

INTERVIEW: BARRY GRZEBIK AND HIS...

Grez Mendocino



When Mark Johnson mentioned that he was now playing a Grez Mendocino semi-hollow body guitar with an ancient redwood top, naturally we were intrigued. Mark brought his Grez over to the house and we were mightily impressed with its tone and the vintage-inspired look of the guitar. We got in touch with Grez founder and builder Barry Grzebiak and after a very casual and informative conversation Barry suggested that he send us a guitar that we could warm up to over a few weeks. Great idea! We received the guitar in a few days from California and we have been playing it ever since.

TQR: How did you wind up building guitars?

I've been an on again/off again guitar player my whole life. I didn't necessarily have a natural talent for playing but that didn't stop me from having fun and staying at it. I did come to guitar building relatively late in life. I started out as a product designer in audio electronics. I designed equalizers and analog signal processors, and power amplifiers for a company called Apogee Sound. A very high-end pro audio company. So I started out in electronics and that transitioned into my becoming a speaker designer. For a long time I designed loud speakers for a living. When you go to a concert and see giant enclosures hanging there, I designed things like that. Being a loud speaker designer is not something you go to college for...

TQR: I keep thinking about the Fletcher-Munson curve...

I could tell you all about that and it would make a boring interview (laughing).

TQR: I would imagine that you have one hell of a stereo system in your house.

You know, believe it or not it is surprisingly upper-end average. Designing speakers all day, you are in an upper end side

room listening to a speaker, making small changes and listening to it again... The last thing I would want to do is go home and listen to something. It's a lot like mixing an album... You might work on it all day and come back the next day and think it's awful. What was I thinking?

TQR: How did this all culminate into guitar building?

I eventually went off on my own and did a lot of work in acoustics. Then a light went off one day while I was working on my on guitars just doing basic maintenance, and I thought if you were really good at product design and knew all about resonance and materials and knew about guitars and wood working which I did, those are all the ingredients that a guitar builder might have. It just kind of popped into my brain one day and before I knew it I had built a guitar, then two, and three and four.

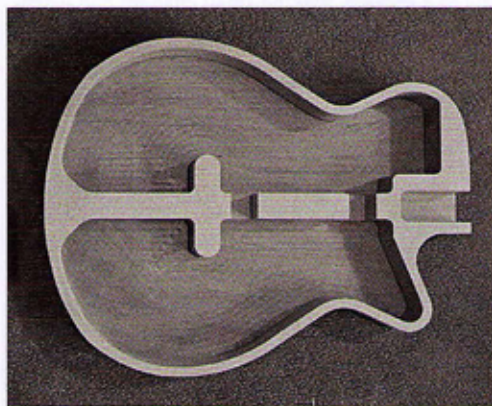
I was always a hobbyist woodworker making furniture so I had the tools and basic skills, and I'm a patient guy and not one to be in a rush to finish. Guitar building isn't an instant gratification kind of process. The first couple weren't as beautiful as I would have hoped. The very first guitar I gave to my sister in law and she still has it. It plays really well and it looks nice. I wasn't in a rush to build a guitar company and I understood that building one guitar is not the greatest accomplishment. When you have built six or eight or ten guitars and you have started to get your arms around it, then you can tell people and sell some guitars. I took it slow, I didn't go to a luthier's school, I was pretty much self-taught and I'm just pretty good at obsessing and studying, learning and doing.

TQR: What did you learn about the sound and tone of your guitars and what you could do to manipulate their sound?



Pretty quickly I started thinking about, if I am going to sell them, what is unique about them? The thing that got me excited was the resonance of a semi-hollow body guitar. So if you tap on the body of a violin or a semi-hollow body guitar you'll get a fundamental

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resonance that is within a whole step or two from the lowest note the instrument will generate. So the

resonance of the body kind of supports the lower frequencies. If you tap on the body of a 335 for example, the top and back are so thick, and the center block is doing what it is designed to do, so you really have no sense of that resonance. If you have an archtop at one end and a solid body at the other you would think that the 335 would be somewhere in the middle, but it really isn't. So what got me excited was figuring out how to make a semi-hollow body that was really in the middle and had more of a big arch top tonality to it. That's where my past experience came into play, figuring out how to make a semi-hollow body that gained back some of that resonance. That is what really got me going and the thing I took an interest in. Something that would fit into the 335 world but was a whole lot lighter and had a real depth to the sound. So the little tiny Mendocino does the job of a 335. Hopefully with a small builder rather than turning out thousands of guitars where some of them are good, some are terrible and a few are exceptional, we are seeking out and building exceptional guitars because we aren't making so many.

TQR: Have you ever built a guitar. Played it and thought, "Man, this one just doesn't have it?"

I have built guitars where I used a set of pickups the customer specified and I felt that the guitar could have sounded better with different pickups. Those are the times that are the most disappointing for me.

TQR: Let's talk about the pickups in your guitars...

I don't wind my own pickups - I'm buying from the typical well regarded winders like Fralin and Lollar and a handful of others - TV Jones. I try to search for pickups that have a certain sound I have in mind. Among five or six pickup winders there are a lot of voices out there. Even staying within a P90, they just vary so much from different builders. Depending on what I'm looking for or what the customer is looking for I will figure out what to use. The gold foils that are on the Mendocino accentuate what the guitar already does. It's a very lively, kind of acoustic instrument and the gold foils have really great dynamics and a wide frequency range. They just match

up well on that particular instrument. I have built them using other pickups, but the gold foil is a really special combination on that guitar.

TQR: They bring out the essence of the guitar don't they?

Yes, exactly. The custom guitar that I built for Mark actually has TK Smith Summertone pickups in it. For the slide playing style that he plays they are perhaps more appropriate. You can have almost too much high end when playing slide and the rounder tone of those pickups really lends itself to what Mark is doing on the guitar. Matching the instrument to the player is the goal tone wise. I have a graveyard of pickups around here and while I truly enjoy discovering a new set of pickups I can't possibly try every set I come across.

TQR: Do you have any experience with Tyson Tone pickups?

As a matter of fact I do. I have used his P90s and humbuckers and they are definitely pickups I like to use.

TQR: Do you usually build to order or are you building guitars to sell on Reverb.com?

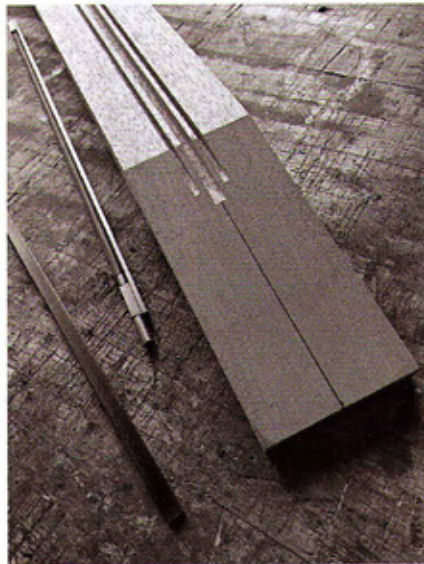
Well, both. I endeavor to keep the Mendocino and Mendocino baritone in stock. If you see one and like one I want to be able to put it in a box and ship it out. I keep a couple of naturals and a couple of black tops in stock. But I still maintain a full tilt schedule for custom instruments, and they really vary wildly as to what they are. I only build perhaps eight or ten commissioned guitars a year. The commissioned guitars could be anything from an old style archtop to solid bodies, but mostly they are archtop guitars. The custom guitar I build most often is kind of like an ES350. If someone wants a custom version of an ES350 I can do that, based on that size. And the second most common model I build is the semi hollow body. Again they are light with a great tone, and from there I will build solid bodies here and there. The one thing I don't do are completely from scratch new designs. It just takes too much time. But I have enough different models to make most players happy without designing something from the ground up, which would bring everything to a screeching halt.

TQR: What kind of tuners do you like to use?

I like to use Grover Sta-tites. They are good quality and they look nice. Because my guitars are so lightweight, I don't want to hang a set of really heavy tuners on them. Of course for the custom builds I will use whatever someone wants. But if I were to use Waverlies for example, it would knock the price point all out of whack. They cost \$100 more so I would have to raise the price accordingly. I also like the Grover mini Rotomatics. They are very easy to install.

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TQR: What kind of truss rod do you use?



A dual action truss rod. You can go online to Alliedlutherie.com. They are made up there out of stainless steel. I've also had good results with carbon fiber inserts in the neck. It helps to minimize some of the hot and dead spots in a neck. You know how some notes can just dive off

the cliff and others seem to sustain forever... The neck has a certain amount of resonance and that resonance must correlate with the fretted notes otherwise weird things happen. By stiffening the neck with the carbon fiber we can reduce the amount of resonance in the neck and put more energy into the body and the pickups. I do a lot of mahogany necks that really benefit from that, and I do maple necks as well and sometimes we won't use the carbon fiber. Most of my necks are one piece although I do build laminated necks as well. But I really like the one-piece neck where you can follow the grain pattern. I think that is just beautiful.

TQR: And bridges? That's a custom bridge on the guitar you sent...

Yes, and on Mark's he has an aluminum Bigsby top on an aluminum base that I made. I will use TonePros Tune-o-matic style bridges. I've just started to get into building my own... It's kind of like pickups in a way, there are so many good things available.

TQR: The bridge on the guitar you sent us is a standard Tune-o-matic, right?

Yes, it's a TonePros bridge – the kind of bridge you might upgrade to.

TQR: The tailpiece is interesting. Do you have that made or did you make it yourself?

I had that made by a local machine shop. It's made out of 12 gauge stainless steel. They laser cut it and polish it.

TQR: How did you find those people?

Oh, from my past in design and manufacturing. I know how to talk to vendors and source parts. It's not a foreign concept for me to design something like that in autocad.

TQR: Now, if I were able to take the top off the guitar to see how it is chambered, what would I see?

It's completely hollowed out – it's hollowed out and the center block is quite narrow. It's only about an inch wide, and then it flares out for the bridge. One of the reasons that the guitar works so well is that much of the tone comes from an unsupported top. So when the guitars got smaller, I also shrunk the center block. The amount of top that remains unsupported that contributes to the resonance of the guitar is still quite large. It also helps that it isn't made of laminated materials – it's all guitar-grade wood.

TQR: Tell us how you source your redwood.

That's kind of a slow process. Sometimes it's searching Craig's List at six o'clock in the morning, I live in northern California, and one hundred years ago everything was built with redwood. So now, it's not uncommon for someone taking down an old barn or other structure to have this wood.



Sometimes I'll get wood from contractor friends that are remodeling a house or tearing down an old barn. There are companies here that specialize in salvaging old redwood. It costs a lot to take an old barn down but if you are salvaging the wood there are companies that will take it down for free. I might get one piece of usable redwood from an entire salvage because there was no attention paid to grain orientation. But if I get a board that is eight inches wide by eight feet long and a couple inches thick I might get twenty or thirty tops out of it. What I use is what is called first-growth redwood that is 500 to 1500 years old when the tree was cut down one hundred years ago.

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TQR: What you have just described is what makes your guitars so special – the use of old growth redwood.

Yes, I can tell a buyer where the wood came from – an old cow barn or something. There is some history to it. Who would want a guitar from an old train tunnel?

TQR: That's the beauty of what you are doing. Taking reclaimed redwood that might be how old?

I would say on average 700-800 years old. I have some that is older than that – you have to count the growth rings to date it. Acoustic guitar people get all excited about counting growth rings, but with redwood you almost have to use a magnifying glass because the rings are so tight. But you can pretty quickly get an idea of how many rings there are per inch. I can have a thirteen inch wide board with 800 rings on it. That's 800 years.

TQR: So the tops on your guitars could average 500-600-700 years...

Easily.

TQR: Well, we know there is a lot more that goes into building a guitar than just picking the top, but you just described your most unique selling point in my mind. A 700 year old top is pretty cool.

Well, luckily for me this is something I am obsessed and excited about. Seeking out and finding and storing this old redwood is what it's all about. There is a good supply of it because I don't really need a lot of it. I can find just one good board and have enough redwood for the year. And if I find a really tiny board that has a good grain structure and I can get just four tops out of it, that's fine too. Being a luthier is a lot like being a musician... You don't get into it to become rich. Sometimes it happens, but don't count on it.

TQR: Wiring... do you do anything special?

Well of course I will do whatever the customer wants, but otherwise I just use good quality pots, caps and wire. I'll do a coil tap if someone wants it, but it's not really my thing. I like to keep it simple.

TQR: Fretwire?

Nickel silver jumbo, and I use a lot of Neo Gold wire. It is a different composition than nickel silver. It's made by Jescar and it is a very nice fret wire that I like to use. That's one of those things that a customer turned me on to. It's a little different color and it's very durable. There is no upcharge for it but it is a step up.

TQR: What would you like to accomplish in the future?



Well, I am releasing a new model solid body guitar in the spring. I have hopes that we will do a reasonable volume with it because that's what most people play – a solid body guitar. I have actually built a solid body guitar shaped like the one I sent

you from redwood, but I am thinking about offering different types of more traditional wood like alder and ash. Redwood is lighter than mahogany for example and it has a more uniform frequency response. I'm a little hesitant to offer a solid body redwood guitar because that would put a lot of stress on finding it, but on a custom basis I can and will make guitars out of solid redwood. There is a cost to it, because I usually have to drive somewhere and pick through a giant pile of wood.

I guess I am old enough now to appreciate the quality of life and making a living versus reaching the pinnacle of success. I'm happy doing my thing and happy that there are enough people who dig what I am doing. TQ

- Greze Specs:*
 13.25" Semi-hollow body
 1.75" Depth
 Solid old growth redwood top
 One piece Honduran mahogany back, sides and neck
 Macassar ebony fretboard
 25" Scale, EVO gold jumbo frets
 Lollar gold foil pickups
 TonePros AVR11 bridge
 Greze tailpieces
 Nitro finish
 RB Continental case

REVIEW: THE GREZ MENDOCINO

A Fine Example of the Builders Art

Is it the redwood top that reveals the wonderful tone found in this guitar? We really can't say, but beautiful it is... Enjoy.

We really didn't know what to expect from the Grez Mendocino. Sure, we had heard Mark Johnson playing his Grez,

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