



MAKERS & SHAKERS

PHOTOS BY SCOTT MARY

## Coats of Many Colors

Jeff Jewitt and his dual roles as a top finishing supplier and luthier

BY KATE KOENIG

Jeff Jewitt has always loved taking things apart. When he was a kid, he dismantled his father's lawnmower, eager to understand how it worked. (Unfortunately for his dad, he was unable to put it back together.) "That's kind of the way I'm wired," he says. "When I want to understand something, I go pretty deep into it."

This penchant for autodidacticism has served him well in his long professional life. Without any formal training in lutherie, Jewitt, now in his late 60s, has made a name for himself as a sought-after boutique guitar maker. But behind the scenes, he is as well known—if not more so—for his manufacturing business, Homestead Finishing Products, which provides colorants for many of the biggest names in the musical instrument industry and beyond. In fact, there's a good chance that the color on your favorite guitar may have come from one of his products.

### TECHNICOLOR VISIONS

As a child growing up in Cleveland in the 1960s, Jewitt had a natural proclivity for science. Captivated by the Mercury and Apollo space programs, he dreamt of becoming an astronaut. Then, as he got older, he imagined himself becoming a chemist. Meanwhile, he got into the guitar during the height of the folk

era and immediately became obsessed. His interest in science never waned, but rather took a backseat when he was sent to prep school as a teenager and found himself gravitating towards the arts, later majoring in studio art at Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio.

In the time between his graduation from Kenyon and the launch of his furniture refinishing business, Jewitt got married, bought a house, and made it his mission to make a guitar—a task he now describes as his Everest conquest. He joined the Guild of American Luthiers, subscribed to the Stewart-MacDonald catalog, and then, after acquiring copies of David Russell Young's *The Steel String Guitar: Construction & Repair* and William Cumpiano and Jonathan Natelson's *Guitarmaking: Tradition and Technology*, built his first instrument in 1985.

At the time, Jewitt didn't see himself making a steady income from lutherie. So then, in 1988, he began refinishing furniture, a trade he learned from his father, who would refurbish antique pieces on weekends. He remained in that field until the early 1990s, when he had the crazy idea that he could make colorants for the music industry. It wasn't long before he realized that he needed a deeper understanding of chemistry to make it in the business, so he bought

some video courses in organic chemistry on VHS tapes and taught himself the subject.

Jewitt then set out to not only produce colorants but to invent a product that would remedy a perennial industry dilemma. At the time, a finisher needed one type of product for staining bare wood, another for making the spray color for a sunburst, and yet another for other tasks like touchups and coloring grain filler. Jewitt says, "I thought, 'Maybe I can just make a one-size-fits-all solution!'"

After a bit of trial and error, Jewitt eventually arrived at a successful formula, and in 1995 brought the finished product, TransTint, to Stewart-MacDonald, the luthier supplier, who bought the idea immediately. Today, Jewitt's concentrated dye-based colorant (sold as ColorTone under StewMac) is used by Gibson, Martin, Taylor, Collings, Breedlove, and Santa Cruz, among other major guitar companies, as well as hundreds and hundreds of small boutique makers. Homestead Finishing Products sells everything from finishes to polishes and waxes to HVLP (High Volume Low Pressure) spray equipment to stains and colorants, marketing both homemade products as well as distributing those made by other brands.

Jewitt is currently phasing out the majority of his products to focus exclusively on colorants.

Jeff Jewitt buffing the finish on a new build for the next *Acoustic Guitar* auction and working on the bracing for another guitar.



COURTESY OF JEFF JEWITT

Having less variety in his inventory means less time filling small orders, and more time for building guitars. In the meantime, the Trans-Tint/ColorTone product line has left an indelible mark on the industry. “Sherwin-Williams has told me that my yellow is different from anybody else’s on the market, and that’s the reason that they buy from me,” he says. “And I’ve been told that if I ever discontinue my red, I’ll have death threats from just about everybody that does Gibson repair work. It’s just a dead ringer for some of the old Gibson colors.”

Jewitt’s clients run the gamut—alongside those in instrument making (which also include Steinway & Sons, the piano company), he supplies manufacturers in furniture and flooring, as well as the film, aerospace, and automotive industries. His products have been used on the sets of the *Twilight Saga* series, *The Green Mile*, and other movies, and to decorate the interior of Sikorsky helicopters. In addition to his main business, he’s authored six books and six online courses on finishing and guitar making—enthusiastically endorsing the same self-taught method that led him to accomplish what he had so long believed to be impossible. He never envisioned achieving so much, but repeatedly brings everything back to his main philosophy that has helped him every step of the way: “If you can build a guitar, you can do anything,” he says.

#### A SELF-MADE MAKER

According to Jewitt, his successful colorant business has reached its apex. Now, he says, “I want

to just focus on the musical instrument business and maybe a few other things to pay the bills.” Fortunately, that success has enabled him to pursue his dream of making guitars, a part of the business he established around 2012, after having built on the side over the years. While he still makes all of his colorants by hand, he’s hired someone to fill all the orders, which allows him more time to build guitars during the week—something he balances with spending time problem-solving colorant issues.

Going back and forth between the Homestead Finishing and guitar shop areas of his 8,000-square-foot Cleveland facility can lead to some humorous scenarios—in which that self-taught organic chemistry education comes in handy. Jewitt says, “It can be a problem in that the raw materials that I use are very powdery. Sometimes I’ll get a bunch of dye powder stuck in my hair when I’m over there, and then I’ll go to wet down a soundboard and all of a sudden, I see little spots of turquoise and red and purple. But fortunately, I know how to get rid of them.”

Jewitt’s average output is six to eight guitars a year, most of them smaller sizes like 00s and 000s. He is currently working on a few commissions. One is for former Major League Baseball player Derek Dietrich, who requested that the guitar match the color of his signature bat. Upon inspecting the bat, Jewitt saw that it was manufactured by Victus Sports—a company that just so happens to be a Homestead Finishing customer. “That made life easy,” he says. “And I love commission

builds. That’s my favorite part—making somebody’s dream realized.”

His goal is to build guitars that sound as good as they look, and when it comes to gauging the quality of the materials and the product while it’s in the process of being built, Jewitt steers clear of modern technology such as frequency spectrum analyzers to measure a guitar’s tone. “I’m still more of the intuitive, old-school type of builder in that I’m just tapping the wood all the time as I’m building,” he says, laughing.

At the end of the day, Jewitt admits the quality of the product can depend on luck of the draw. He has carefully built instruments using the finest tonewoods—like sinker mahogany or Honduran rosewood and Italian spruce, assembled with hot hide glue—and been underwhelmed by the finished results. On the other hand, he’s experienced many of those special and unpredictable moments in lutherie when a finished guitar sounds brilliant, unlike any other. “It’s like, ‘Wow, how did that happen?’ You never know, quite frankly,” he says.

Despite having made it as the guitar industry’s leading colorant supplier and achieving his dream of becoming a luthier, Jewitt says that his favorite parts of the job are the endless creative avenues and the rewards of navigating them. “What I love about building acoustic guitars is that there’s always something different to do,” he says. “You go on social media or whatever and you see something that somebody else has done and you go, ‘Wow, that’s really cool, I want to incorporate that.’ You’re always upping your own game, and I just love that.”

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