



Part IV: By Paul Schwartz-Peekamoose Custom Guitars NYC

One client recently brought in an instrument he'd purchased on eBay. It was in dire need of fret leveling. It wasn't so much that any frets were grotesquely worn so much as the over all alignment along the length and across the radius of the neck was bad enough the instrument felt and sounded far below his comfort zone.

He wanted to know if the instrument was garbage. I said probably not, it's just not at the standard you are used to. I suggested he gamble on having the frets leveled before he passed final judgment on the instrument. When he got it back the instrument had the responsiveness he's grown accustomed to over the last few years.

He commented that several years ago before he knew what was possible, he probably would have been fine with the instrument as it arrived from the seller. But, he would never have been able to execute many of the musical feats he can now with instruments having a higher performance characteristic. Sure he also got better over time. But with this instrument at his current level of skill, he still struggled to execute things easily within his grasp on instruments properly tweaked to his needs.

This is just another way of illustrating what is acceptable becomes a matter of what you are exposed to and what you learn is or isn't possible. You have to be unhappy with your instruments. Sometimes you just need the right solution to afford greater flexibility in your technique.

Over the last 27 years almost everyone regardless of starting sensitivity has physically benefited from an instrument being more supple and responsive to the touch. It just takes a little time for a person's body to adapt.

The best analogy I can give you is this. I have a client who we affectionately refer to as "the gripper", although the nickname no longer reflects her playing technique. This woman is a recreational player who is reasonably adept. She continues learning physical technique as well as music. Her instructor originally referred her to us. She was playing an Ibanez, which is similar in size and shape to a Gibson 336. The first time I looked at this instrument the action was in

the stratosphere and there were dents in the frets practically down to the Rosewood. I knew this was a re-fret and thank God her guitar teacher had prepared her for that idea, because even several years ago it was not an inexpensive repair. Anyway the short version of what happened is this. I refretted the instrument. The Gripper was amazed at how much easier the instrument was to play. But eight months later she had put a lot of wear in the frets and needed a grind & polish to bring the feel and sound back. And here is where the story changed. The next grind was 18 months later, the one after that was about two years later. So what happened? My client still plays a lot, but her muscle memory gradually learned to play with less grip. She developed finesse in her playing. And the energy formerly utilized in an attempt to wrestle her instrument into submission, is now used for subtle changes in tone. At this point all of her instruments have been fine tuned to be very touch sensitive and as such they allow her to achieve a wider range of tone though subtle changes in pressure from her left hand and complimentary changes in right hand attack.

It's worth mentioning that with more seasoned players we see faster results. Players with more mileage usually adapt faster and the benefits of fret wear diminishing usually become apparent in the first year versus three years. But, regardless of skill or time frame, I've seen this transformation repeat itself literally thousands of times. It's a win/win situation, if your instrument is more responsive, you will have an easier time playing and the wear and tear on it will become proportionately less. Your hands feel better, your instrument sounds better, and you are spending less money on instrument care because you no longer wreak havoc on your axe.

OK so I have to mention it because if I don't some people will write e-mails saying why didn't you??? However, because I did talk about it in the last column. I wanted to really focus on why fretwork matters and how it matters versus talking about the machine...But here's a quick summary if you missed it before. For the last three years I've been using my Plek machine for fret leveling. The machine is a remarkable tool. I will always be very grateful to Gerd Anke & Michael Dubach for having the vision and patience to bring their dream to reality. And Joe Glasser is always generous with his time and advice. As is Gary Brawer, Phil Jacoby, John Suhr, Charlie Chandler, and everyone else I know though Plek.

Many people want to believe the machine is a magic bullet. But the machine is only as effective as the person analyzing the information, making decisions, and programming it to level frets. If a luthier or repair person does not already have a very strong background in fretwork, this will not make them a god. It just means your hands won't be as tired at the end of the day. The key is knowing how to interpret information presented when deciding how to adjust a neck, how much fret to reduce, and then how to shape the fret crown at the end. An ability to make the most effective choices only comes from years of experience. As far as being god like goes...in the world of fretwork, Gerd and Michael as the ones who deserve very special credit.

For the rest of us mortals, the experience of being exposed to a vast number of instrument models and brands in the context of routine maintenance as well as warranty support is a great teacher. Sooner or later you see almost everything. But more importantly you see all the classic problems over and over. Building instruments refines what we learn from repairs. And hopefully, the lessons we learn allow us to make improvements in our own designs. The goal being to deliver a more responsive and stable instrument to the player's hands.

Working on other people's instruments carries a lot of responsibility. They've placed their trust in you to do the best you can and make their instrument better than before. The number of re-frets and fret dressings I've done since I started is several thousand. I believe if you do it often enough and are obsessive, you can't help thinking about why certain physical characteristics repeat themselves so many times and why some things only show up on one style of neck versus another. I also believe we must keep refining our skills and learn from each job that passes under our hands. Just because the last one was great doesn't mean the next one can't improve in some way. Don't be satisfied to sit still. There is always something new to learn about things you already know.

Till next time.

Cheers

Paul