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SUPPLY

SPARROW GUITARS | BY SARA FARR

SPARROW TAKES FLIGHT

Billy Bones' Sparrow Guitars combines the best of Asian manufacturing with Canadian workmanship

Billy Bones knew early on what color his parachute was, and it wasn't standard-issue gray. No, Bones' parachute was made up of red, orange and yellow hues, with shooting flames and curlicues.

"I love rock 'n' roll," Bones said. "I grew up without a ton of money, and when I started playing guitar, I was always having to play terrible guitars."

Now 32 and a father, Bones spent his early adulthood as a touring musician. He worked a series of straight jobs in between gigs, one at a high-end furniture design shop. There, he learned "how to make an excellent end product without a million man hours." A month-long guitar-building course in Calgary, Alberta, further refined his skills. The seeds of what would become Sparrow Guitars took root.

ASIAN PRE-PRODUCTION

There was just one catch. "When I build a guitar from scratch, there is a ton of time that goes into every little detail, and I wasn't interested in only building [collector] guitars," Bones said. "I know what it takes to take a band out on the road and keep it together [financially]. They're the people that I want to be building guitars for, and for the most part, they don't have a few thousand extra dollars to drop on a good guitar."

Sparrow Guitars' Billy Bones



Bones turned to Asian pre-production to accomplish a high level of customization and quality while still keeping prices reasonable. Sparrow sends its own QC people to overseas factories to ensure those high standards — a costly expense that Bones said “proved to be totally necessary.” Currently, the company is receiving hollow- and semi-hollow bodies from a factory that primarily makes necks. “I can’t make a better neck here,” Bones said. Once the parts arrive in his Vancouver, British Columbia, warehouse, the customization begins.

Sparrow instruments have a definite punk/rockabilly-inspired feel and look. Many of the instruments are similar-looking to retro Gretsch and Gibson models, but with bold paint jobs

and unique styling and customization. “When we were just entering the market [in 2004], we knew we had to come in with designs that people related to easily,” Bones said.

Currently, Sparrow offers five models in several different finishes, all of which are done by hand. Each instrument features Vinci strings and Kent Armstrong-designed Sky pickups. Bones and his staff of 10 produce about 100 guitars a month. He primarily relies on dealers to sell the instruments but also offers custom orders through the company’s Web site.

PUNK-ROCK STAR POWER

Sparrow has approximately 50 retailers in Canada, the United States and Australia. Bones said trade shows have

helped pique their interest, as has the company’s Web site. But Sparrow’s biggest boost has come from its endorsement deals with bands, such as HorrorPops, MxPx, Bouncing Souls, U.K. Subs, You Say Party! We Say Die! and The Black Halos.

“There are a lot of people who are motivated to play a particular guitar by who else is playing it — that goes for both internationally touring acts and folks who are regionally influential,” Bones said.

When he gets an e-mail from a potential customer who wants to play the same guitar as Pete Steinkopf from Bouncing Souls, it’s “exciting! When a kid sees that his favorite band is playing a Sparrow, he’s able to get a guitar that is every bit as good as

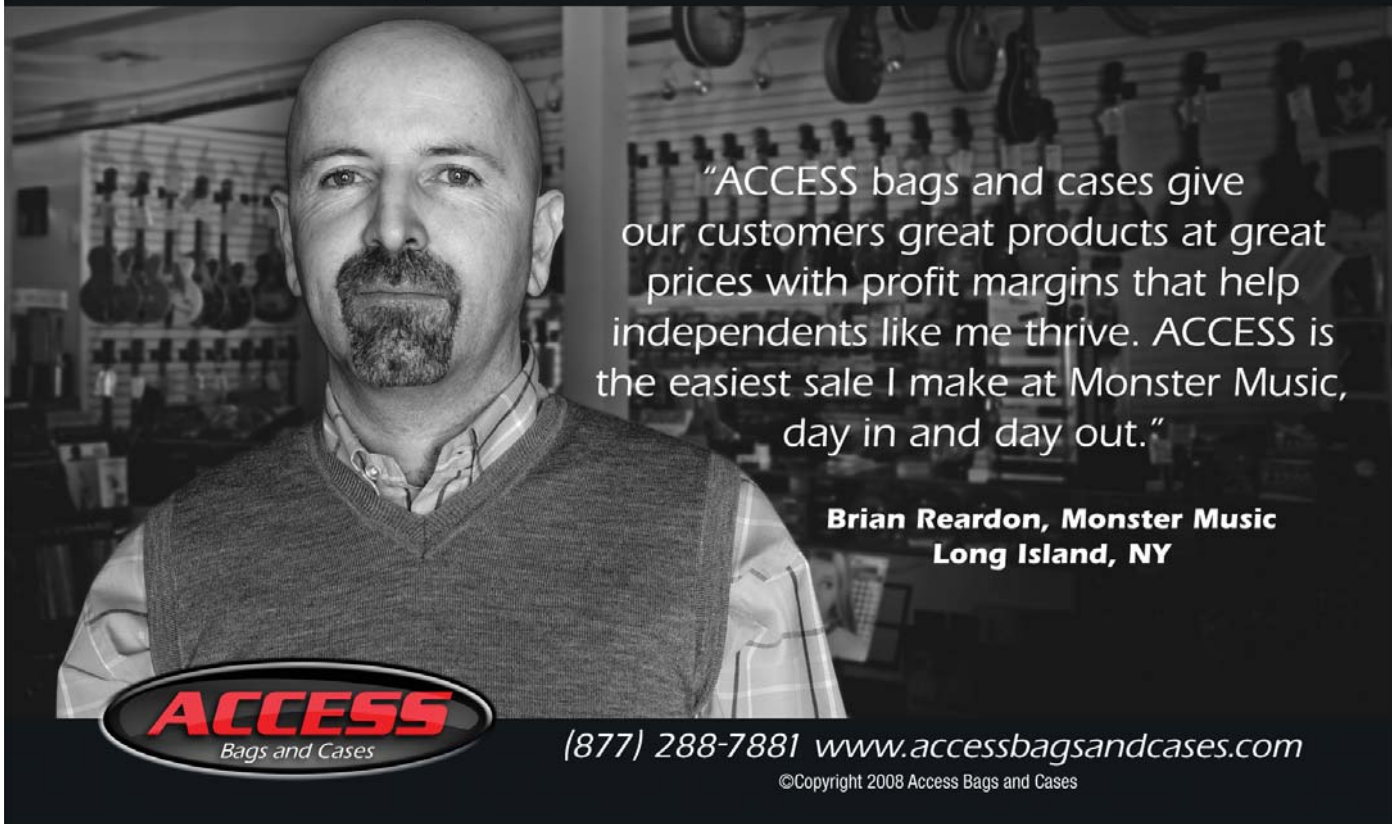
the one his favorite band was playing on stage.”

As business picks up, Sparrow plans to launch an all-Canadian-made line. Bones is enthusiastic about the control this will give his company over all facets of the production, adding that he will now be able to make small design changes in a matter of weeks rather than months. The company also plans to launch a line of basses.

Sparrow’s growth is a point of pride for Bones, but his biggest rush comes from knowing he has made a difference in the lives of kids who want cool guitars.

“We get people sending us pictures of themselves with their guitars,” Bones said. “You can see how proud they are, and that makes us feel great.” **MI**

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