

THE INTERVIEW:

LAURENT BRONDEL



Laurent, it's a long way from Metropolitan Paris to Rural Maine, how did you end up as a luthier in the United States?

It's a long story... As a teenager I was fascinated with lutherie and had wanted to apply and go study violin making at Mirecourt, in the French Vosges mountains. But I had no previous experience in woodworking and was not accepted. I also started to play the violin at 15 and at the same time I was in rock bands, did my 1st tour in Germany and started a career in music.

In 1999 I moved to NYC, I had my green card since 1995 but always postponed emigrating because of ongoing working projects in France. By this time I had already stopped teaching guitar and playing gigs to concentrate on recording electronic music and engineering/producing other people's music.

However, I slowly became weary of life in the city, and spending most of my time behind computers, synths and mixing boards. I wanted to go back to singing and playing the guitar.

So on a spring day in NYC, I find myself walking out of a guitar shop on 30th St. with a '53 Martin 00-17 in my hands. I loved that all mahogany 00-17, which was so easy to play and record, but soon wanted a richer/wider tone. I started buying vintage Martins, Guilds and Gibsons but was never fully satisfied. Most of those guitars were in need of serious work.

After a couple of dreadful experiences with mediocre repairmen I decided to tackle the work myself. By this time I was already living in rural Maine with my wife. We had saved some money and we took a one year sabbatical to figure out what direction our lives would be taking.

So here I am, doing my 1st neck reset on a '66 Martin 00-18 with an old expresso machine... I bought, repaired and sold many guitars without ever being 100% satisfied.

The work became addictive too, with all the challenges and the satisfaction of returning those mis-treated guitars back to original playing condition. And I learned a lot, it gave me the opportunity to see how those wonderful instruments are built, strengths and weaknesses.

Opposite: German Spruce top with a custom rosette
Above: A Carpathian spruce / Pau rosa D-5 under construction

Soon enough, after a couple of years, I thought, well, I’ve done pretty much everything on a guitar, from neck resets to re-bracing to finish work. Why couldn’t I build my own? I swear I intended to build only one, THE one, for myself, and then move on to other things.

So I ordered a customised Martin 000 kit from John Hall, I wanted to do a 13 fret to the body 000 with a 26.5” scale. I use dropped tunings all the time. John was very helpful in providing parts and advice, he even called this project the “Amish” guitar because I wanted something very simple in terms on trim, a look alike to the Martin OM-18GE I owned at the time, down to the banjo tuners. The East Indian Rosewood sides were pre-bent and the Sitka top joined but the rest was up to me. I built this guitar with essentially nothing, I just had a router and a vintage drill press I think, no mold, no sander, no power saw. I took enormous pleasure in this project and after 2 months of part-time work, the guitar came out wonderful. It had the tone and playability I was seeking, it surpassed my expectations. Needless to say I was hooked and the only thing I was thinking about for a few months after this project was building another. So I started buying tonewood...

Meanwhile a childhood friend asked me to find him a vintage Martin in the US, like a 14 fret 00-18 or 28. He really liked the guitar I had built, but we didn’t make the connection until I told him: hey wait a minute, with your budget I could probably build you a guitar! So we became very excited and that was my 1st commission. I built him an OM with an incredibly figured German spruce top and EIR B&S, he was ecstatic when he received it.

So there I was, on my way to do this seriously. I became obsessed with lutherie, reading anything I could on the subject, asking people, trying different techniques. I spent 13 hours in the shop every day I could, sometimes more. You couldn’t get me out of there.

In the summer of 2006 I contacted Buck Curran, I liked the aesthetics of his guitars, very much influenced by Sobell like I was. Buck worked at Pantheon Guitars with Dana Bourgeois and loved my first guitar. He insisted I showed the guitar to Dana.

One month later I was hired at Pantheon Guitars working under Cary Clements supervision... I learned a lot from Cary, Dana and John Slobod. I have to say they’ve been extremely generous with their time, advice and encouragement. I worked there a little over a year and in November 2007 it was time to move on.

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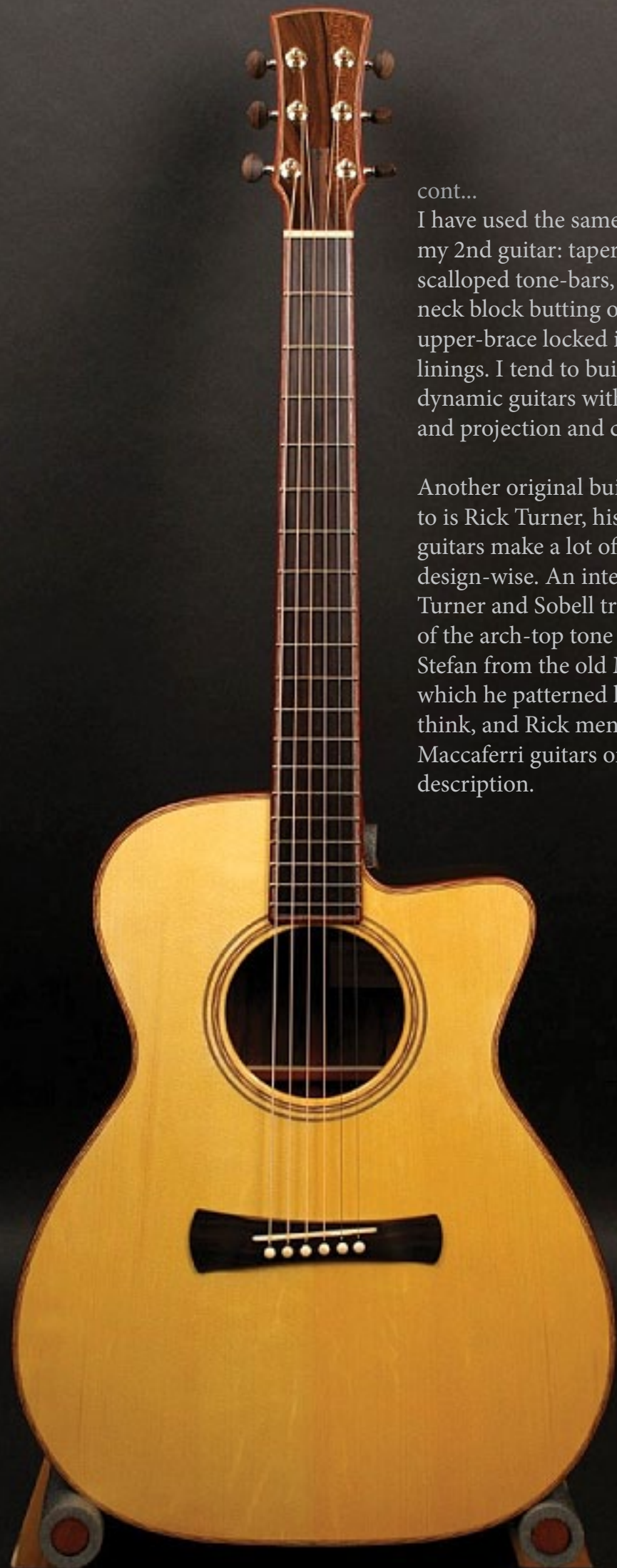
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So every guitar is an improvement or refinement on the last? I noticed that your guitars are influenced by Sobells but I take it they are designed differently?

I don’t know if every one of my guitar is better than the last, but I feel I am constantly progressing. Otherwise I would do something else. I think every steel-string builder is trying to find the sweet spot between a guitar that sounds full and a box that won’t self-destruct after a few decades with the relentless pull of the strings (140 to 180 pounds) I definitely try new ideas all the time and note the changes, if any. I am not so much interested in making the same guitar twice, or a hundred times, but rather in making each instrument unique.

I have great admiration for Stefan’s work and he’s definitely an influence, at least in terms of aesthetics. I am very taken by the tone Martin Simpson gets out of his Sobell guitars, but of course I played a few Sobells, including one owned by Simpson long ago, and was disappointed: I couldn’t sound like Martin! They’re beautiful instruments, very versatile, but I think they’re designed for players with a strong picking hand. To get the best of those guitars one has to really “dig in”, at least that’s been my perception so far, and looking at Simpson’s technique seems to corroborate that. Another guitar tone that’s been a great influence is how Michael Hedges sounds on “Bensusan”, I think he played his 70’s D-28. Totally different players and instruments but I hear a similarity between Hedges and Simpson tones: strong attack and sustain, rich overtones but with a lot of clarity and separation. Of course those are recordings, nevertheless they represented an ideal for me.

Stefan’s way of building is totally unique, from his neck-body modified bridle joint to the arched plates and bracing, he developed a totally original concept for the steel-string. I am more traditional in the way I build, at least from an American perspective. I build neck and body separately and those get assembled after finishing. I am moving toward a detachable/adjustable neck with a floating fingerboard and plan to offer it as an option.



cont...

I have used the same bracing system since my 2nd guitar: tapered x-braces and scalloped tone-bars, inverted Spanish heel neck block butting on a flat and strong upper-brace locked in the rim by the linings. I tend to build delicate and dynamic guitars with a lot of separation and projection and clear mid registers.

Another original builder I pay attention to is Rick Turner, his Compass-Rose guitars make a lot of sense to me, design-wise. An interesting point is that Turner and Sobell try to bring a little bit of the arch-top tone into the steel-string, Stefan from the old Martin arch-tops after which he patterned his first guitars I think, and Rick mentions Selmer/Maccaferri guitars on his Compass-Rose description.

Opposite: Model A1 with German Spruce top and cutaway
Below: Custom purfling around the fingerboard, top and rosette





I know Stefan is fond of European spruce and Rick of Carpathian. What's your take how the various species of topwoods work for your guitars?

I feel I get my best results with European spruce, particularly German. This is what I mostly use. For me it has it all, tone, stiffness, resonance, sustain. It is delicate and resilient and yields a solid tone rich in harmonics.

I have used Italian spruce on a couple of guitars and really like it, it is perhaps a little more delicate than the German I'm used to. I would like to try some Swiss spruce from the Alps and French spruce from the Jura as well when I can source a good supplier.

Carpathian is great, the last guitar I used it on was a myrtle A-3. It was a very powerful guitar with a ton of projection, somewhat reminiscent of Red spruce, maybe a hair more subtle in the dynamics and overtones. Besides most of the stuff is really wide grain and I love the look of it.

At Pantheon I saw a ton of red spruce and like it very much. Although I think it could lack the subtlety of the European spruces, it is a consistently stiff and excellent sounding top wood. I use red spruce for most of my bracing.

Sitka spruce can be great, like Indian rosewood it is looked down upon because there are still large supplies of the stuff and factories use it extensively. There are more average and mediocre sounding Sitka/EIR guitars out there than anything else... However one of my favourite sounding guitars was a 1974 Martin D-28 with a Sitka spruce top and Indian rosewood back and sides! Straight bracing, large rosewood bridgeplate, wide grain on the top, what a beautiful sounding guitar... So maybe I'll use Sitka spruce again one day. Like Englemann I find it is a little more inconsistent in quality than Red or European spruces, so one has to find a good source. By the way Englemann can be great too, the very best pretty close to Italian spruce.

A last word on the spruces: I think the most important factor is how and when the wood was cut. How much sap was in the tree before felling, how it is quartered and how it was dried. These are the most important factors. Also there are a lot more similarities than differences between the species, with a lot of cross-linkage, or in-between.

Finally I've used western red cedar and redwood, they have similar characteristics. Very nice low end and rich mid registers, perhaps lacking a bit in the high registers. They are harder to work with, but can be worth it.

I've heard people get good results with Port Oxford cedar, pencil cedar, mahogany and koa but have not tried any of it. Although I remember restoring a 1928 koa-topped Martin 0-18k, somebody put his foot through the side, and it was a fine sounding instrument. And my mahogany topped '53 00-17 sounded so simple and sweet...

Model A1 with Malaysian Blackwood Back ad sides, Maple neck and cutaway



Model A1 with Malaysian Blackwood Back ad sides, Maple neck and cutaway

With old growth wood stocks rapidly shrinking, do you think we will soon have to rethink our approach to tonewoods? Already we have seen wide grain and colour streaks being more and more acceptable in Adirondack spruce, and 3 or 4 piece backs more common place.

I think builders of the past were much less obsessed with plastic perfection in wood. Torres is an obvious example, with his 3 or 4 piece non-bookmatched tops, and back and sides woods with knots, defects and so on. Although it was probably difficult to obtain instrument quality lumber in provincial Spain at the time. Also looking at Baroque and Renaissance guitars it is rare to see a 2 piece back.

It is difficult to find tight-grained and homogenous coloured red spruce in large sizes and the price is usually prohibitive, so makers (and players) have adapted. How about a 4 piece top? It would be much easier to find smaller red spruce trees of greater visual quality, and the same holds true for back and sides hardwoods. Personally I find a 4, 5 or 6 piece mix-and-match back visually pleasing.

It is changing, but I think players and makers alike are still hanging onto the paradigm developed by US guitar factories the past century. Tastes developed guided by the shadow of Taylorism.

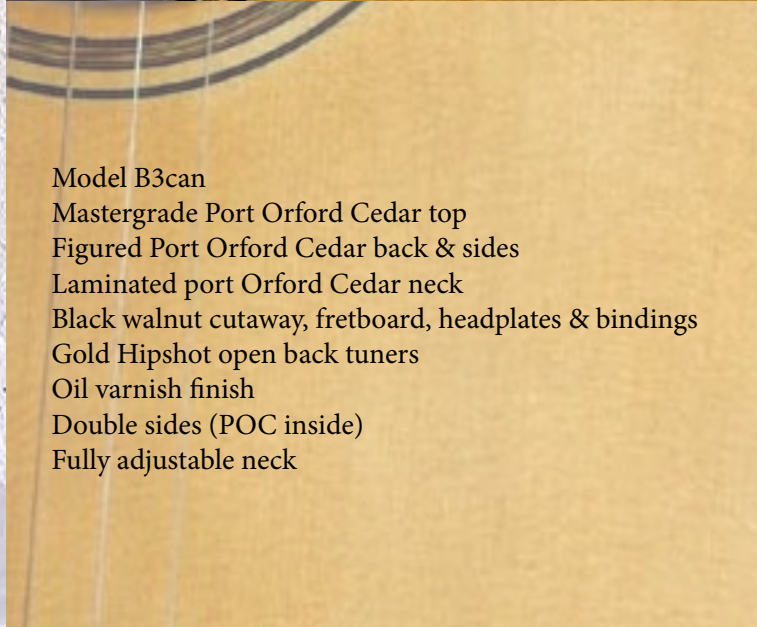
It is more time consuming to join and trim a 3, 4 or 5 piece back than a 2-piece. It also requires more skill and aesthetic sense. To assemble a top with 3 or 4 pieces one needs to join between the grain lines and try to make the joints invisible, and so on. It would be nearly impossible to mass produce such instruments and have an homogenous output.

The same holds true for the choice of tonewoods, the obsession with Brazilian is getting ridiculous. Yes it could be a great tonewood, yes it can look beautiful. So can other tonewoods. The truth is, so little of the Brazilian I've seen is outstanding, most is about average and, frankly, a fair amount is garbage. Just because it is Brazilian, makers are building with sets that would have been discarded a generation ago, or would be discarded if it was another species.

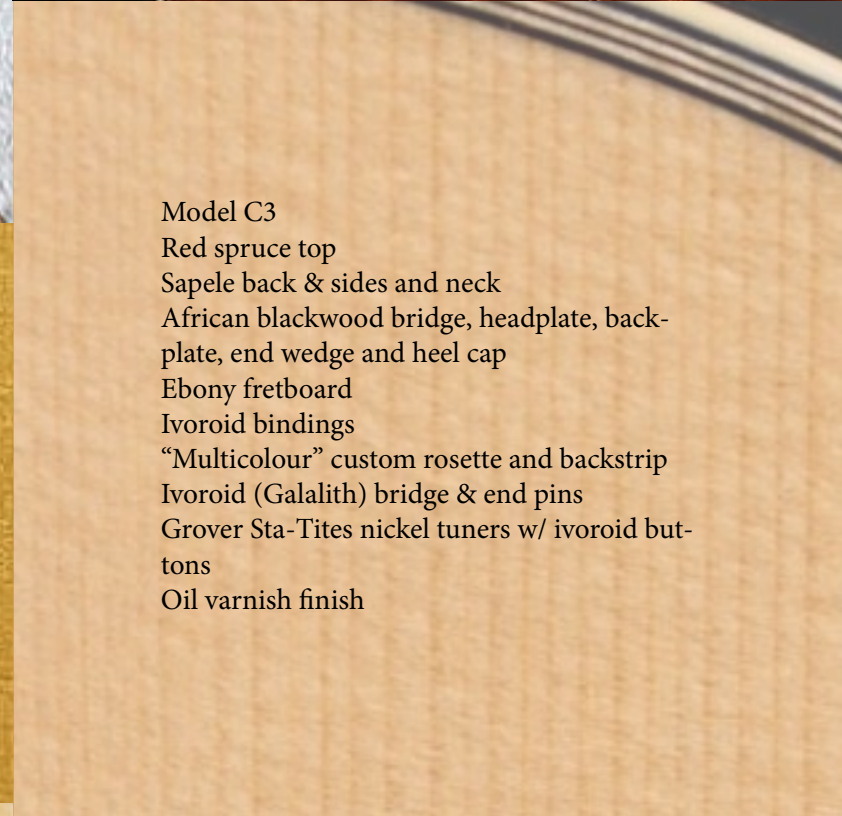
There are beautiful sounding and stable tonewoods that have just been barely noticed and we should put our prejudices aside. Also I would be interested in mostly using local, or at the very least national, tonewoods. Often the trade in exotic woods is murky and carries a cost we do not account for, whereas it affects negatively the localities they come from, or oil-based transportation which is totally subsidised.



Two alternative rosewoods: Honduran on the left and Cocobolo on the right



Model B3can
Mastergrade Port Orford Cedar top
Figured Port Orford Cedar back & sides
Laminated port Orford Cedar neck
Black walnut cutaway, fretboard, headplates & bindings
Gold Hipshot open back tuners
Oil varnish finish
Double sides (POC inside)
Fully adjustable neck



Model C3
Red spruce top
Sapele back & sides and neck
African blackwood bridge, headplate, back-plate, end wedge and heel cap
Ebony fretboard
Ivoroid bindings
“Multicolour” custom rosette and backstrip
Ivoroid (Galalith) bridge & end pins
Grover Sta-Tites nickel tuners w/ ivoroid buttons
Oil varnish finish





Finally, where do see the future of your guitars?

Refining what I am making now, in small increments. Whereas it is for structural or aesthetic design I always have ideas, or get ideas from others, that I want to put to the test. The concept of a fully detachable adjustable neck really appeals to me, so I have to come up with my own design.

Also I get a lot of inspiration from the past, so maybe in a few years I will build vihuelas and Baroque guitars out of Western Maine tonewoods!

Actually I would like that, to continue building contemporary steel-string guitars and fully explore the world of gut-string plucked instruments. I've been wanting to build a Flamenco guitar for a couple of years but haven't found the time. And lastly I have a few ideas for a harp-like steel-string, a 2 neck affair with fretless and scalloped fingerboards.

D-3 Model
 German spruce top
 Striking Macassar ebony back & sides, headplate, backplate, end wedge and heel cap
 Bloodwood bindings
 Ebony fretboard and bridge
 Laminated Honduran mahogany neck
 Gotoh 510 tuners w/ black buttons
 Oil varnish finish
 Sound port