

The Axe Builder

Former Collin student crafts guitars for famous musicians

by Heather DARROW



It was a day Rob Bridges will never forget. Just outside the Cotton Bowl Stadium, renowned musician Bo Diddley invited Bridges inside his trailer. He sat on the couch beside the rock and roll pioneer. Just when he thought it could not get any better, Eric Clapton—the only musician to be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame three times—sat down next to him. Mere inches away from fame, fortune and immeasurable talent, Bridges was in awe.

“For the first time ever I had to tell myself to breathe,” Bridges said.

It was the antithesis of his life in 2009. Bridges held his breath as the construction industry took a dive, leaving him without a job. However, instead of dwelling on the lack of work, this former band manager decided to merge his two loves. The door of construction slammed shut, but the window of opportunity was wide open, and Bridges did not miss a beat. He began constructing guitars, and today his creations travel from one end of the country to another, slung over the backs of musicians playing with Miranda Lambert, Poison and Heaven Below.

Quest for perfection

The perfect moment with Diddley and Clapton drives Bridges to continually pursue the dream of creating flawless guitars. According to Bridges, there are some aspects of guitar making that can be perfect if you use technology and machines. To accomplish his goal, Bridges decided to take Computer Aided Drafting and Design (CADD) classes at Collin College.

“I want a perfect product. The better it is, the more fun it is for me. When I started classes at Collin College, the customers were coming one after the other. I was making four guitars at a time,” Bridges said.

The classes at Collin provided the

information and assistance Bridges needed and kept him riveted to his seat.

"I didn't want to miss a second. I was computer illiterate and AutoCADD has so many commands. Professor Warner Richeson is laid back. Whatever problem you had he would help you with it. He is an artist and knows all of the programs so well. By the end of the intermediate class, I was able to create a perfect drawing. That was amazing!" Bridges exclaimed.

A retired TI engineer, Professor Richeson has been teaching at Collin College for 15 years. A CADD expert, he designed hundreds of homes and close to 40 churches in north Texas. He says it is not uncommon for professional engineers and architects to enroll in Collin College CADD classes.

"I tell my students, 'You cannot make a mistake I have not already made. If you make a mistake it is good because you learn more.' I love to use practical assignments. Students know that if they go to certain addresses they can see the buildings we are working on in class," Richeson said.

After mastering CADD, Bridges designed guitars and sent electronic files to a company in Washington that used a Computer Numerical Control machine to cut out the guitar body. Sending the specs out to have a guitar made saves Bridges six hours, but the real advantage is the precision.

"It was dead on perfect. It is easy to get .065 thickness using CADD. You can add as many zeros as you want and it is still perfect. There's no way it can be that perfect by hand," Bridges said.

Not every guitar lends itself to the mechanized process. Destroyers have a special angle in the neck that cannot be cut on a machine, so Bridges still constructs many guitars by hand.

Grinding the axe

Aden Bubeck, bass player for award-winning country artist Miranda Lambert, has performed on television, in music videos and in Carnegie Hall. He commented on Bridge's guitars from San Diego where he was opening with Miranda Lambert on George Strait's final tour.

Heather Darrow is a public information writer for Collin College.

Photos, Nick Young, Collin College.



Rob Bridges shows a photo of a perfect moment with Bo Diddley and Eric Clapton.

"Rob's guitars are so striking. He made Miranda a purple, Flying V guitar. The first thing you notice is how pretty the wood is and how vibrant the colors are. Rob makes beautiful, precise guitars. You can get exactly what you are looking for from the wood to the size of the neck or the types of pick-ups. I have some guitars that fight you. Rob's guitars make it easy to do what I do."

Bridges made three guitars for Bubeck, an orange bass, a blue bass with a unique, extended sustained sound and a special guitar Bubeck dubbed "Sardine," which is made from a plank of the stage of the former Sardines Ristorante Italiano in Ft. Worth which featured jazz seven nights a week.

"The blue bass has an aggressive sound, and it cuts through other electric guitars. It is the most aggressive sounding bass I own. It works well in big rooms. It is hard to get guitars to be heard in arenas. Our sound guy and monitor engineer commented on how clear the blue guitar was and how well it sat in the mix. I played the blue guitar all night in Houston at The Woodlands. Being a Texas boy, it was special because Dusty Hill from ZZ Top was there," Bubeck said.

Bubeck says he played Sardine during several Miranda shows at the end of the 2013 tour, but he especially likes this guitar for recording.

"Sardine is more mellow and better for the blues. Rob makes very special instruments that have character. So many companies make guitars that don't have personalities. Rob's guitars have personalities, and you can tell

with all the time he takes that he cares about his guitars," Bubeck added.

Perfect may be a pipe dream for other people, but Bridges learned that a perfect body is possible with CADD design. Today, he continually tweaks his guitars in an effort to exceed the standards of renowned musicians. It's Bridges' special touches that make all the difference, like the last guitar ever made for Diddley, a triple nickel, rectangular guitar with special foot pedal switches you can control with your hands to accommodate the fact that Diddley's toes were amputated.

Soon people across the U.S. will be able to view another Bridges' masterpiece made for NASCAR legends Leonard and Glen Wood, slated to be housed in the Wood Brothers Racing Museum in Virginia. Within the year, Bridges plans to open a high performance guitar shop in Deep Ellum, and soon he will be tweaking Bubeck's guitar during the 2014 Miranda Lambert tour.

The construction industry has its perks, but for Bridges standing backstage while a musician evokes a sound from a guitar he made, bringing thousands of people to their feet screaming for more, is infinitely better.

In the words of Rob Bridges, "It is pretty cool when you see your guitar in front of 20,000 people."

For information about Bridges' guitars, visit www.brimstoneguitars.com or www.facebook.com/rob.bridgesbrimstoneguitars.

For more information about CADD classes at Collin College please visit www.collin.edu/academics/programs/cadd.html.