

Strobel Guitars

By Ward Meeker

In his previous job as an electrical engineer with Motorola, Russ Strobel did his share of traveling – and he *always* missed his guitar.

“I’ve played since I was 12 and had many wonderful times with a guitar in my hands,” he said of being parted from it. “The guitar can be very liberating and healing.”

Any picker who travels has felt Strobel’s pain, as business trips often involve a lot of time sitting in hotel rooms with only a book or television to keep one mentally occupied. For guitarists at home, that time is often spent with the instrument in-hand. For some, it’s the only thing between them and stir-craziness!

But dragging a full-size instrument along on trips just is not a realistic option for most. The predicament provided inspiration for the founder of Strobel Guitar Company. His idea? A guitar that would fit into a suitcase or laptop-sized bag. But how? That’s the story...

So, what was the first step once you decided the world needed a foldable guitar?

I attended one of the National Summer Guitar Workshops. There, I found many players and artists who shared the same frustrations I had trying to travel with a professional, stage-ready guitar. Plus, I heard a lot of stories about airlines *breaking* guitars!

After several attempts at a prototype in my garage, I came up with a viable design and started working with Tim and Pat O’Donnell from Resurrection Guitars, in Stuart, Florida. As they saw it, the only practical solution for a truly portable guitar was to find a way to easily remove the neck so it could be packed separately from the body. So we invented the StringKeeper, which keeps the strings in order when the guitar is taken apart.

When did you build the first production version?

The first real Strobel electric travel guitar was built by Tim in late 2002. We were pretty impressed with its playability, sustain, and sound. Once we had a design we liked, we went to several guitar shows to demonstrate it, and we knew from the reaction that it would sell.

How many models did you offer at startup?

The initial line was completely custom, and we focused on the guitar-playing business person looking for an easy,

convenient, great-playing guitar to take on plane trips.

After several years of limited custom production, we started thinking about how to expand. We went to the ’09 summer NAMM show and met some folks from Gold Tone, which builds high-quality banjos and acoustic instruments.



We talked about distributing the Strobel Travel Guitar through their distribution channels, but decided the best approach would be to go with a direct-sales model.

What approach did you take toward growth?

We found a small Korean manufacturer that could perform to our standards. I traveled there in early ’09 to set up production lines and quality processes. We have been very impressed with the form, fit, and function of the guitars as well as the overall quality of the instruments. When they arrive, the guitars typically only need minor setup, which I do myself. I check, intonate, and play every instrument before it ships.

What sets your product apart?

You know, there are quite a few travel guitars to choose from. Many are intended for practice or to keep your fingers in shape. Our vision is to provide a stage-quality instrument that happens to break down and fit in a computer bag. It’s a guitar that you can jam with when you get there, or take on stage and play in a band.

Do you work alone in the shop?

Family and friends help with shows



Russ Strobel in his shop.

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and promotions. Our kids graduated from the University of Florida and help with the photography, brochures, and website. One of my wood-working buddies makes custom stands, bookmarks, and pick boxes for us. So for now, we run it as a small family business.

What are your hopes for the future of the industry?

Well, guitar building is a fine art. I learned everything I know from Tim

and Pat – like how a high-end custom guitar should be built, the types of wood to use, the nuances of how things should go together, etc. There is a lot of room for innovation and experimentation.

I am always impressed when we go to a show with custom builders, just how clever people can be. My expectation is that we will continue to see evolution of how guitars are designed and constructed; there are a lot of ways to attach a few strings to some wood and make a guitar. The tricky part is finding the ones that work! VG



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