

Miracle at Felton

I make guitars. I am self-taught and have made about nine of them in the last three years. You will probably not see David Russel or Scott Tenant playing one of my instruments in the near future. Indeed, I do not play them in concert. My standards for the guitar I play are higher than I am able to reach as a builder - so far.

At the Guitar Foundation of America's annual symposium in San Antonio last year, I ran into Kenny Hill. (No one was injured) These Festivals attract guitar players, makers, publishers and others, who are widely separated geographically, an opportunity to interact and renew acquaintances. I had met Kenny before on several occasions. This time, however, on the Hill Guitar Company table was a flyer, advertising an intense, "hands on" guitar-building workshop at the Hill Guitar Company's headquarters in Felton, California. This seemed just the thing for me if I was going to move out of the "loving hands at home" category of guitar maker. I signed up for the June class.

The thrust of the workshop was simple: a small class begins from scratch and completes a Hauser style classical guitar in ten days. Did I say "simple?" My own guitars had taken between four and six months to complete...Ten days?!

At the Bethlehem Guitar Festival in early June, I spoke to a somewhat renowned luthier about my plans to attend the Hill class and its optimistic goals. "Build a guitar from the beginning in ten days? Harumph! (He spit on the floor - figuratively) Maybe assemble one from parts. (he sneered)

Since my guitars had taken me so long to build, I really did not see any possibility of the class succeeding. The renowned luthier's words hit home. Was I going to travel to the other coast, spend thousands of dollars on the class, lodging and air fair only to "assemble " a guitar from parts?

After an uneventful flight, Kenny Hill picked me up at a local shopping center where the Airport Limousine Service had dropped me. During the short ride to the shop, Kenny pointed out local eateries and generally made me feel right at home. At the shop, I was introduced to some of those stalwarts who would be helping to shepherd me through the intricacies of guitar construction. There was Larry, who was really sort of an office manager-type, and there was Arul - an apprentice of the old school who slept at the shop and swept up after the day's work and generally made himself useful in ways far too many to list.

My motel must be one of the most picturesque on the planet. My cabin was nestled among giant redwood trees, and overlooked a small river. It was about a ten-minute walk from the shop.

The first day of class began at about eight o'clock. The seven students assembled in the showroom portion of the facility and introduced ourselves. There was a wide disparity of experience represented, from those who knew virtually nothing about guitar making, to those who had made instruments before and attended a number of other classes. There was such a variety of characters that it seemed every type was represented: There was the joker, the girl whose seriousness of purpose was almost Zen-like, the "born again" fellow who tried to convert me, the quiet and wonderfully competent young Mexican, the "dot Commer" who got out in time, and me.

To work. After a tour of the shop and an explanation of the tools and equipment, we began choosing wood from enormous piles of Indian rosewood, engelmann spruce, and cedar neck blanks. So much for my fears of “assembly from parts.”

The rest of the time is a huge montage of scenes in my memory. We joined the tops and backs, bent the sides, thinned the plates, installed the rosettes, cut the sound holes, etc., etc., etc. At every step, there was Kenny to make sure you were not planing something too thin, using some power tool incorrectly, endangering yourself with your ignorant chisel usage, and generally making sure all went well. Kenny could hear the difference in tone of a power tool being misused from one end of the workshop to the other. The class would occasionally stop so the Kenny could explain a process. These explanations were always succinct but complete. You got his method - and his philosophy - in twenty-five words or less. There was joking around. There was socializing. There were lunches at the local health food grocery store. All of this was at all times secondary to the main thrust - complete the instrument.

At some point toward the end of the class we were visited by legendary guitar builder and teacher Charles Fox. He strode about the workshop, asked some questions, and gave some advice. I got the impression that he was as blown away as I was at the possibility of doing the impossible - a ten-day guitar.

As the class wound down, guitar after guitar was completed - COMPLETED!! If any guitar was going to require more time than the given ten days, Kenny would make his shop and assistance available to that student maker after the ten day period. Because this would not help some one in my situation - I came across the country from New Jersey - my guitar was among the first to come together.

I got to play my guitar for the last days of the class; all the while marveling at the quality, playability, and actual existence of my new guitar. I also had a opportunity to hear Kenny play the guitars as they were strung and tuned. You might expect a person who spends his days with his hands on power tools and sandpaper to be a player of, shall we say, “Modest attainment.” In Kenny’s case, you would be wrong - he plays beautifully.

After the last class day, the members of the workshop took Kenny and Arul out to dinner at a local and very interesting restaurant. Eating good food and drinking good wine in the soft California evening among the redwoods, it was hard to believe that ten days ago this small band of student guitar makers did not know each others’ names. It is way too soon to say we are all friends for life, but I know I will never forget my experience.

Now I am French polishing my new guitar in my home shop. I am also attempting to build the jigs and forms and to replicate the processes that I learned in Felton at the feet of Kenny Hill. Can I build a guitar in ten days? No. Can I make use of the philosophies, standards, and cheap tricks that I picked up from Kenny? You betcha!

I have been in touch with Kenny Hill by telephone in the last several weeks, with questions about dimensions etc. He continues to be very generous with his time and expertise. Call any time, he said, if there’s anything I “didn’t get” or don’t understand from the class.

I’ll be talking to you, Kenny.