

The Birth of 'Red' and 'Honey'

Building dreadnoughts at Woodtone Guitars

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Part 1 - The Plot:

Once upon a time...

...back in 1993, in the land of Aus', there was a TV program called 'Getaway', that focused on holidays and every week the producers would give away a free holiday to some lucky viewers. During their relaxing sojourn, the recipients would be tailed by a film crew and the resulting report broadcast soon after on the show.

About this time I decided to pluck up courage and write to 'Getaway' suggesting that they send my wife Elaine and I for a week's holiday in Hamilton, Victoria, Australia. There I'd discovered that Woodtone Guitars held five day guitar building workshops after which you returned home with a brand new acoustic guitar, built with your own hands, the sweat of your brow and substantial help from Barry and David Kerr, the resident luthiers.

Nine months had past when low and behold 'Getaway' contacted us and we were off for an intense course in guitar building.

Normally these courses would start at 9am on a Monday and end around 6pm on the following Friday, but to fit into 'Getaway's shooting schedule, our course was to be squeezed in between noon Tuesday and noon Friday. Now usually it would be nigh impossible to build a quality instrument in this time, so David and Barry prepared a couple of the components earlier. To ensure a first class job, it was standard for them to do some of the most complex tasks anyway such as bending the sides and cutting the neck/body dovetail, but in their usual friendly manner they explained and demonstrated every task so we could learn about the techniques behind it all.

Here I should mention that these courses were designed to make guitars, not luthiers. The knowledge we gained was immense, but in no way near enough to call ourselves 'guitar makers' much less 'luthiers'.

We spoke-shaved, planed, hammered, sawed, glued, sanded and filed our way through the week. and with a Thursday stint that ended at 4am Friday, (back to it at 8am) our two beautiful instruments were (just) ready to be played in front of the camera in the Hamilton city gardens by Friday lunchtime. This was only achievable through the dedication of our hosts and their lovely wives who visited us on and off during the week with encouragement and cakes. (Their involvement in the business does go far beyond this.) To top it off, Barry actually slept in the workshop on a pile of bags to ensure he would be there when we returned on Friday morning.



Barry with Reds back and sides



David with Reds top



Elaine scalloping the braces



Phil cutting the sound hole



Honeys first tune



30 minute old guitars!

We consider ourselves the luckiest of all the people that 'Getaway' sent on holiday. (They no longer do this.) As a 'relaxing' sojourn it didn't score a point. As an intense, exciting and rewarding escapade, it was tops and at the end of it the Kerrs magnanimously presented us with Elaine's guitar for free and discounted the price on mine. What I paid wouldn't have covered the rental car and three nights accommodation we were provided with by Channel 9, not to mention the massive country lunches at the local hotel that were included as part of the course.

The film crew also had a good time. Presenter/producer Geoff Watson and the sound recordist were both musos and tried out all the guitars in the office racks and generally had a ball while the cameraman enjoyed the experience too. As he said, 'There's only so many ways you can make people lying on the beach look interesting.'



Cast and crew minus 1

And now the bad news. Barry and David rarely, if ever, conduct these courses anymore. This does of course leave more time to produce the beautiful instruments you can buy in the stores, so I guess there's a better chance that wherever you are, you'll have the opportunity to play, or even own one.

Part Two - The Instruments of Delight;

Need I state it, they look and sound great! Over the years they have played in beautifully. Everyone that plays them loves them. One of the advantages of being so involved in building your own guitar is being able to chose the specific pieces of wood and fittings (from Woodtone stocks of course) and customising little things to produce an individual instrument.

Both guitars were built to dreadnought plans but Elaine's current instrument had a nice warm bass so she chose the Spruce top to give slightly more treble. This guitar has been named 'Honey', due its sound and also because of the colour the top has aged to. (It can be heard as the main guitar on the title track of the Brightwater album, 'Follow The Moon'.



Honey



Red

My current guitars were 'toppier' than Elaine's and so I followed the suggestion of the Bros. Kerr and chose a Californian Redwood sound board. This has a stronger bottom end which, as a one-time bass guitarist, I like a lot. As the photos show, this instrument has a very red hue to it so it is sometimes referred to as 'Red'. (It can be heard as the main guitar on the track 'Witchwood' on the Brightwater albums and on most other tracks except 'Big Waiting Room'. (The fingerpicking recordings were made using stereo-paired condenser mics positioned over the 14th fret.)

As I already had a narrow neck and a wide neck guitar, I chose to have a mid width neck on the Woodtone as a sort of transition guitar. Using it as my main instrument means that changing to either of the others is not such a big jump. It also means I have plenty of room for my (not really all that big) fingers.

Both guitars have Victorian Blackwood back and sides, mahogany necks, and were the first Woodtones with Gidgee fingerboards, (subsequently found on some production models) plus herringbone inlay around the sound hole. Elaine's fingerboard has a nice fiddle-back figure to it. Other woods used for the trim include Padauk, Birdseye Maple and Silky Oak while the fret markers are Abalone.

In an effort to personalise our new treasures, we came up with a few little features some of which the Kerrs chose to incorporate into a number of their production guitars. These included a tapering headstock, fret markers aligned between the 5th and 6th strings, and a flared bridge plate. Due to the tapering headstock, there was no space to mount the unique Woodtone silver logo button, so they kindly attached pins to the back and we had badges instead.

Part Three - The Postscript

When we went on our 'holiday' I said that I was looking for a working guitar not an ornament and that's how I've treated it. I'm careful but not precious with it. As a result it has been back to Woodtone to have the top refinished after a few minor mishaps put dents in it and a repair was done to the binding after it fell off the stand. If I didn't use it so much it would look perfect forever, but I wouldn't have the pleasure of its sound and feel.

We purchased L.R. Baggs under-bridge, piezo pickups and on-board micro pre-amps and Barry installed them for us. On reflection, while they are wonderful pickups, I think I would choose a set up with a more natural sound if I had to do it again now. The pickup/preamp units that I understand Woodtone now recommend, are developed and built here in Melbourne by A.G.A and are said to be very good. They have something like 4 faders, three knobs and a switch or two, allowing great versatility in setting up EQ and feedback suppression profiles. I haven't yet tried one out, but may soon have a chance to play with one mounted in a friend's Woodtone. (Nb: as at 2009 I have installed a Baggs 'I-Beam' pickup with in concert with a Marshal AS50D amplifier gives me a sound I really like. The 'I-Beam', is a little more natural and the amp has a notch filter to control feedback, amongst other treats.)

Before we met the Woodtone crew Elaine knew little about the inside of a guitar and had no real experience in woodworking. Barry and David's ability to pass on a little of their knowledge and experience resulted not only in two fine instruments, but Elaine went on to build two mountain dulcimers from kits and a hammered dulcimer and bowed sultry from scratch. (The first mountain dulcimer is on the title track of 'Follow The Moon' by Brightwater.)

I'm sure anyone owning a fine instrument like a Woodtone becomes very attached to it and this applies even more so when you've worked on it yourself, so you can imagine the shock when Elaine arrived home to find that 'Honey' and several other instruments had been stolen, along with the usual household appliances. 'Red' was lying on the couch in the case waiting to go out the window too, but Elaine had unwittingly disturbed the offenders, who must have scarpered out the back as she arrived. Two of the four guitars were tracked down at a second hand store in a couple of days and retrieved for a nominal sum, but 'Honey' eluded us for several months. Finally she was found on sale at a music expo on the show stand of a metropolitan guitar shop, having first been through the hands of well known pawn brokers. Following a public altercation with the proprietor,

we ended up paying what we considered was an unreasonable price to get her back. We do however believe in Karma and a lottery win the following day made us feel a bit better. (Needless to say we didn't spend any of it at that shop.) At last report, at least one of the thieves was on remand awaiting trial for his deeds. Maybe 'what goes round...' etc. Needless to say we have 24hr monitored security now.

I'm sure this isn't the end of the story for our friends 'Honey' and 'Red' and I trust the musical future will be bright for us all, together...
...happy ever after.

Part Four - Addendum

While we were at Woodtone, there were several instruments there for sale including this most interesting 5 string semi-acoustic bass built by a local man who had attended the guitar building course several times. As he had already built all the available models, the Bros. Kerr designed this instrument specially for him and what a beast it is too. In the photo you can see David holding it out for the camera. The solidity of the construction not only made this a feat of strength, but lent a great bass tone to the sound. Coupled with the hardwired pickup, this created a beautiful guitar and several jealous musicians, including Geoff Watson the 'Getaway' host. This is not a model available in the Woodtone catalogue, so you may drool, but don't expect to purchase one anytime soon.



Ps: Barry now produces Woodtone guitars by himself from premises in Alexandra, Vic. Australia. Go to: <http://woodtoneguitars.com.au/> to check him out.