

# Peekamoose Custom Guitars

By Ward Meeker

**P**aul Schwartz founded Peekamoose Custom Guitars in 1983, after working in the shops of not one, but two renowned luthiers; he was just 17 when he took a part-time job in Charlie LoBue's Guitar Labs, where he sorted parts and worked as an intermediary with clients. After high school, he attended college, then spent a few years playing guitar professionally. By the early '80s, he was working with Woody Phifer at STP Custom Guitars.

"Those guys were pioneers in guitar making," he said of his former bosses. "They had to solve problems, and they created rules along the way. My first serious electric guitar was a LoBue, and I discovered that it was more sonically adaptive than any production instrument," he added. "The guitar was easy to hear regardless of style or situation."

A "lucky accident" happened when LoBue began to experiment with lacquer additives in its finishes.

"I bought my LoBue in early '73, and by June I had worn the finish off the neck and body's arm roll-off. I went to see Charlie, thinking I'd done something to cause the finish failure. As it turned out, the culprit was a retardant he used to create an off-the-gun finish. He was pushing the envelope – who knew it would take three more decades before off-the-gun finishes would become practical. But, the good thing was, Charlie and his team offered to let me use the guitar to learn how to strip and prep-sand it for refinishing."

Working in two shops that built unique instruments and were held in high regard for their repairs shaped Schwartz's attitude toward the guitar as an instrument. "I believe that to

design a high-performance guitar, you must have been a musician with enough sensitivity, as well as performance and recording experience, to recognize when an instrument is letting you do your job. Of equal importance is understanding why some designs have become classics, what makes them great, and recognizing their weaknesses."

We recently spoke with Schwartz to learn more about his approach in the Peekamoose shop.

**When Peekamoose was in its infancy, how many models did you offer?**  
Models 1 and 2.

**No-nonsense names!**  
Yes, and there have always been three sets of pickup options – traditional, active, and my custom circuits, which employ custom-wound Duncan pickups.

**Did you start with guitars that were fairly traditional in appearance?**

Though some had, and still have, the outward appearance of a classic, all have significant differences in structural configuration, geometry, hardware, and circuitry. People may think, "Oh that's an X or Y clone," but, after playing one, musicians realize that with our guitar, they can express themselves more freely, with less physical effort, and there are sounds that the classics can't hit.

**What was the concept behind them?**

We make several classically influenced models where the instrument and electronic layouts are a homogenous unit. Any Peekamoose instrument is a tool for hitting required "sonic benchmarks," plus, they create new sounds. We focus on what owners love and what works best.

I give a lot of thought to ergonomics; many working musicians suffer back



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problems, carpal tunnel and/or tendonitis, so I've spent years learning how to make instruments work in ways that allow a player to move naturally instead of fighting the instrument, which in turn aggravates repetitive-stress injuries. Musical instruments should naturally meld with human anatomy.

I had another instrument-understanding growth spurt thanks to [the fret-levelling system] Plek, which is a wonderful tool. To make the best use of it, you should already be great at fretwork. I bought my Plek because doing several grinds/re-frets every week is exhausting; I wanted to spend more time making instruments. Seven years and a few thousand Plek runs later, I have routinely observed, in hard numbers, neck behavioral characteristics Woody Phifer demonstrated to me 30 years ago. Understanding what necks do under load and over time is the key in doing great fret work. Working under someone as inspiring as Woody instilled in me why some instruments are a dream to play and maintain, while others are a colossal pain.

**When did you expand the line?**

In 2005, came the Model 3, and in '09, the Model 4. In 2011 and '12, I revised the bodies on models 1 through 4, partly because we were finally doing wood fabrication in-house and I finally had the freedom to make the adjustments I'd wanted to make over the last 12 years; the CNC houses we were subcontracting to did not have

**When did you hire your first employee?**

In 1988. My current crew is wonderful. Indira Wiegand and Andrew Carton are our shop managers and client interface, Craig LeBlang works at repair bench number one, Giovanni Leyva at bench number two, and Benjamin Birillo translates what I do into functional CAD models and cut strategies.

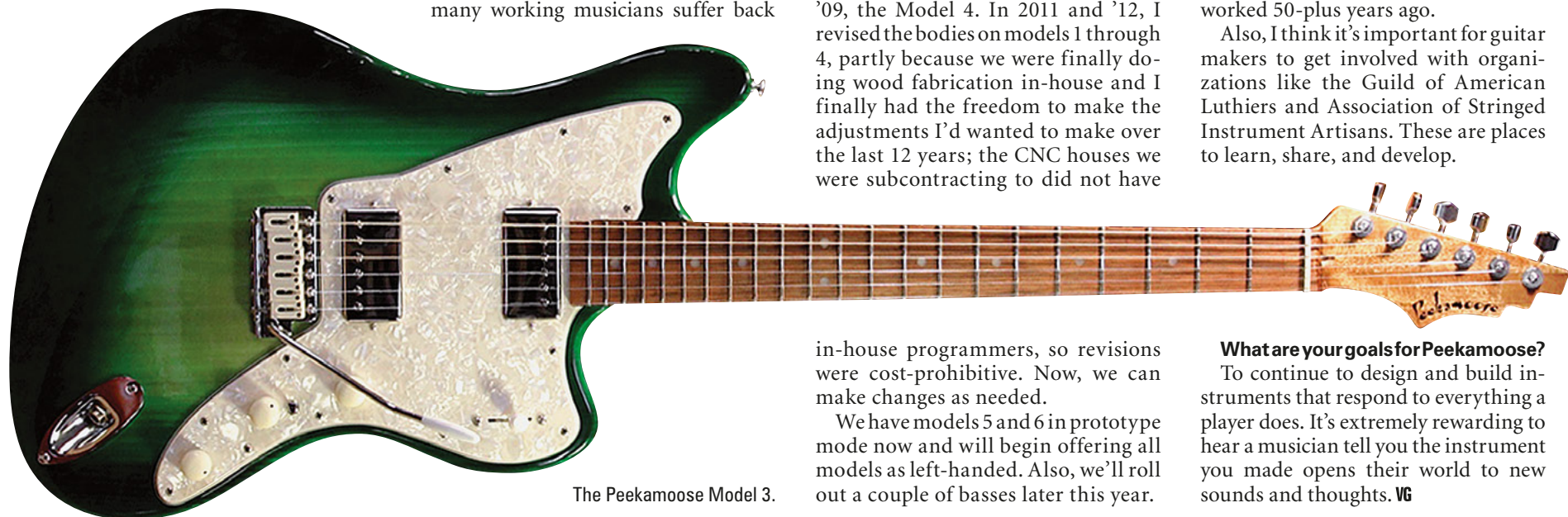
**What are your hopes for the future of the industry?**

Musicianship and music are art forms that benefit from instrument construction that places greater emphasis on sonic and aesthetic appreciation of classics without being trapped in production flaws of the past, which often makes quality hit-or-miss. Some instruments come off of production lines being nice – possibly great – but many more come off the line requiring nursing from a luthier with strong diagnostic skill and chops. It's as if some of the majors have forgotten how and why their instruments, which have become classics, were designed as they were. The designers have retired or passed, leaving the companies imitating themselves without understanding why a design worked 50-plus years ago.

Also, I think it's important for guitar makers to get involved with organizations like the Guild of American Luthiers and Association of Stringed Instrument Artisans. These are places to learn, share, and develop.

**What are your goals for Peekamoose?**

To continue to design and build instruments that respond to everything a player does. It's extremely rewarding to hear a musician tell you the instrument you made opens their world to new sounds and thoughts. **VG**



The Peekamoose Model 3.

in-house programmers, so revisions were cost-prohibitive. Now, we can make changes as needed.

We have models 5 and 6 in prototype mode now and will begin offering all models as left-handed. Also, we'll roll out a couple of basses later this year.