

Upgrades and Options

By Mike Nash, Luthier & Owner of Alien Guitar Factory



When it comes to luthiery, there are no shortcuts. Well, perhaps that's up for debate in a world of CNC lasers, templates, jigs, plans sold online. And, there's even an "anti-power-tool" school of thought. Flying in the face of all that, there are the kit builders.

Those who buy everything but the paint at a fraction of the cost and send a self-respecting luthier's blood pressure through the roof (on the wrong Facebook page that is). But while the craftsmanship of each instrument widely varies, I have found that simplicity done right is still quite appreciated by a wide audience. This is why the beginning luthier may still stand a chance in the open market. So here are some thoughts on how you can maximize your efforts simply with creative wood and parts selections.

Tops The face of an electric guitar can have everything from bumper stickers to plaster appliques on it! But a nice piece of figured exotic wood is easy to achieve and extremely popular. The most common practice is to re-saw or butterfly the piece of wood in half lengthwise, and then glue the two pieces back together in a splayed fashion. This creates a "mirrored" effect which gives the face of the guitar a sense of symmetry when properly lined up, or "bookmatched".



Maple is by far the most popular wood for tops due to its light color, which makes it easy to stain into any color you wish, unlike say... purpleheart. In my searching, I have found suitable timbers for as low as \$35 shipped; and made them worthy of the boutique guitar price.

Woods But what about the rest of the guitar? The timbers you choose for your body and neck will not only affect the tone, but the appearance as well (unless you're just painting in opaque colors).



For the tone-minded, the less figure in the neck the better. Tonal transfer is achieved best through wood without interlocking grains; the body may also benefit from this. Still, few ever balk at a highly figured exotic! But it's also easy to get too "busy", so most try to achieve a balance and add accessories like binding.



It is the opinion of this author, that with so many color and "tone" options available in the world of wood, there be little need for paint or stain. When you are first starting out, it's a nice option to be able to depend upon Mother Nature for a large portion of what makes your guitar "pretty". Not all of us can pull off fancy paint graphics like Ibanez.

Accessories & Parts Continuing with aesthetic options, learning how to put colors together can make or break the appearance of your instrument. Binding is a great and simple addition that can tie all your colors together. Installing binding can be tricky along necks, where frets must have their tangs nipped, or on bodies where we carve out our "comfort curves". Color matching can go wrong, as well, when selecting hardware. Gold bridges and knobs only seem to work on the "right" guitar, for instance.

From an aesthetic point of view and with little effort, taking a guitar from a zero to a "10" can be simple and add value to the instrument. Of course, "tone" should be taken into consideration as well. Just beware of all the snake oil out there. Perhaps that is a good topic for next time...

Editor - Mike Nash rediscovered an interest from his youth, in how electric guitars were made, and decided to become a student of luthiery at Red Rocks Community College. He now builds custom guitars under the name "Alien Guitar Factory" based in Castle Rock, Colorado.

For more information about Mike's current projects and available instruments, contact him at: alienguitarfactory@gmail.com or look up Alien Guitar Factory on Facebook.

