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CASIMI GUITARS - LUTHIER INTERVIEW

Posted by Michael Watts on October 17, 2014

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Casimi Guitars of Capetown South Africa have been getting a lot of attention since their inception three years ago. Their excellent craftsmanship and stunning tone certainly made an impression with me!

I interviewed Matthias Roux and Matthew Rice of Casimi to find out more...



Matthew Rice and Matthias Roux

MW - Tell me about the beginnings of Casimi Guitars

C _ We've been best friends since early childhood. We both attended the Constantia Steiner school here in Cape town and that's where we got our first experience of building guitars as part of extended high school projects. Matthias was lucky enough to get the help of Marc Maingard with his build and he later apprenticed with Marc in 2000. Over the next 10 years, Matthias built some 250 Maingard guitars largely singlehandedly. In 2006 Matthias and Colin Rock of Maingard guitars offered a guitar building course. Being a musician, Matthew joined with the expressed purpose of building himself a working dream guitar. Matthew joined the Maingard team in 2007 on the strength of that build. That guitar was to later become the prototype Casimi C2. The inspirations flowed from there and we realised we would have to start our own company! In 2012 Casimi Guitars officially opened its workshop. Things have been picking up momentum ever since.

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MW - Who are your influences in the world of acoustic guitar building?

C _ That's an interesting question. As far as sound goes, we'd have to mention our senior contemporaries Ervin Somogyi and Michael Greenfield as way pointers and sources of inspiration. Of course Kevin Ryan has been instrumental in the origins of our flowed bevel and Marc Maingard was a huge facilitator of all that we do. Having the opportunity to work and learn through building his guitars has been an amazing education. Its also a huge privilege to be building at this time in the history of the guitar. It has been called the golden age of the guitar, because there are literally hundreds of great Luthiers out there and we get to learn from all of them and be part of the evolution of this instrument.

Our lineage is basically from Santa Cruz guitars via Maingard guitars, but we have become increasingly interested in the work of Ervin Somogyi, Michael Greenfield and Michihiro Matsuda. However, much of what we do has developed in relative isolation. Being about as far south as you can get in Africa, we are located very far away from most of the world of Luthiery. We have never had the opportunity to do the pilgrimage to meet Somogyi or attend any of his voicing classes, so its been a lot of detective work to gather all the clues and join the dots. Its always been inspiring to read the pearls of wisdom that Somogyi drops across the web here and there, in his blog and in papers and articles. Being forced to figure it out for ourselves has been a very real process of making it our own. We've really had to use our ears!



Carved, lacquered Ebony rosette with Abalone inlay

MW - What other influences do you have from art, music, nature etc?

C _The steel stringed guitars we build are primarily finger style instruments, so that genre is an obvious influence on the way we build.

In terms of aesthetic design, nature is probably our primary source of inspiration. The continuity of nature's designs are a source of never ending inspiration. Art nouveau and Japanese art and design are very present as well.

Michihiro Matsuda is someone we both admire and his work is always a source of fascination for us.

Music in general is also part of the palette of aesthetic influences. The idea of harmony and flow is very present in every aspect of our designs.

The fundamental laws of physics present us with shapes such as the Parabola, Hyperbola and Ellipse. These shapes encapsulate the principals of mass, inertia, momentum and flow. All our designs are fundamentally associated with these ideas. Rather than basing our shapes on the classical circle and square which are perfect and static, we have based our shapes on the Elips, parabola and hyperbola which are moving. The lines are constantly accelerating and decelerating, swinging through the corners like a race driver. The only straight lines on our guitars are to be found in the strings and neck. Everything else is supposed to reflect the infinite continuity of flow that governs our physical universe. So each plain and line blends into the next.



Inner architecture of front and back bevels

Coming back to nature, you could say that our guitars are designed as far as possible to be like living creatures. I believe that we reference everything we see back to our own bodies subconsciously. This is related to our innate perception and understanding of body language. Body language most often is the physical manifestation of emotions and health. It manifests as the physical interaction of tension and relaxation. Any given shape will evoke a subtle or a strong psychological response in us because we subconsciously see its body language. This is born out by experience in martial arts, but also, architecture works very effectively with this principle. The general rule is that healthy bodies are attractive bodies, so our shape takes into account the basic elements that make a body appear healthy. Lean, honed, smooth lines that are supple and agile. There is an element of athleticism incorporated in the way they are proportioned and balanced.

The ideas of bio-mimicry, where everything non essential is removed, are a big influence on us too.

The idea that form follows function is central to our work. As I mentioned, we are both musicians, so the understanding that these guitars are first and foremost for the express purpose of releasing music into the air keeps our feet on the ground with regards to innovation, but also informs every part of our work.

MW - How did the C2 model come about?

C _ The C2 was where it all began for us. The original prototype of this guitar was designed and built by Matthew as his personal performance and studio instrument.

As a musician, Matthew had spent many frustrated years sketching out his dreams of the ideal guitar. So when he had the opportunity to build one with Matthias, he leapt at it. He brought all his drawings to the workshop and the ideas began to coalesce.

Every aspect of that guitar was considered for maximum tone and functionality. The pinless system we use for our bridges had its genesis in that first C2 as a means of speeding up string changes on stage. The hollow headstock began there as a simplification of the idea of the slotted headstock. The deep cutaway to allow maximum reach to the upper frets on a 12 fret body join. The body shape had its origins in comfort and maximum tone and projection.

At last, one very emotional morning the first set of strings was put on and it had a voice! From that moment on we knew we were onto something.

MW - Tell me more about the C2 Signature we have at TNAG



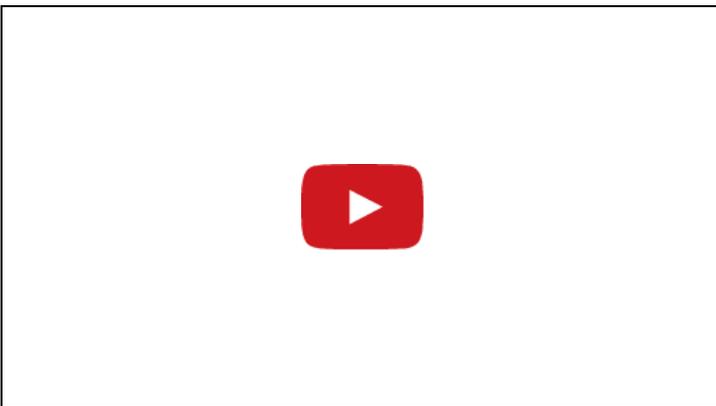
C_Our C2 model is the equivalent of a grand auditorium, being 16" across the lower bout, 20.1/8" in body length with a typical depth of 4.5/8".

This specific C2 is actually a very special instrument. Besides having an amazing set of African Blackwood for back and sides and the finest woods throughout. It was originally built as our showpiece instrument and was not intended to be for sale. As such we threw everything we had at it. It represents a sum total of what we could achieve in tone and build quality at the time. All our signature features are there to represent a summery of our aesthetics and capabilities. It is extravagant while maintaining restraint and subtlety. It is a good many steps forward in evolution from the original C2 and was built over a period of two years (2011 -2012) with much careful consideration. We are rather sad to see it go, but the evolution continues and we are exited about the next build along these lines.



Its worth mentioning the signature features on this guitar. All these features, (The hollow headstock, carved rosette and hollow port bridge) can be added to any of our other models. The designs are created to make it possible to include all or any single feature on any model.

The original C2 was built with all these signature features as part of its original design. Later we realized that it would take two of us 3 months to build just one guitar like that so we would have to find a way to simplify things. Thats where the aesthetic of our C1 that is currently on the wall at TNAG HQ fits in.



MW - Tell us about the design of the C1 model

C _ This C1 currently at TNAG represents our more minimalist take on aesthetics. As mentioned before, this guitar could also be augmented with any or all of our signature features to customise it further. But this particular C1 represents our most minimalist aesthetic. It features a solid headstock, inlaid, rather than carved rosette and solid, rather than hollow port bridge. It still has features like the flowed arm bevel and flowed purflings and rosette because these come standard on all our guitars unless specifically omitted for individual customer preference.

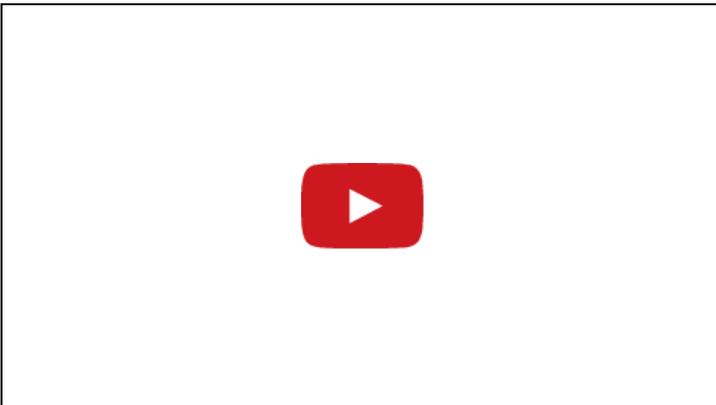


The C1 is smaller than our C2 . It is designed for a powerful sound with a lot of midrange and high-end punch without losing warmth. It is a very focused yet well balanced tone with maximum sustain and projection. We think it's Ideal for finger style and acoustic lead players.

This guitar is also a nice size for a touring musician. It is the equivalent of a Grand Concert guitar being 15. 3/8" across the lower bout, 19. 3/8" in length along the body, with a typical depth of 4. 3/8"



Our body shape remains the same as the C2 as it does in all our models. The most important difference from one model to the next is size, so that is the only difference we employ. Of course dimensions of sound hole, body depth and scale length do shift, but the basic Casimi shape remains. Therefore it can be hard to see a dramatic difference between our C1, C2, and C3, but the real difference is in the sound and the feel of the various sized models. Of course signature features which can be included or omitted will also make a difference to the appearance.



MW - How would you describe the Casimi sound?

C_ That's an interesting and complex question.

Taking into consideration the different tonal responses of woods and body sizes as well as client preferences, in a nutshell, we are always looking for something that incorporates these essential ingredients: Tone, clarity, projection, separation and sustain.

A music teacher once pointed out to me that the silence just after the music has ended is where you can really hear what the piece was all about. To create the right silence, a musician must possess utmost sensitivity. He must be completely

present and alive in the moment and his instrument must not hinder him in any way.



South African guitarist Guy Buttery with his Casimi C1

In the pursuit of this unhindered instrument, we look for these attributes in our sound:

Tone that is rich, full and powerful with fat trebles and growling basses. Each string and part of the spectrum should be complete in itself yet contribute harmoniously to the overall tone picture. Besides power and warmth, we look for a lot of clarity in the basses and besides clarity we look for a lot of power and warmth in the trebles. The mids should be rich, clear, full, powerful and well balanced. The overall tone should also be complex and complete, yet well coordinated and controlled, stacking secondary harmonics in harmonious layers without clashing or dissonance. (something that is only possible with perfect intonation)

Sustain is something we try to get as much of as possible. The magic of translucent ripples receding ever so slowly into silence. This is another reason for a well coordinated and balanced spectrum. We want to hear the whole spectrum for as long as possible lingering on the fringes of hearing.

Projection: We try to allow as much of the voice of the instrument out of the box as possible! This all contributes to the tone and sustain, but also allows for maximum expressive headroom and dynamics.

Clarity is key. HD is what we are after. So we aim at really getting that crystalline sound picture.

We like to hear each individual string contributing its unique voice to the choir, so separation is very important to us.

We are strong advocates of the 12 fret guitar, Many of the design features of our guitars stem from this consideration. ie the very deep cutaway to allow access to the top frets. We are currently looking at a way to recess the heel to make even more room up there without moving the body join to the 14th fret. We just feel the 12 fret join makes tone an easier target and we always want more tone!

To sum all of this up, we'd say the Casimi sound is powerful, articulate, balanced and clear with long sustain. We are aiming at something of a piano-like quality.

Specifics such as attack, focus, and decay would fall more into the realm of customising the sound for different clients and genres of music.

MW - What are your favourite materials to work with?

C _ African Blackwood is a strong favourite of ours. Having everything in spades from very wide and well balanced spectrum to massive sustain, (almost a kind of built in reverb) as well as power without becoming muddy. Not to mention stunning finish. Spruces of various varieties, but particularly European spruces. We feel the clarity and projection attainable with spruce is unsurpassed. However, having said that, we really enjoy working with a wide variety of woods and materials. Here in Africa we have the advantage of many great and as yet, relatively undiscovered woods such as Paduak, Wenge, Sapele etc. Some really great woods are also rather underrated such as Indian Rosewood.



Ultimately its about understanding what any given material is capable of and building in such a way that enhances the teamwork of all the materials together for the specific sound you are after. The sum of all the parts of a guitar is really what makes it's sound.

For inlay, we use anything from pearl, metals, woods, stone and anything else that is beautiful and has quality.

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