

Musical pioneer makes his mark

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For 15 years, Jim Normandy worked patiently on his idea. Through 15 prototypes — thicker metal, thinner metal, different shapes, different aluminum grades — he slowly developed a lightweight archtop guitar with an aluminum body.

The Salem resident originally jumped into making instruments for himself in the early '90s.

"I'm a bass player, and back when all of the acoustic bass stuff was going on, I wanted an acoustic bass," he said.

Although Normandy couldn't afford the \$3,000 price tag, he thought he could make one himself — out of plastic, wood or metal. After seeing his friends' reactions to his metal prototypes, he decided the idea could have some commercial merit.

"People really started freaking out," Normandy said. "The sound is awesome and he looks so cool."

He decided that the guitar market would be bigger than the bass market and diligently applied himself to developing the perfect metal guitar.

And then in June, Normandy Guitars exploded. Patents were finalized; the guitar was debuted at the Summer NAMM show, one of the music product industries' biggest gatherings.

Normandy found himself the recipient of a Macsimum Best In Show award, with the citation noting the "stunning sound as well as a look that is absolutely going to be the ice-breaker for many conversations. Turn heads with your sound, but cause whiplash with a Normandy."

Normandy made 25 guitars for the NAMM show. Since then, the orders have been pouring in through his Web site, from as far away as Australia.

Now, six weeks later, Normandy is in the process of producing his 87th guitar. Frank Black, a guitarist for The Pixies, is now in the studio with a Normandy, he said.

Now, Normandy — who moved to Salem when he was in sixth grade, and returned with his wife in 1996 after attending college in Portland — is dedicating much of his time not spent at his consumer finance job to guitar production.



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Jim Normandy plays one of his chrome finished archtop aluminum guitars.

Links

www.normandyguitars.com

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=386564022>

<http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.channel&ChannelID=386564022>

www.gearwire.com/normandy-guitars-snam08.html

www.namm.com/summer

www.namm.com

The work of building the guitars themselves has been contracted with South Salem-based Zephyr Engineering, and on a recent Thursday, the cavernous warehouse vibrated with activity.

Workers supervised the laser-cutting of enormous sheets of aircraft-grade aluminum; others welded a long metal ribbon around the two curved body pieces, hand-clamped to ensure the correct arch.

While you might expect a metal guitar to sound tinny, this isn't the case.

The tonal difference, Normandy said, comes from a much greater sustain — how long a note played on the instrument holds out — than from a wooden guitar.

"I use the analogy of a wooden bell versus a metal bell," he said. "It rings out truer, longer, louder."

Shawn Sonnenschein, guitarist for the Portland metal band Black 'n Blue, said he's the first endorsee, and is now playing only Normandy guitars.

"The first gig was a couple weeks ago in Tulsa, Okla., in front of 30,000 people (at Rocklahoma), they played really well," he said. "The guitars travel well, they sound amazing — great tone, playability — and they look incredible."

Tim Knight, owner of Guitar Castle in downtown, is so far the only officially licensed dealer. He has yet to sell a Normandy, he said, but has seen customer interest in the guitars, which retail for \$1,999.

"People are interested in them," he said. "I have three in here for customers to play. I'm nothing but giggly about it. I'm happy for Jim, and I'm waiting for more players to come in and give it a try."

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