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INSIDE

Don Grosh Guitars & how to build a modern classic...

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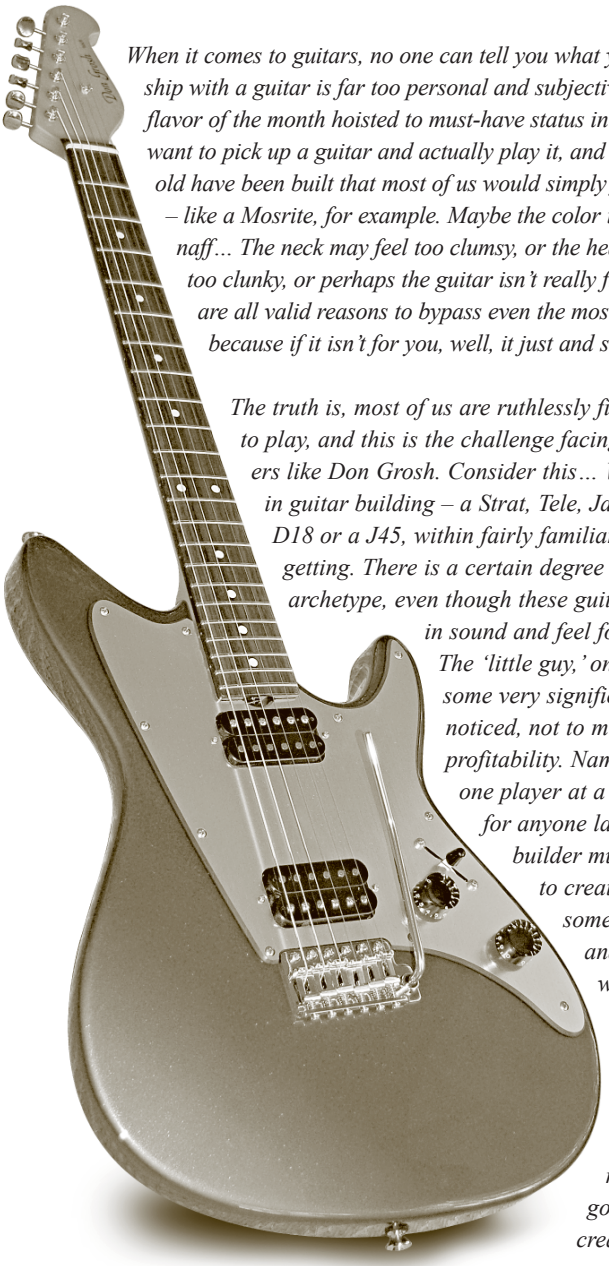
Don Grosh Guitars

"Any problem you can't solve with a good guitar is either unsolvable, or isn't a problem."



When it comes to guitars, no one can tell you what you oughta be playing. Our relationship with a guitar is far too personal and subjective to be reduced to another white-hot flavor of the month hoisted to must-have status in a chat room. First of all, you should want to pick up a guitar and actually play it, and let's face it, plenty of guitars new and old have been built that most of us would simply find uninspiring on style points alone – like a Mosrite, for example. Maybe the color is all wrong, or the body shape is naff… The neck may feel too clumsy, or the headstock shape is goofy, the hardware too clunky, or perhaps the guitar isn't really flawed at all – it's just not 'you.' These are all valid reasons to bypass even the most popular and revered guitar designs, because if it isn't for you, well, it just and simply isn't.

The truth is, most of us are ruthlessly finicky about the guitars we choose to play, and this is the challenge facing small, independent custom builders like Don Grosh. Consider this… When you buy one of the archetypes in guitar building – a Strat, Tele, Jazzmaster, Les Paul, SG, 335, 6120, D18 or a J45, within fairly familiar parameters you know what you're getting. There is a certain degree of comfort and safety in buying an archetype, even though these guitars, like any others, can wildly vary in sound and feel for no outwardly apparent reasons. The 'little guy,' on the other hand, must surmount some very significant challenges just to be favorably noticed, not to mention attaining a modest level of profitability. Name recognition can only be achieved one player at a time – an agonizingly slow process for anyone lacking patience. The small custom builder must also possess the skill and vision to create an instrument that clearly offers something unique and of value – a cool and embraceable design, superior workmanship and materials that surpass that of a production guitar, exceptional playability, tuning stability, and outstanding tone. Simple enough, eh? History would indicate otherwise. It seems that the modern custom builder's ultimate goal in designing guitars would be to create an instrument that possesses an

enduring appeal that is universally recognized and appreciated by players whose influences and musical taste are as unique as the builder's vision. Such a guitar, it seems to us, would earn the status of a 'modern classic,' and in our opinion, Don Grosh has achieved that goal with the ElectraJet.

Our review of the ElectraJet will be undoubtedly be the most concise guitar review ever published (and you're reading it now.) Yes, we could tease you with glowing praise describing the worn-in feel of the perfectly shaped satin neck, the exquisite fret work, the exceptional metallic finish on our review guitar that reminded us of the faded copper color of an old Gibson sparkling burgundy 335, or the stellar balance and feel of the ElectraJet in hand… We could rant endlessly about the uniquely toneful tone of the Grosh humbucking pickups, or the precise and reliable nature of the Gotoh tremolo… But you've no doubt already read hundreds of glowing guitar reviews, and when referencing Grosh guitars, to simply crank out another review on just one model would leave you woefully short-changed. We visited the shop in Bloomfield, Colorado and saw how all the different Grosh guitars and basses are made, how the wood is selected, stored and worked, how the nitro finish is painstakingly applied, the necks shaped and the frets dressed, and how the pickups are wound. Don Grosh builds roughly 22 guitars every 30 days. He could build more, but not the way he chooses to build them. While we received an ElectraJet specifically for review, we can tell you that all the varied Grosh models share the same attention to detail, and every one of them embodies an uncommon appeal that reflects the builder's eye for classic design that marries the romance of the past with modern day precision, craftsmanship and consistency. If you can't find exactly want you want in stock through a dealer, you can order a guitar, choosing among all the considerable options available. That's custom building. The beauty of the ElectraJet and all the other Grosh models is that you can get what you want, not just what's available, and Don Grosh is completely hands-on, working in the shop every day building the guitars that bear his name. What you really need to gather from this review is that Grosh overbuilds utterly fantastic guitars at a very reasonable price, while allowing you the freedom to acquire what will be the perfect guitar for you rather than someone else. The following interview vividly reveals the Grosh story and how he builds guitars today. The rest is up to you. We urge you to hit the Grosh web site when you have the time to linger, consider all the varied models and options, pick one, and Enjoy…

TQR: How did your interest in working on and building guitars initially develop, Don?

I've always been a 'tool guy' ever since I was a little kid. I was always tinkering and building stuff, and I was comfortable with power tools because my dad really just turned me loose. When I'd go to a friend's house he would have to ask permission to use a jig saw, and that seemed really weird to me (laughing). My dad's side of the family owned Grosh & Sons Scenic Studios in Hollywood. My grandfather started the company, and there were four brothers in the family dating back to the 1930s. They built sets for film and stage like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland as well as working for lots of hotels in different locations like Las Vegas, so by the time I was in high school I was proficient in welding and carpentry work. When I got into BMX racing my friends and I would fabricate our own frames and weld them together, and for awhile I was making my own skateboard decks.

When I got into guitars at 18, I immediately started working on them for myself and friends, putting together necks and bodies and doing repairs. It isn't like I sat down and read any books about guitar construction – I just jumped into it. One of my first guitars was a Guild D-50 that I still have, and my brother and I built a Martin from one of those kits from the 1833 shop, and after that I built a thinline acoustic/electric that I still have and play. I had a Les Paul Custom and a Gibson 335, but I really liked all kinds of guitars.

TQR: How did you graduate from working on instruments of your own and for friends to becoming the shop manager at Valley Arts guitars? That's a huge jump.

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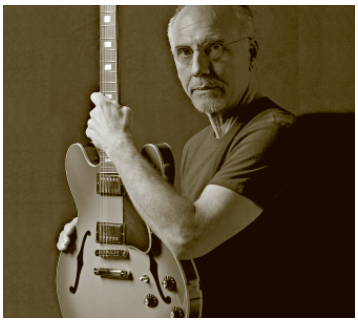

Well, I was working in the construction industry building custom homes, from complete framing to cabinet work, and I had been doing that for quite awhile and I was getting a little burned out with it. I went into construction right out of high school and we were doing some really high-end work – my main thing was custom cabinetry and custom bars – really complex work, and I still do some from time to time because when your wife wants some crown molding in the house and she knows you can do it… (laughing). I had three guitars that I had built that were really pretty good, and I had seen an ad in Guitar Player for Valley Arts, so I took my guitars down there and they hired me to work in the repair department. They did work for players like Steve Lukather, Lee Ritenour and Larry Carlton, and they were doing a very small amount of custom building. Even though it was a minimum wage job and I had been making pretty good money in construction, it's what I really wanted to do. Eventually I was overseeing all the repairs, and when they moved into a larger space and began building more guitars, I was the shop foreman managing production.

TQR: You must have had thousands of guitars go through your hands at that time… What were some of the things you might have learned about design and construction working on so many classic guitars?

Some of the older stuff really had a vibe, but I wasn't really a vintage junkie – I was more interested in making things better. Honestly, a lot of the 'vintage' guitars seemed to be hit and miss and were often not very good. Obviously, the Gibson guitars were built to a higher level, but Gretsch guitars really weren't very good, and the Fenders were simply mass-produced guitars to me. Some of them could sound great, but they weren't representative of anything more than a very economically built instrument.

TQR: How long did you work at Valley Arts?

I was at Valley Arts from 1985-1993 when Samick eventually bought them, and I was also in a Christian alternative band and I wanted to see where that would go. Eventually the band fell apart, and since I had kept a lot of tools and equipment in my parents' 3-car garage, I was building guitars on the side. I took three prototypes to the 1993 NAMM show and had a couple of guitars in the Matchless booth that year, and they were well-received. I also took the guitars down to Make'n Music in North Hollywood and they became my first dealer. Some of the musicians that bought my guitars included Michael Landau, who bought five or six, Oliver Lieber, Randy Jacobs and John Shanks.

TQR: Those 'garage' guitars would almost be collectible now... So did you continue building in the 3-car garage?

Yes, at that time there weren't a lot of small custom builders other than Tom Anderson and Tyler. I sent guitars to other stores, and I think it was a little easier than it would be today. I built about 20 guitars in the first year, then I acquired a Japanese distributor who ordered four guitars a month, which was good, and I had a friend helping me in the shop. We also received an incredibly positive review in Guitar Player, and that review article really put us on the map. We increased production to about 8 guitars a month, still working in the garage, and I eventually was able to move from using a pin router to a CNC machine. At that point I had two full-time guys helping me and with the CNC we were able to build about 16 guitars a month, including some basses. We built about 1,000 guitars total working in the garage, and in 2001 we moved to an industrial space in southern California. I'm really particular about the way I want things done, and I've never been interested in sitting at a desk, so we kept production at a level where we could build the guitars to my standards.

TQR: When did you move to Colorado?

We moved in 2005, and within a week we were building guitars. We also had some unassembled and finished necks and bodies from California that enabled us to get started quickly, and on nights and weekends I worked on finishing out the build out of the shop and better organizing the space.

TQR: And presently you are building about 22 guitars a month… Let's discuss the various models you build today, beginning with the 'Reserve' models.

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Those are limited run guitars that we come up with in the shop. We build them whenever we have a unique idea we want to try, and we have some things in the works right now. We are going to be building a limited run of full-size 'Strat-style' guitars with vintage specs, for example, and we may only build 40 of those guitars.

TQR: In 2009 you also built a limited edition Turbo Jet – the rocker's version of the ElectraJet with mahogany back, figured maple top and humbucking pickups…

That's a chambered guitar with the ElectraJet body style, bolt-on neck, humbucking pickups and a really nice maple top.

TQR: Can you describe the changes you made to the Retro Classic Strat and Telecaster style models?

There were certain things I thought I could improve on when I designed those guitars. The body shape features deeper cutaways for better access to the fingerboard, the lower bout is slightly larger and the contours on the back are more subtle and comfortable, and we contour the neck heel for easier access to the upper part of the fingerboard. The neck and truss rod are a completely different design as well... The truss rod we make here has more mass than a standard design, and the peghead is thicker with more wood in the area where the neck transitions from above the nut to the peghead. We make the body slightly wider at the lower bout and the peghead thicker to encourage better resonance and sustain, and that is why we create those types of design changes – not just for cosmetic reasons. Our priority is about better tone and resonance that you can hear and feel with the guitar unplugged. We do the same kinds of things with the Retro Classic Vintage T as well.

TQR: How is the Vintage T constructed? We noted a humbucking pickup in the neck on your web site...

You can order it with a humbucker or standard Tele neck pickup, with F-hole or without, in swamp ash or mahogany. The body is completely hollow on either side with a center block beneath the bridge.

TQR: How and when did you develop the design for the ElectraJet?

We had been in the Colorado shop for about a year, and I wanted to come up with something new, but still a retro style. I drew the initial body shape free-hand and kept tweaking the cutaway areas and body shape, and then began working on the pickguard shape, which probably took 3-4 months to finalize.

TQR: Perhaps one of the most notable features of the ElectraJet body style is that virtually any pickup looks like it belongs on the guitar – Strat, Tele, P90 or humbucker, and that is often not the case with unique, custom-built guitars.

Well, that's probably because the shape is so unique that you don't have a preconceived idea of what 'belongs' there. If all you had ever seen was that guitar with single coils and then you saw it with P90s it might seem wrong. The headstock is also different, and we have four different headstock shapes for the Retro Classic, Tele, ElectraJet and set neck models. They are subtle changes, but you can easily see the difference.

TQR: You also build bolt-on maple top models. Are they typically built with mahogany backs, and have you ever used ebony for fingerboards?

Yes, mahogany is my favorite wood for guitars with maple tops as a complement to the brightness of maple. We don't use that many ebony fingerboards. It's brittle and prone to splitting, and we really haven't received any requests for it.

TQR: How many different tremolo designs do you use?

The main tremolo we use for the Retro guitars is the Gotoh 1088. It sounds perfect for that guitar, with bent metal saddles, a V groove in the saddles to keep the strings centered, and we modify the block by adding a nylon bushing for the trem arm to avoid any sloppy action. We also modify the two posts. I really love the way this bridge sounds for a 2-post,

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floating tremolo, and it really stays in tune well. For the ElectraJet we use the Gotoh 510 6-screw tremolo bridge and we set it up with the bridge flat on the body. Our original intention was not to set up the 510 on the ElectraJet to be floating, but after we had some customers request a floating trem, we found that it actually works very well, while still maintaining excellent tuning stability. When we get requests for the 1088 Gotoh bridge to be installed on the ElectraJet, we'll do that as well.

TQR: When did you start building the set neck models?

While we were still in California. I designed it to be either a fully hollow, semi-hollow or solidbody guitar, and at the time I was looking at archtop designs as a reference point. The cutaway design provides access to the very last fret, and the body is a little rounder, wider and shorter than a typical Les Paul. The waist is also moved more forward for better balance.

TQR: How did you approach the neck tenon/joint design?

I wanted to use the long tenon similar to a '50s Les Paul, although the tenon on our guitars is wider, extending all the way to the neck pickup rout. We also added a volute for added strength with the thickness of the headstock as thick as it can be and still fit standard tuners. The additional mass not only adds strength, but it also improves sustain and resonance.

TQR: And the set neck models include solidbodies, fully hollow and semi-hollow designs...

Yes. The solibody models include the Custom, Limited and '59 Spec. The Custom features a 5A figured maple top, mahogany back and neck, and a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard is optional. The Limited adds full binding on the neck and our 'Limited' fingerboard inlays. Both models can be ordered with P90 or humbucking pickups, TonePros stop tailpiece and bridge, or optional wraparound tailpiece. The '59 Spec is our tribute to the '59 Les Paul, with trapezoid inlays, aged single ply binding and period correct humbucking pickups, pots, tone caps and wiring.

The DG 293 is the fully hollow model with a small block of wood that extends from the tailpiece to the bottom of the bridge pickup, and it can be ordered with humbuckers or P90s. It is also available with a standard figured maple top or Sitka spruce. Both models have a hollow mahogany back, with a block of wood that extends from the tailpiece to the bottom of the bridge pickup.

TQR: Being fully hollow with the exception of the block, does the guitar feedback like most hollowbodies at high volume?

Not at all. It has a little more mass with the mahogany back and carved top, so the feedback you might experience with lighter hollowbody guitars that lack the block beneath the bridge isn't a problem. The DG 193 is our semi-hollow model with a solid block that runs down the middle of the body, and it also has a great acoustic quality with more mid punch and attack than the DG 293. Both models are available with humbucking pickups or P90s.

We also build a Gretsch-style, fully hollowbody guitar called the Hollowtron with cat eye f-holes, TV Jones Filtertron pickups, and a TonePros stop tailpiece and bridge or Bigsby tremolo tailpiece.

TQR: We also saw some bass necks in the shop and basses on your web site...

What we've done so far with the basses is just a Jazz or P-Bass style. I had a lot of people asking for basses, so we did some limited runs to meet that demand, but we're going to start building an ElectraJet bass soon.

TQR: Let's talk about your philosophy and approach to building and finishing guitars that makes them tangibly different from typical production instruments, starting with the finish...

The finish is very important to me, and very important to

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tone. That's why I still use nitro and apply a very thin finish that requires a lot of time to build up thinner coats. What you see in a lot of guitars today are finishes that are applied in a way that speeds production, and in that environment you don't want to be using lacquer. I also mix all of our own colors, including the metallics, and mixing our own colors gives us a lot of creative flexibility.

TQR: Like the 'black orange' color on the ElectraJet you sent us for review – one of the nicest custom colors we have ever seen. You offer a lot of options in terms of neck shapes and fret size as well. Do you follow any philosophy in regard to the size of a neck and its role as a tone generator?

The bigger the neck, the bigger the tone. We do have a lot of different neck shapes, and our most popular is the medium/large round-back with rounded fingerboard edges that make it really comfortable, but with enough mass to produce a great sounding guitar.

TQR: We also saw the racks of beautiful fingerboard blanks in your shop – Brazilian, Madagascar and Indian, and it all seemed to be uncommonly nice. Have you noted a difference in the sound of different types of rosewood?

You can tap on those boards and hear a difference. Every piece of wood is unique – some of it has a heavier, denser midrange tone, and the Indian can be lighter and brighter sounding than the Brazilian and Madagascar. A lot of times we'll go through different boards and tone-tap them to select the right piece for a specific guitar. With ash and alder guitar bodies, the weight of the body will also completely affect the tone of the guitar. On an ash Retro Classic body for example, a 3.5 pound body will sound different than a 4 pound body. A 4.5 pound ash body will be too heavy, and that will go to the band saw. A heavy ash body will sound very bright and not very open sounding. On a Retro Classic Vintage T, I would go a little lighter because there is a little less routing. The target weight for the bolt-on guitars is 7 - 8 pounds.With the set necks the target weight is 8.5 pounds, and we will still do a certain amount of chambering to meet that target weight. Through every step of the building process – from the rough blank to the stage when the top is matched with the back, the body is weighed and then we'll chamber it according to what is required to reach that perfect weight. The heavier mahogany pieces sound better with the hollow and semi-hollow guitars.

TQR: How has the wood supply changed over the years since you've been building?

It's more difficult to get really good ash right now, so I'm going through more wood to get the optimum piece that I want. We have a new supplier for alder, and we're probably getting the best alder I have ever seen since I've been building. Sometimes we'll produce a 1-piece body, but I prefer 2-piece bodies because I think they look better. With a 1-piece sometimes the grain is inconsistent or doesn't match up as well as a 2-piece.

TQR: What do you use for the nut material, and is all of your hardware made by Gotoh?

We use micarta. We have used bone in the past and it sounds good, but it isn't as durable in terms of tuning stability. All of the hardware we use is Gotoh with the exception of the TonePros bridges and tailpieces we use for the set neck guitars. We use nickel, and since the chrome tailpiece on the HollowTron is chrome, we use chrome hardware on that model.

TQR: Let's talk about pickups... You made the decision to wind your own – how long did that process take and what was involved?

We started about two and a half years ago with single coils. It was something I had always wanted to do but just didn't have the time. We worked on just the neck single coil for a good 6-8 months. We knew what we wanted to hear, but it took a lot of time to dial it in. We tried hand-winding, and we got really close, but I realized that it was impossible to get the tension of the wire on the bobbin consistent with handwinding, and that was key to the sound of the pickup in my mind. Without the correct tension, that's probably 60%-70% of the sound. With handwinding, every pickup is going to be slightly different, and it was even more critical with humbuckers, so we eventually bought a computerized winding machine. Then we were able to really work on things we could control – the tension, the way the wire is scattered, how it's layered, the shape of the coil...

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TQR: What type of magnets are you using?

Alnico 5 for single coils, and we use different types of Alnico for humbuckers depending on the application. On our 302 humbucker uncovered we use Alnico 4 and with a cover we use Alnico 5. When you start introducing covers to the mix the sound changes. We tried different covers from different suppliers, and we experimented with polepiece screws. When we were developing our P90 we were listening to different pickups from boutique winders, and we had one from a specific winder that seemed muddy with very little definition. When we put our polepieces in that pickup, the clarity and string definition improved dramatically, so we learned something by doing that kind of testing. Some of the parts we use for pickups had to be outsourced to unique suppliers, but we are really happy with our pickups now and winding them here gives us much more flexibility and consistency. There is always some variance that occurs, like on the 42 gauge wire, the tolerances might vary from one spool to the next, and we actually take measurements and compensate for those variances when we wind the pickup.

TQR: What about pots, caps and tone caps?

We use CTS 250K and 500K pots, orange drop .047 caps for the single coils and paper-in-oil .022 caps in the set neck guitars.

TQR: Aside from rolling out the basses, what's ahead?

We're doing a baritone guitar right now with TV Jones Magnatron pickups in the ElectraJet style, and we're building five in the first run. I don't know how many we will actually sell over time, but I want one for myself, so we'll be set up for them. It's an 18 fret neck, but the bridge is moved back so you don't have to extend your arm so far out when you play. On the one I'm building for myself, I'll have just one bridge piezo pickup, and it will have a fretless fingerboard extension over the body that extends almost to the bridge pickup. To my mind it will be great to have the baritone thing going on, with the ability to slide chords up or play slide on a fretless surface above the 18th fret. Other than that, we're working on the full-size Strat and a new set neck model. TQ

You're invited to contact the shop directly for all guitar inquiries: www.groshguitars.com, 303-464-8717

Time Has Come Today...
Unknown Hinson

"This whole world's wild at heart and weird on top."
– Peanut

It feels sometimes as if we are drifting into a dull sameness that threatens the unique look, sound, and feel of the country that is furtively unbecoming America. In the sterile style of an international airport, a mall, or a global hotel chain, our cities and culture are succumbing to a revolting code of generic blah that dilutes every facet of our lives, yet we pride ourselves on diversity... The presumably inoffensive visual Muzak permeating America's urban landscape betrays a misguided theory of design that places an illusion of upscale conformity above the natural human tendency to embrace chaos and questionable taste, as if the Earth were a galactic cul de sac with a neighborhood covenant banning pickup trucks, yard ornaments, purple shutters, bed sheet curtains, carports, tiki torches, barbecue pits, sounds emanating from one's property that are audible from another (excluding leaf blowers piloted by $7 an hour undocumented aliens), and all other outward signs of vibrantly flawed human life being lived to the fullest. And as you, of all people, have surely noticed, America's formerly rich and exceptionally deep musical heritage is suffering

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