
Guild: An Introduction

The year was 1952. The place was a small loft in New York City, just a mile or so from what is now known as the West Village. A group of five guitar makers—all of them older men with the steady hands of experienced woodworkers—were completing the bodies, necks, fingerboards and headpieces of the first Guild guitars.

The man who had brought the group together was the late Alfred Dronge, owner of a music store and former professional guitarist. Two of his craftsmen had been in retirement after decades with a prestigious New York guitar factory. Two others were guitar makers who built a few instruments each year for players who came to them on recommendation. The fifth was a finisher. Their combined experience in guitar-making exceeded 200 years. They believed in quality.

Alfred Dronge was a perfectionist—a patient man who was in no hurry to place his instruments on the commercial market. He played every Guild guitar himself (so few were produced that this was not impossible), and when his fingers ran over a particularly good fretboard or a body sang with an especially resonant voice, he would pass the word to some of his friends in the studios uptown.

Thus Guild in the beginning was a limited production guitar. There were just a few models, with customized variations as requested by the professionals for whom they were built. The tradition of hand craftsmanship has never been compromised by Guild to this day.

Guild was a convenient place for professionals to visit, try guitars, and work with the men who were hand-building their instruments. New York was one of the recording capitals of the world;

radio and television stations maintained staff musicians on contract; and there was considerable work for free-lancers in the clubs around town. There was also a trend towards smaller bands, which meant more gigs for more guitarists. Alfred Dronge was in the right place at the right time.

During the mid-Fifties, as Guild's production capacity grew and the company began to compete with the older names among quality guitars, distribution became national. Dealerships were established in greater numbers. Guild won acceptance in the Hollywood recording studios, the Las Vegas clubs, and everywhere guitarists performed.

In the early Sixties, America began to re-discover folk music. It was the day of the coffee-house, of folk groups touring the colleges, of charismatic soloists carrying the words and music to their young audiences. Guild had been building classic guitars because Alfred Dronge was himself a classical guitarist, but now there was also great demand for steel-string acoustic instruments. The F-50, D-50, D-40 and F-212 were among Guild's original flat-tops.

A parallel phenomenon was of course rock and roll. Acoustic electrics were among the first instruments Guild had ever built, but these were deep-body jazz guitars—the X-500, X-175 and Artist Award. Rock and roll guitarists wanted a thin, hollow-body electric. Guild's entry was the Starfire.

During those years, Guild also built its first solid body electrics. They had names like Thunderbird, Polara and Jet-Star, but they had the electronics and fingerboard that rock guitarists—by then into hard rock and its variations—were looking for.

Meanwhile, in 1956, Guild had moved from New York City to Hoboken, New Jersey, where factory capacity could be expanded and a group of younger workers trained. Engineering and research departments were set up as the company thrived. In 1961, Guild became a publicly owned corporation. In 1966, Guild became a division of Avnet, Inc., which is a diversified corporation in the consumer electronics, automotive and industrial fields.

In 1968 and 1969, guitar manufacture was transferred to Westerly, Rhode Island, where Alfred Dronge had discovered a group of woodworkers whose skills could be applied to the building of fine guitars. Many of Guild's most experienced workers made the move to Rhode Island with the factory, while administrative facilities were relocated in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Under Leon Tell, president, and Neil Lilien, vice president, both of whom had worked closely with Guild's founder for many years, manufacturing and product innovations have continued uninterrupted.

Today, Guild guitars are exported through distributors in Canada, Europe, the Far East, the Southwest Pacific area, and South America. The company and its products have earned international stature.

Guild grew up with contemporary music during the era of the guitar's most significant development, when the instrument became deeply woven into the artistic and social fabric of the time. At 24 years of age, Guild is not one of the oldest, is not the largest, but is certainly among the foremost makers of quality guitars in the world.