

Meet The Luthier Virgil Mandanici

An in-depth interview by Duane M Evarts



come a professional luthier. I just found a passion in my 46th year of life that I can't seem to quit. The ideas are endless and I started making custom guitars for people and they enjoyed part of my journey with me. They seem to keep showing up and I really dig making dream guitars for people.

When did you actually begin your career as a luthier?

The summer of 2010 was when I started the drawings on my computer and the following August (2011), the Dueling Dragons was done... with a documentary film of the build!

What sets you and your guitars apart from other fine luthiers and their creations?

My guitar builds are about a journey that gets archived through photos and videos that originate with a conversation about what the client is looking for in a guitar. I need to see if there's an actual "fit" between the client and myself before anything is built. There seems to be more builds that I have passed on because there are more people out there that seem to think that if you are a custom builder, you can make anything, and I don't really do that. I have certain models they can choose from and then we go into wood selection, parts to pickups that I wind here in-house. I do lots of customizations for each client and all of my builds are one-offs, but I don't do "custom shapes". Some people are intimidated because of the inlays I do and think my guitars are really expensive! That's true to an extent, but only if you are getting lots of inlay, which is obviously an aesthetic and is usually the last thing that I discuss in regards to a custom guitar. All of my clients witness photos every time I am working on their guitars. These photos are posted on social media, where I have around 10,000 fans (between Facebook and Twitter) that are cheering-on their guitar; from the original blocks of wood all the way to the



What did you do before becoming a luthier?

I have been quite fortunate with my journey in life. Many things I've done in the past 52 years led me into the art and craft of lutherie. Things that have been most beneficial actually helped me market myself. For instance, I have been an artist since I was a kid. I started doing pen & inks by the time I was thirteen. Really fine-line stuff, which helps with the etching into the shell for the inlays. In the early 80's, I started getting into photography and joined the Navy. Upon leaving the Navy in the mid 80's, I took courses to become a producer for Public Access television in Tucson, AZ. This was followed by me doing voice-overs for radio and television. The six years prior to getting into guitar building I owned a web design company. So in theory, I had learned the skills of an entire marketing department that could produce videos, photography, copy for the website and the website... all in one guy – me!

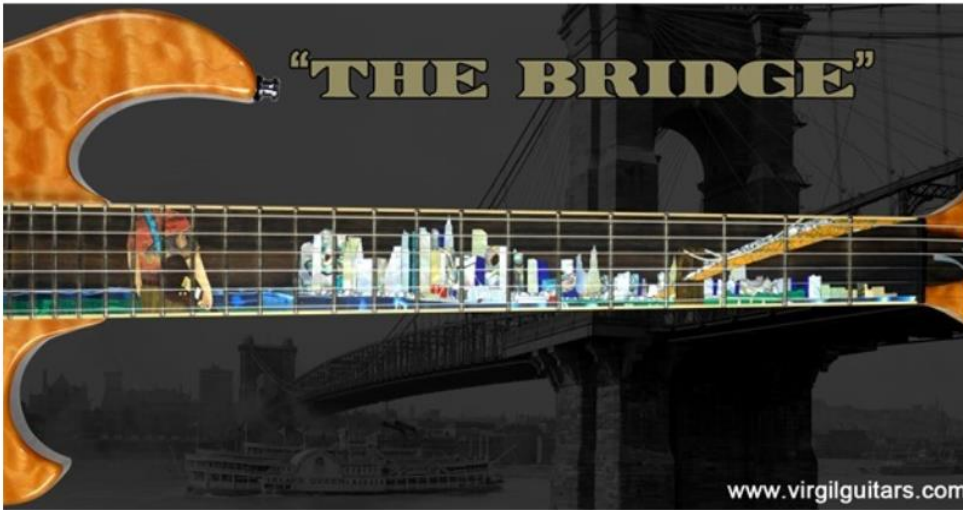
Share the circumstances that led you to become involved in the art of lutherie.

It was a chain of events really. I was having a custom guitar built by Carvin and at the same time I had a guitar student whose father, Tony, was a cabinet maker. We hit it off pretty well and he started talking me into building a guitar. I thought this was crazy, and explained to him just how much goes into guitar making and that it was way beyond cabinetry; along with the fact

that I had only done a couple of small wood-working projects previously. I ended up drawing a guitar in Adobe Illustrator just to humor Tony, but he kept pestering me and I seemed to have this thing about wanting to refine the drawing anyway. Out of curiosity, I took measurements from various guitars I owned, a Fender Strat, a PRS custom 22 and my Gibson Smartwood. I then started looking at guitar parts on Stew-Mac.com and was ecstatic to find blueprints of various parts like bridges and tuners with exact dimensions. I moved those blueprints into Photoshop to crop them out, then into Illustrator to resize them to the exact specs and discovered that whatever printed out was to the exact millimeter! So really, after merging things together, including angles of necks and everything else to the exact specs, I could make my templates that way.

What was the defining moment where you realized that you were going to become a professional luthier?

On my first guitar build, the "Dueling Dragons", I had no intention to start building guitars. I made it for myself. As the journey continued for almost a year, I started dreaming up the second guitar, which I wanted to be a carved-top. The financial struggles were pretty epic to make the first 2 guitars and I thought to myself, "If you sold the second one, it would surely give you some money for tools and more builds. There was never a "defining moment" per say, to be-



client who wants me to make a music video with their guitar. It's an indescribable experience that my clients claim is like having a cool gift over and over and over again...for months! We also have the videos and photos posted on our website and people can show their guitars off anywhere, anytime.

As a luthier, who or what inspires you the most and why?

This is a tough one, as I have never really thought about this...my inspirations always come to me naturally, usually when I'm not looking. I have played guitar since 1977 and have always admired guitars for their sound, feel and looks. I would say it's something collective. So, for instance, I look at other builders' works and some of them are ok, and others are profound. I'll see images around me during the day or something that I remember from a long time ago. And things usually hit me while I'm busy doing other things. Sawing shell is a great



example. When I'm in the middle of hundreds of pieces of shell, I can go into a "zone" where my hands and eyes are on auto-pilot and great ideas hit me there. I take that idea and keep it in my mind and every time it comes back, I try to build on it. It's where most of the guitar ideas came from. We have some dragonflies in our bathroom (ornaments and photos). That's where the dragonfly on the Silver Willow (Virgil Guitars #2) came from. A year later, my wife had a box of Kleenex tissues that had some Dogwood flowers on it. That's where the Dogwood build came from (Virgil Guitars # 9). So really, ideas are endless!

How far and wide have your guitar creations gone?

There are two Virgil Guitars in Japan, and two in Costa Rica and the rest are spread out across the USA.

Are there any well-known owners of a Virgil guitar?

I've had 3 big-name players interested in my guitars, but they wanted them for free. The irony of this was one of the most famous guitarists of all time, who had a look at my guitars suggested that I should never give these gems away. I agreed. I'm not in this gig to give away anything, no matter who the player is. These builds are hard work and take months to make and some of them go into thousands of dollars for the parts, shell & materials. If they make that kind of money, they can commission me for a build if they want.

What do you like to do when not making guitars?

There are other things I can do? Hahaha...I have a wife and 2 daughters and a couple of dogs. They are my "grounding devices" – they keep me humble and give me bits of vacation from the madness of building, which is my big obsession.

What qualities should a person have to be a professional luthier?

Perfectionism is a great start...a people person

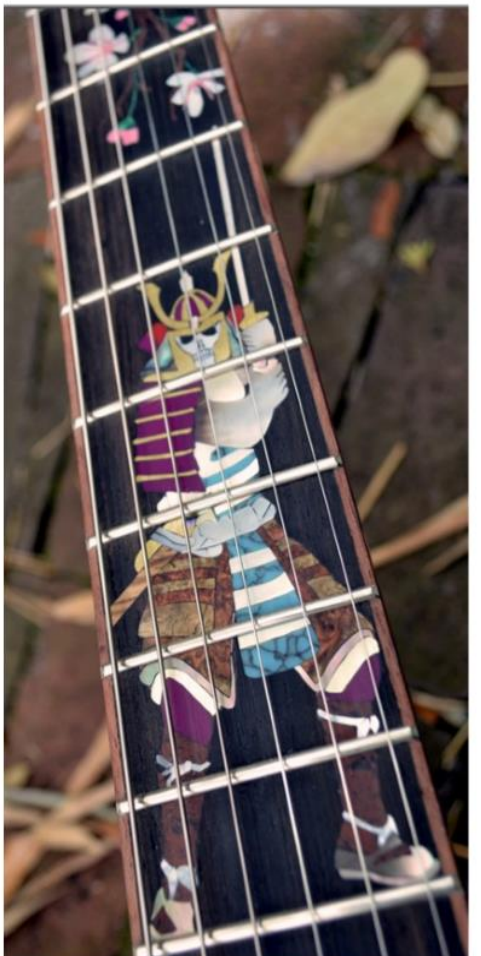
to deal with customer's needs. Creativity! (You'll definitely need that one!)

If you could share just one thing with someone considering the art & craft of lutherie as a profession, what would it be?

Make something that you like, not what you think others would like, and see where it goes. I seem to have done that most of my life in one form or another and eventually, someone else will want it, if it's cool enough.

Any other thoughts you would like to share?

My true passion is building guitars. I wish I had found this out earlier in life, but I guess I got here when I was supposed to. I know today, I'll never be able to make all the guitars I want as the ideas are endless. But I'm like a kid on Christmas every time I cut into a piece of shell, install frets, design a new headstock on my computer or deliver a brand new guitar to a client who ended up becoming a friend during the process. There are so many cool things about



guitar building and I don't know if I'll ever get bored of this. Think I'll go out and buy some sandpaper now...

Photo Credits and thanks: Kent Ross Photography shot the awesome picture of the Dueling Dragons guitar and Angelina Mandanici took the photo of Virgil holding the guitar on the magazine cover. All other photos were taken by and are courtesy of Virgil Mandanici.