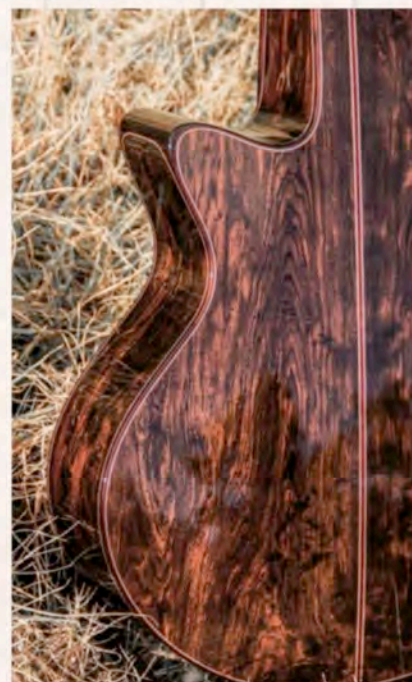
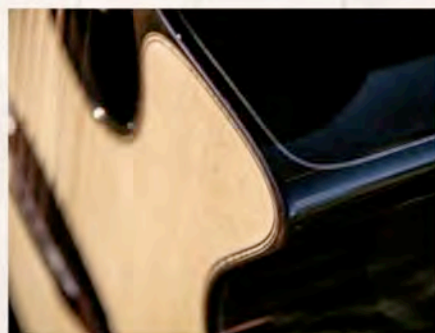


THE WORKSHOP

Casimi Guitars

BASED IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, CASIMI GUITARS SPECIALISES IN HANDCRAFTED, BOUTIQUE GUITARS. WE CHAT TO THE MATTHIAS ROUX AND MATTHEW RICE, THE COMPANY'S FOUNDERS, LUTHIERS, AND DESIGNERS. . .



Formed in 2012, Casimi Guitars is the brainchild of Matthias Roux and Matthew Rice. Matthias has been a luthier for 15 years and has built over 250 guitars by hand while working at the Maingard Guitars workshop in Cape Town, South Africa. Matthew Rice is a designer and musician with a background in fine art (something immediately evident in the instruments) and woodworking.

For people in the UK, could you tell us about how Casimi Guitars came to be?

Matthew: We've been best friends since

early childhood. We were basically juvenile inventors, fascinated by all manner of contraptions and ideas. This spirit continues today, but now we have specialised in the quest to build the ultimate acoustic guitar. After leaving school, Matthias went into a full-time apprenticeship at Maingard Guitars while I developed my career in music. In 2006, Matthias ran a guitar building course with his colleague at the time, Colin Rock. I joined that course and designed and built what later became the Casimi C2 prototype guitar. During that time, I also joined the Maingard team and took on the inlay work there as well as

being involved with all other processes. Matthias has the experience and hard-won skills of a master luthier. I am a designer, skilled jewellery maker and carpenter, and bring these abilities to the team. But both of us are engaged in all the areas of building guitars.

You're based in South Africa; how is the acoustic guitar market over there?

Matthew: We do a small amount of business here, but aside from our guitar building courses and a few orders a year, most of our energy is directed overseas. In reality, it's a very small market here.

There is a lot of interest and appreciation for this kind of thing and an enormous wellspring of talent, both in music and craft, but the buying power is mostly in Europe and America. We are currently looking at ways of making a more affordable guitar for the South African market, but it's a tough thing to get right. Pricing and quality are a delicate balance of time and expenses, but we hope to be a part of stimulating growth for this industry in our country.

Casimi guitars are very idiosyncratic – where do you draw inspiration?

Matthew: In our case, with two of us coming to the bench from different points of view and meeting there, there are different and common sources of inspiration for both of us. As an art student I had a passion for Art Nouveau and this has informed my design ethos very much. But more than this, we are very lucky to have our workshop located on the doorstep of a nature reserve and so this is definitely one of my primary sources of design inspiration. Particularly in terms of the continuity and flow of its designs. The wood itself is another source of fascination and inspiration. Its often many-layered luster and silk and the way it holds a shape or glows in the light.

Matthias: I have to say that Matthew has and always will be a wellspring of inspiration for me. I have watched him fill countless scrapbooks over the years with all sorts of fantastical drawings and inventions of all kinds. One of Matthew's mottos is "design first, edit later". His design perspective is completely unique and through this, he challenges me constantly as form and function sometimes go head-to-head, then we both arrive at the answer without compromise, and a new guitar is born. The great Spanish builders of the classical guitar have always inspired me. Their time-honored skill and techniques are what really excites me as a luthier.

You've got some distinguishing features on Casimi Guitars: tell us about the body shapes you build, to start with...

Matthew: I've based our shapes on the ellipse, parabola and hyperbola. These shapes arise in nature usually as the result of movement of some kind and the interaction of the laws of



physics. I have worked hard to try to achieve designs that are not fragmented but form more of a continuum. When designing a guitar in this way (you could say holistically), it seems natural to blend each line and plain into the next, to blur the boundaries between the different parts and knit them together in a more continuous way.

Then there's the unique hollow headstock design you use. How was this developed?

Matthew: In nature, everything non-essential is removed. I looked at headstocks for a long time before putting this idea on paper. It struck me that the traditional classical slotted headstock was an excellent solution for reducing weight and retaining strength. Then I realised that the central column of the slotted headstock would be unnecessary in a steel stringed guitar using standard modern machine heads. There's no remarkable sonic difference apparent between different headstock designs in our experience. Sound is produced by the sum of all the parts and woods that make up a guitar. Mostly it's an aesthetic and structural element.

As well as being a guitar builder, you're also a musician who uses the C2 Signature Series. Does your playing complement your building and vice versa?

Matthew: Our slogan is "built by musicians for musicians" and we take great pride in that fact. We want these instruments to be every bit as playable and sonically awesome as we can possibly make them. There's a lot of investment buying that goes on in the high-end handmade guitar market and a lot of these kinds of guitars are best suited to staying in a very well regulated environment or in a glass case. There's nothing wrong with that, but we want our guitars to be as effective on a stage or in a studio as they are hanging on a collector's wall. This is also the thinking behind our ST (Stage Tourer) guitars. Being a musician I feel gives



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us an advantage because we have an insider's scoop on what works well from a musician's perspective. Casimi Guitars has been an exercise in determination and our belief in what we do has been tested to its limits, but we have weathered an exceptionally difficult environment and time. Starting a small company in South Africa during a recession with 90% of our market outside our borders has been challenging to say the least.

You produce a 10-string classical – what are the challenges making a 10-string in comparison to a six-string?

Matthias: In some ways, the biggest challenges are aesthetic ones – how to resolve things such as 10 machine heads on a headstock, while maintaining an elegant design. It is pretty much the same as building a six-string, but obviously



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with some extra structural and strength considerations. Generally, the rule is: you always want to remove as much weight as possible without reducing strength to the point of implosion. In the case of a 10-string, you need to add some of that weight back for strengthening without stiffening everything up too much. It's a balancing act, but that is always the case no matter how many strings are involved. The same principles apply to all of our guitars: voicing, aesthetics, structural considerations, choice of woods and, of course, the needs of the customer.

Tell us about the Stage Tourer you produce. What is the thinking here?

Matthias: The ST adds a specific angle to the build. We use some more robust structural elements and add carbon fibre to certain areas in the braces and neck. We also bolt the dovetail neck joint instead of using glue. The idea is to build a guitar that is every bit as responsive, but is capable of handling the rigors of the road. Another consideration in a big stage or band context is feedback. We build things slightly more rigid so that rogue frequencies are discouraged from hijacking your show. Some of the features of the ST have migrated across to our normal instruments too. For example, the carbon fibre reinforcing bars in the neck and headstock have been so successful at promoting sustain and eliminating dead spots in the neck that we have started using this method across the board.

Bevels appear on some of your models; how do you get these to fit in with the aesthetics of your guitars?

Matthias: As a concept, they are built for ergonomics, but they have great aesthetic appeal as well. They lend the bindings a kind of calligraphic movement by placing weight and emphasis on parts of the line. This serves to reinforce an already established movement, so it's a perfect marriage. In fact they come standard on all our guitars unless the client specially asks for them to be omitted.

Tell us about your timber procurement.

Matthias: Some of our favourite spruces come from Europe. Mostly

we like to hand-select this but we

also sometimes deal with suppliers who we trust enough to know what we are looking for. Our favourite wood for backs and sides (which is African Blackwood) has to come to us from the US at the moment. We are constantly on the lookout for new sources. We also use local woods such as African mahoganies and tonewoods like padauk. Our favourite combination, to date, has to be African Blackwood back and sides and European spruce top.

Due to CITES, you've come up with some creative ways of achieving similar effects with materials which are not restricted...

Matthias: Here in Africa we are blessed with some amazing unrestricted woods and materials, many of which are still relatively undiscovered. We believe there are still many relatively undiscovered materials that will prove their true potential and worth as tonewoods and inlay materials in time and many of those are here on our doorstep.

Matthias: We try as much as possible to ensure that the wood we buy is procured in the most sustainable and ethical way possible. We are planning on offering a completely green guitar from certified sources within the next year. We are also looking at ways of being involved in tree planting here in Africa.

What construction methods and techniques do you favour?

Matthias: Mostly old-world techniques. We try to keep things hands-on and avoid as much machining as possible. We take pride in doing things by hand. As human

beings we get to practice our art and grow through it. A machine does what it does, sometimes extremely well, but it will never gain the experience and never become a master of its art, nor will we, if machines do the work for us. However, we do live in the 21st century and we see the benefits of certain machines in certain areas.

Tell us a little bit about the bracing pattern that you use for your guitars?

Matthias: We use a modified X-brace pattern as well as lattice and fan bracings depending on what type of model. The braces are indeed an extremely important part of shaping tone and response, but it's important to keep in mind that the sound of a guitar is made by the interaction of all the many parts, dimensions, woods strings and finish. Each of them influences the next, and of course this all influences bracing and voicing as well. So we keep this in mind all the way through the build, from start to finish.

What's on the bench at the moment?

Matthias: We have a C1 South African commission and a C3 for a German client who has ordered for the second time. Also we are getting close to the finishing stages of two C3s for two of our full-time students as well as an interesting project for a completely new concept.

How important is the relationship between the builder and the customer?

Matthias: This is a very interesting and rewarding part of the process for us. Essentially, it is very intrinsic to the final result. We have worked very closely with some of our clients, entering into protracted correspondence over aspects of customisation, tone and design. Our goal is to build our client their dream guitar. We encourage our clients to become part of the creative process as much as they are comfortable with and within the confines of reality. In some cases this has resulted in forging great friendships as well. It's also something we have come to appreciate through the students who embark on our guitar building courses. It's an amazing benefit for us to see the eyes of our clients and students light up with joy when they see and hear their new instruments, knowing the process that got them to that point.

What's the key to making a great guitar?

Matthias: We both believe in working out of a spirit of collaboration, inspiration and innovation.

For more information on Casimi Guitars, visit: www.casimiguitars.com