

behind the nameplate

■ All Jim Normandy ever wanted to do was play rock 'n' roll music or be in the music business. Growing up in the 1960s, he'd hear his mom listen to Janis Joplin, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin and think "this is what I want."

But like many other musicians, Normandy realized playing rock 'n' roll for a living would be difficult while trying to raise a family. "It's difficult to do the band thing when you are starting a family and a career," says Normandy. "So I let it go."

He played bass for a few punk bands in college and started building his own bass guitars. When he first started thinking of how to make a bass, he tried thinking of different materials to use than just traditional wood. He experimented with plastic and fiberglass but wasn't impressed with the results. One day he asked a welder friend if he'd help him make an aluminum bass.

"I picked it because it was lightweight," says Normandy. "I found out later, because of the patent process, that there had been earlier patents, people who tried to make guitars out of aluminum. They weren't necessarily successful, they couldn't make it viable."

The more he refined his prototype, the more he thought of making guitars instead of basses. "There's way more guitar players," says Normandy. "I thought, if I want to do this as a business, I should work on guitars first and then get basses down."

Now about 15 years after his original prototypes, the Oregon native has introduced the very first commercially viable aluminum guitars. Last June at the Nashville NAMM 2008, the world's largest music trade show, he officially introduced Normandy Guitars' first few models of electric guitars made from aircraft-grade aluminum. His guitars won the Best of Show Award and ever since musicians have been lining up to play and buy his guitars, he says.

Working with aluminum is labor intensive, he explains. Several engineers work in the facility where his guitars are made and it takes about 40 people to make the guitars. The guitars are individually crafted and engineered on a computer. Lasers precisely cut the aluminum body, while Normandy uses hard maple necks and frets, and high output humbuckers to complete his guitars, which range in price from \$1,400 for newer models, up to less than \$3,000 for chrome models.

While he may not look and sound like a typical executive when speaking casually of his life before Normandy Guitars, when he talks about his aluminum guitars, his enthusiasm shines clear.

"The interest is insane," says Normandy about his new guitars. "I can't keep up with the orders. Professional musicians and novices alike, they love it."

Musicians who have bought Normandy guitars include Frank Black of the Pixies, the guitarists from Eagles of Death Metal and William Bragg. Besides being lightweight, aluminum guitars provide greater sustain (how long a note rings out).

"I don't think you can make something cooler looking than a chrome color guitar," he says. "They sound good, or better than any guitar. They are super cool and sound awesome."

To learn more about Normandy's aluminum guitars, check out the website www.normandyguitars.com.

