuracy as it is about having a sense of what a neck will do when it moves. A rough translation is how much error can occur before it's felt or heard. However solutions are subjective. What can work in one area of the neck probably won't a few frets up or down. The sheer badger like tenacity required to chase this stuff down and make it as close to perfect as humanly possible is enough to make a luthier's brain melt unless they have the right attitude.

Dress Em While They're Young: So this brings us to the point being, most instruments would benefit from a preliminary fret leveling within the first two to six months after it was completed. It's a matter of perception and exposure. There is no question most instruments are made well enough that a good careful setup will make a world of improvement and can go two or three years until there is enough fret wear to warrant doing a fret dressing. But leaving an instrument in that state means there will always be some compromises made to how an instrument is setup to work around what the frets won't do. After an instrument passes the two/three year barrier board compression becomes less pronounced, seasonal behavior becomes more predictable. But frankly, regardless of your skill level, why suffer? Get your instrument tweaked into line by someone who really grasps what is going on. You won't regret it for a second. You

will have more fun playing and spend less time wishing your guitar were a better instrument. Most instruments have the potential to be very responsive, some instruments have the potential to be truly amazing.

OK go get another beverage and we'll go back for more Obsessive Compulsive 101....

Board Compression: Even if a neck is never played, I mean there is no fret wear; there will still be issues. Fret alignment will change due to board compression and the natural aging and shrinkage of wood. When should you worry about it? When will board compression (distortion) become significant enough to affect how an instrument sounds, feels, and intonates? New instrument see a lot of change in the first 90 days. Then in most cases the changes slow down. But make no mistake newer instruments shift more than older ones. If you combine board compression with fret wear. Especially for instruments older than two or three years, the average range of time is about 18 to 36 months. Older than five years the time stretches a bit more. It depends on the wood, how old it is, where it lives, etc.. Even 60-year-old instrument keep changing. Nothing is static. That includes synthetic necks. There is no magic bullet.

If frets are seated properly, their alignment will reflect the way a board was leveled. But there are also small discrepancies in the wire itself. Then you have the possibility fret seating will shift as the board shrinks...Nothing is perfect. But, don't despair; it's also seldom a worst case scenario. This concept of 18 to 36 months for new instruments can be a bit trippy. But it can also be your best friend.

Bottom line is you are better off having an instrument adjusted frequently and having the frets dressed within the first couple of months that you own an instrument. Most of the major board settling will take place in the first few weeks any neck has string tension on it. If a neck has been strung up for at least a month you are usually safe in terms of doing a preliminary fret level to clean things up. This is assuming the shop you frequent has the chops to do a great job. As I said earlier, the ability to work on frets has many facets. Accuracy is extremely important but it is not the only factor. Understanding how fret alignment, neck relief, and style of fret crowning also influence how an instrument feels.