

Music City Craftsmanship

A Look Inside the Guild Custom Shop in Nashville

Story by Eric Kingsbury Photos by Bucky Barrett

From the eras of Jimmie Rodgers and Loretta Lynn to our own time of George Strait and Shania Twain, Nashville, Tennessee, has been the undisputed heart and soul of country music. While faces and fashions have come and gone, that heart beats as loudly as ever in the honky-tonks downtown where hotshot session players gather to jam. It beats in the historic studios along Music Row, where the walls still ring with the classic sounds of Chet Atkins, Hank Williams and Merle Travis.

Ask most anybody about Nashville and it's this legacy that springs to mind—cowboy crooners, hillbilly pickers, The Opry, Hee-Haw and Nudie suits, country music in its most conspicuous forms. If you ask people in the music industry, however, a different picture emerges. Blues, rock, jazz, soul, gospel—all kinds of music gets performed and recorded in Nashville on a regular basis. A day or two in the streets of the Music City will smash your preconceptions and convince you that the Nashville community cares about music, period, without conditions.

More specifically, Nashville is a great place for guitar players. On an average weeknight, one can stroll from club to club and hear some of the best session players in the nation. Everyone seems to play. On my three-day visit, I was propositioned four or five times by musicians looking for one more player to round out a group. And, of course, there's a bevy of first-rate guitar stores capable of satisfying the most selective gear addicts.

The Perfect Place for a Custom Shop

Nashville's musical orientation, along with the growing number of artists living and working in the Music City, caught the attention of Guild management when the idea of opening a Guild Custom Shop came up in 1996. All things considered, Nashville seemed the perfect place to locate the Guild Custom Shop. Fender, Guild's parent company, had already

opened a Nashville office in 1991, and the head of Fender Nashville, Bruce Bolen, Sr., seemed the perfect man to bring the Guild Custom Shop to life.

Born in England, Bolen took up the guitar at age six and hasn't put it down since. After migrating to America as a young man, he studied under the likes of Howard Roberts, Johnny Smith, Reggie Boyd and Homer Haynes, developing a sophisticated stylistic blend of jazz, rock, country, blues and funk. Over the years, Bruce has released several solo albums and has played studio sessions for more major artists than he can count.

A calm, genial man, Bolen is as comfortable in the woodshop as he is in the recording studio. He has worked as a guitar designer since the mid-'60s, first at Gibson and then at Fender, and over the years, he has been responsible for the design of guitars for such top-shelf players as BB King and Chet Atkins.

Under the personal direction of Bolen and fellow guitar-design veteran Tim Shaw, Guild opened the Custom Shop in 1997, but space, and therefore production, was limited. The Shop focused initially on high-end acoustics such as the Deco and the Finesse, as well as the limited edition 45th Anniversary, a gorgeous maple-bodied version of the old Guild F44. The limited edition of 45 guitars was created to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of Guild Guitars in 1952.

In 1998, the Custom Shop was expanded considerably when it moved into an 8,000 square-foot former pharmaceutical warehouse. The new Shop was immediately equipped with climate-control systems and a sophisticated spray booth. Additionally, the Shop in Nashville received a boost from Corona, California in the person of Fender Custom Shop master builder Mark Kendrick, who took the job of Production Manager at the Guild Custom Shop in January of 1998.

"We ran an ad," recounts Bolen, "and I interviewed several people, but none of them felt right. So one day, I get a call from Mark Kendrick.



Far left, Bruce Bolen and repairman Mark Piper confer with studio ace Michael Rhodes (center) on a Starfire bass.

Near left, Custom Shop Production Manager Mark Kendrick cuts out a Crossroads body.

Below, the Custom Shop crew, from left, Mark Kendrick, Tim Shaw, Mark Piper, John Kornau, Ronnie Anderson, Evan Ellis and Thane Shearon.

