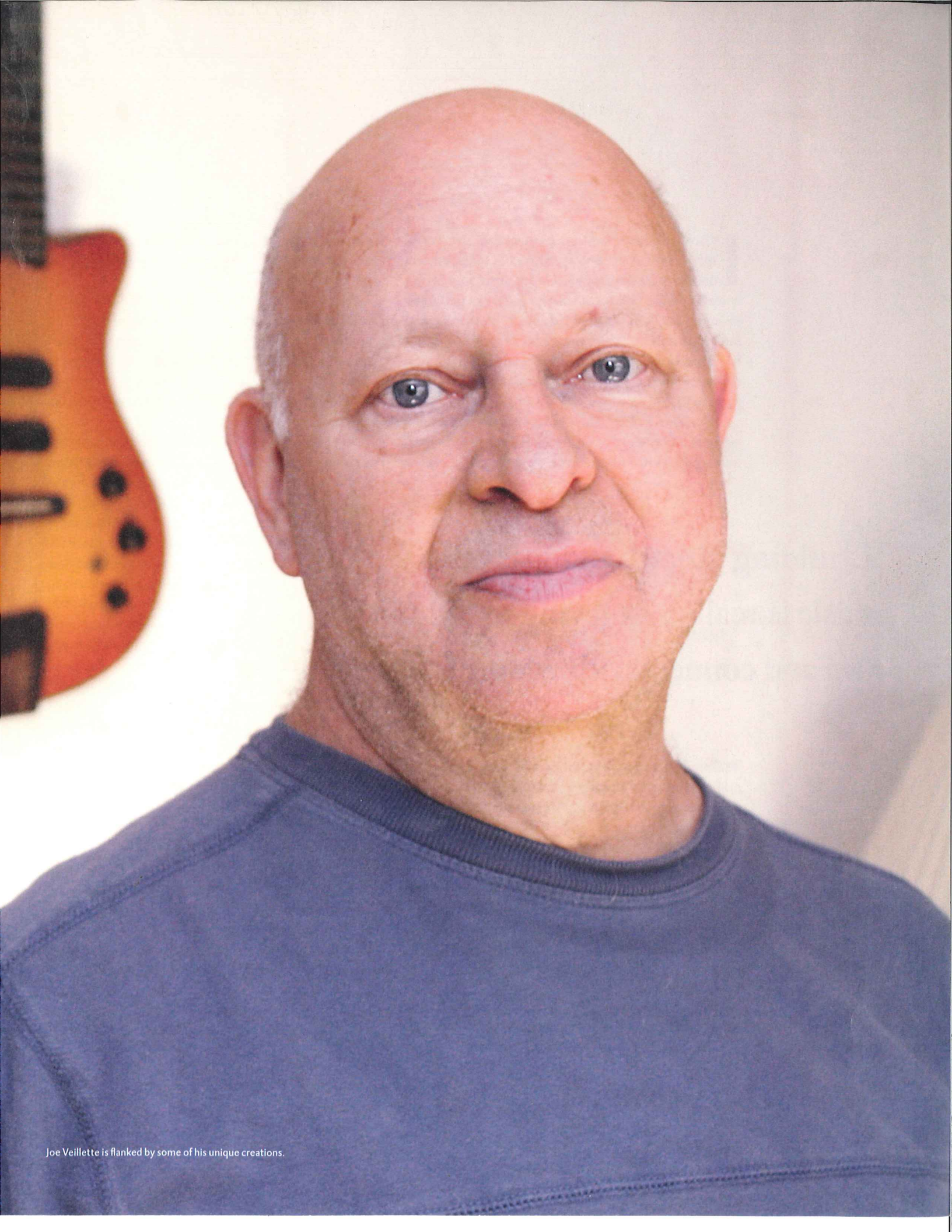


Alchemy

Joe Veillette
unleashes the
magical energy
of wood

TEXT Michael Eck
PHOTOS Thomas D. Lindsay



Joe Veillette is flanked by some of his unique creations.

IT'S A SATURDAY morning in October, the air still apple crisp before giving way to autumn sun. I walk into the Bearsville Theater, notebook in hand, and, almost immediately, Joe Veillette hands me a guitar — a spiffy, new six-string Studio 15" cutaway. I assume he needs me to find some spare real estate on his crowded table at the Woodstock Invitational Luthiers Showcase, but no; instead, I'm informed that, in 20 minutes, I'll be playing lead alongside Veillette as part of an impromptu trio.

Pen down, pick in hand — what better way to really find out what Veillette's guitars are made of than to be thrown, unwittingly, into the cauldron of performance? With

Veillette is just as happy when his work lands in the hands of a suburban bedroom picker. "I don't care who you are," he says, "as long as you play it."

He beams when telling the story of a Veillette making another regular Joe's day. "One of my customers said, 'You know, sometimes I'll have a really bad week, and I'll just pick up one of your guitars and I'll play it, and I'll feel so much better.'

"How did I do that?" Veillette asks, with genuine wonder.

At the Veillette Guitars booth here in Woodstock, instead of engaging in endless chatter about tonewood and inlay, folks are grabbing instruments and playing them. Ron Gordon, a multi-instrumentalist from Schenectady, just over an hour up the road, is romping out ragtime on a 12-string and grinning ear to ear. Later, he'll be back at the booth, scoping out the diminutive but powerful Parlor 14" and its strident, snappy tone.

"Building guitars and making music," Veillette says, "is really just trying to put out love and connect with people. I can't help but feel grate-

ful when someone lets me play and sing in front of them, and I can't help but feel grateful when somebody buys one of my instruments."

BRANCHING OUT OF BROOKLYN

Veillette (pronounced *Vay-ette*) was born in Brooklyn, with one ear glued to the radio. He loved music, but a close friend told him he couldn't sing, and he took it to heart for a long time. He was mum through most of his days studying architecture at City College of New York, but he finally caught the bug when his fiancée gave him, as he'd much hoped, a Gibson J-45 for an engagement gift.

Not long after he received it, the guitar fell, and the headstock came off. Veillette duly took the instrument to a couple of local shops, but none fixed it to his satisfaction, so when he saw a notice for a guitar-making class at the Manhattan YWCA, he signed up.

“Building guitars and making music is really just trying to put out love and connect with people.”

Veillette's frequent collaborator, Jerry Mitnick, we play a few originals, take a stab at some reggae-tinged soul and offer a sweet but gritty take of Randy Newman's "Baltimore." I'm smitten; sad, too, because once we're done, I have to give the delightful little red box back.

This is pure Veillette.

Most of the builders at the Showcase — John Monteleone, Linda Manzer, Frank Montuoro and so forth — have enlisted hot Northeast pickers like Larry Campbell, Paul Asbell and Mark Dziuba to show off their wares. Veillette, who lives in Woodstock, does it himself. Unlike many luthiers, Veillette is also a gigging musician, and he's emphatic about the fact that he makes tools for players, not prizes for collectors.

"I'm making it as much about the music as I can," he says, "rather than about the artifact or the collectability." While his client list runs to big names like Eddie Van Halen, Neal Schon, James Taylor, Ani DiFranco and Dave Matthews,



"The green light is the display for the built-in chromatic tuner, which is an option we offer," Martin Keith says. "The display (which is either an LED or a fiber-optic dot, as in this case) shows flashing blue for flat, flashing red for sharp or solid green for in tune. The brightness is user-adjustable, and the display is basically 100 percent invisible when not in use. We've actually had a customer who forgot he had the tuner and didn't realize it until we reminded him about 18 months later."



“Here I was,” he laughs, “a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn on the seventh floor of the YWCA.”

The course was taught by a young Michael Gurian, and Veillette’s career was launched. “On Tuesday nights over four or five months in 1971, Michael taught us to build a classical guitar with about six or seven hand tools. I suffered through making a classical so that I could make a steel-string, but the whole motivation, at first, was to fix that Gibson.”

Veillette continued to make acoustics privately for the next few years, until teaming up with CCNY pal and fellow architectural student Harvey Citron. In 1976, the duo gave up any thoughts of drafting and blueprints and joined forces. Veillette-Citron instruments, now rare and sought-after, were something fresh on the scene, and their sleek lines, versatility and inventive modifications are still echoed in Veillette’s current catalog.

The duo, for example, marketed the first production baritone guitar, pioneered neck-through construction and offered a sometimes dizzying array of electronics options. The instruments — in then-uncommon woods like koa and walnut — were both beautiful and dependable, favored by serious players like Jorma Kaukonen, Jeff “Skunk” Baxter and Talking Head Tina Weymouth.

VC customer John Sebastian first suggested the baritone concept to the company. He had been restringing and using a capo on a Fender Bass VI when he asked for something

with a more reasonable 28.75” scale length and wider string spacing. “By that time,” says Sebastian, a Woodstock resident, “I had been playing the six-string bass for a few years, so I knew what was wrong with it as a baritone, which was that the strings were too close together.” With a body design based on a Guild Thunderbird owned by Lovin’ Spoonful cohort Zal Yanovsky, the VC Shark was born, and with it began Veillette’s still-strong fascination with different scale lengths and tensions.

Veillette-Citron moved from Brooklyn to Kingston, New York, 100 miles north, in 1979, taking with them the heavy machinery, hand-wound pickups and dedication to craft. By 1983, the partnership had run its course, and for the next eight years, Veillette focused on playing rather than building. “I built two guitars in that time,” Veillette says: “a bass for Joey DeMaio from Manowar and an electric double-pickup six-string baritone for Earl Slick.”

When he did come back to building full-time, it was at first in a short-term partnership with bass maker Stuart Spector in nearby Saugerties, which lasted from 1991 to 1995. During that time, Veillette also designed the Deep 6 neck (allowing no-modification baritone conversions for Fender-style instruments) and, along with bass maker Michael Tobias, developed the Avante line of instruments for Alvarez.

During the missing years, Veillette traveled up and down the Hudson Valley, blazing a trail from Montreal to Manhattan



with an effervescent party band called the Phantoms. In keeping with Veillette's paradoxical nature, the Phantoms became as well known for their a cappella gigs as for their plugged-in dates, singing a crazy mix of covers in five-part harmony. A guitar builder singing without a guitar?

"It makes sense to me," Veillette says. "The human voice is, for me, the most compelling instrument that there is. There's something about doing a gig just a cappella that is satisfying on the deepest possible level." Veillette's strong feelings about the human voice apply to his instruments, albeit in an indirect way. "I consider the instruments I make as support for singing. I think of instruments, in general, as supporting people vibrating their bodies. That's what we're here for; we're about connecting to God."

Along with the occasional Phantoms gig, Veillette currently performs in a variety of settings, and he also makes a practice of singing Kirtan, a devotional form of Sanskrit call-and-response chanting. Hindu images abound in the shop and in Veillette's attached house, though the builder has a Woodstocker's embracing sense of spirituality. ("I think there are just truths," he says simply.)

Everyone in Veillette's shop plays, and that sense of communion with music is evident in the instruments that come out of it. Ande Chase and Martin Keith both play bass locally in a variety of situations. Keith and Veillette, in fact, performed together on a 2005 Krishna Das session (released

on Triloka as *All One*) with Steely Dan's Walter Becker and Def Leppard's Rick Allen. Like Veillette, Chase and Keith play instruments they've made in part or in full in the shop. Chase employs a Veillette Paris four-string boasting an ebony fretboard, an English maple cap and a Hipshot bridge. Keith uses basses of his own design — either a four- or six-string Elfin, depending on the gig — built using knowledge gained from a decade of working with Veillette.

Veillette played a Steinberger TransTrem through much of the Phantoms' history, mostly because he didn't want to confuse the two elements of his life — building instruments and playing them.

"I want there to be a clarity for what I do at any given moment," he says now. "I tried hard to keep the disciplines separate for a long time. I didn't want to feel like I was pushing one thing over the other."

These days, however, he's entirely comfortable playing Veillette guitars, especially a newly developed double-neck, which sports a supremely comfortable convex body, an intuitive yet expressive system of piezo and magnetic Lindy Fralin pickups and the built-in fiber-optic tuners available as an option on most Veillette models.

"My gigs are more fun with this," he laughs, strumming the light, well-balanced beast. "The playing — and the music I make — has also fed the building. It's given me inspiration for what should be built."

These color-coded body forms are used to make the various models: green for the Gryphon, purple for the Parlor, silver for the Studio, blue for Baritone and (for some reason) pale green for the Acoustic Bass.

The twin headstocks of Veillette's double-neck electric are both slotted, which allows for closer side-to-side positioning, because the tuning machines project backward. All of Veillette's guitars have a zero fret, which he feels gives open and fretted strings a more uniform tone and improves intonation.



THEORETICAL, EMPIRICAL, MYTHICAL

When it comes to what should be built, Veillette is nothing short of visionary. You won't find riffs on OMs and Telecasters here. "Everybody's making them," he says. "Why would mine be any better than theirs?"

You will find electro-acoustic Minotaur piccolo basses with nylon strings and carved wenge tailpieces that slide into a pocket at the base of the instrument; seven-string long-scale archtop jazz guitars with pau ferro fingerboards and Sitka tops; and solid mahogany Alpha electrics with radiused fingerboards and Veillette's distinctive adjustable wooden bridges floating the strings over Duncan Vintage Rails, D-Tar piezos or both.

One of Veillette's most noteworthy creations of the past decade is the Gryphon, a high-strung, unison-tuned 12-string that sounds a little like a mandolin and a little like a dulcimer. Its hybrid of sounds and inspirations is what led to its name, a nod to the mythical beast with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle.

Last year, at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Veillette and Kimberly Kay, his partner of six years (and a noted soap-opera actress), stood giddily amidst a cheering Journey crowd as Neal Schon wailed the blues on a blue stand-mounted solid-body Gryphon. (The finish work for Veillette is done by Robert "Cue" Gerhards, formerly with Brian Moore Guitars, in nearby Hyde Park.) Earlier in the SPAC season, Dave Matthews strummed a plugged-in acoustic Gryphon, drawing cheers from a sold-out throng during "Squirm" and other high-strung favorites.

The visibility of the D-to-D-tuned Gryphon has been a boon for Veillette, and he's already at work on an as-yet-unnamed E-to-E version, with a tiny 16.5" scale length. (The Gryphon, by comparison, has an 18.5" scale.) Some of Veillette's scale-length experimentations — including an unwieldy 30" scale on a baritone 12-string strung entirely in octaves — have proven too farfetched for even his own tastes; others are eminently practical, if admittedly offbeat.

"You've got to temper the theoretical with the empirical," he says.

In the early 2000s, after not building acoustics for almost a dozen years, Veillette made himself a 12-string of Sitka spruce and mahogany — his instrument of choice. With a shorter 24.1" scale, a zero fret (found on all Veillette instruments) and careful tolerances, it turned what is often a difficult task — wrestling 12 strings to the board — into a joy.

"Proper tension on a 12-string is so critical," Veillette says, "because it can become a really playable instrument. It's not simply easier to play with the right tension; it also lets the top work better."

At the Luthiers Showcase, John Sebastian sits down with Larry Campbell at Veillette's booth and jams on a



new baritone 12-string. That afternoon, he takes it to the stage with Campbell for a spontaneous run through "I'm Satisfied." Sebastian owns an early Veillette 12-string Mark III bari, but he seems quite fond of the recent model as well. "It has a unique quality," he says. "Building instruments and being a musician at the same time makes you want to create something that will last and that is simple."

"What I do," Veillette says, "is I bring some coherent thinking and detail to the party. It's the relentless attention to detail that makes an instrument seem like it's something really special. That's why people like my stuff with all the different scale lengths, because it all comes together. When it feels good, it sounds good. Everything reinforces itself, and it really works."

A BAND SAW'S JOURNEY

Sawdust is everywhere in Veillette's cramped Woodstock shop. It's on the Tech 21 amp used to test pickups, it's on the go deck and it's on the computer screen that sits by the front

Veillette has developed a unique bolt-on neck that requires only one quarter-inch machine bolt that screws into a flanged tee nut inside the neck joint. This setup is remarkably solid and makes adjusting the neck angle a simple proposition.



The Gryphon is Veillette's smallest guitar and one of his most popular designs. It has a short 18.5" scale length, and its 12 unison strings are tuned from D to D, two frets lower than the 12th fret of a guitar in standard tuning. The unique string arrangement sounds similar to that of a mandolin, but it can be played fingerstyle, like a guitar.

door. It smells good, a fragrant blend of rural and exotic, with a touch of machine oil. It smells like guitars. Music plays in the background, often overwhelmed by the *skrrsb, skrrsb, skrrsb* of Chase sanding or the whirr of the pin router as Veillette pushes a long, slim neck blank along the spinning bit.

Virtually all VC and Spector instruments made during Veillette's tenure with those teams were made on the same machines that produce the guitars he makes today. The well-traveled band saw, which has traipsed up and down the Hudson Valley, is nearly 100 years old.

One of Veillette's great joys is making the various color-coded templates, jigs, body forms and fixtures that give his guitars their distinctive shapes. Ande Chase — who, Veillette says with a wink, “stalked his way into a job” — is largely the one tasked with putting those tools to use. He cuts the poplar for solid-body guitars and basses, glues the angled kickbacks (shop-speak for headstocks) to the mahogany (for acoustics) and maple (for electrics) neck blanks and lays in the graphite truss rods before attaching and fretting the fingerboards.

Veillette, when he's not bogged down on the phone or dreaming up a new jig, bends mahogany sides for acoustics, roughs out the accompanying mahogany necks and gives completed instruments a good once-over. On the rare occasion when the heating blankets for the sides go on the fritz, he lets Martin Keith fix the rig, because Keith built it. (Veillette once swore to a certain Professor Jennings, a revered figure in the shop, that he'd “never do anything having to do with electricity.”)

Keith, in addition to other electrical duties and customer service, handles assembly and setups. He dresses frets, sets action and wires pickups to 18-volt D-Tar Wavelength preamps. Keith even makes or customizes the plastic parts of the electronics control panels and battery compartments by hand.

When Keith began with Veillette, in 2000, most of the shop's output was solid-bodies, although not always what players would think of as electric guitars. Inspired by seeing future customer Dave Matthews play a Chet Atkins model in a video, Veillette designed a solid-body fitted with a piezo that was clean, comfortable and designed to work well in high-volume environments where an acoustic would fit well in the mix.

These days, Veillette says his output is roughly 60 percent acoustic, with a 50/50 split between filling customer orders and creating stock models. A rack of acoustic bodies bears witness to the change, but Veillette notes that virtually all of those naked boxes will also be equipped with some type of pickup system. Most boast twin asymmetrical “moonholes” on either side of the strings, but, in a rare bow to tradition, Veillette has lately introduced oval soundholes under the strings as well, subtly changing the flavor of the shop's many offerings.

“It's another different sound,” he says.

Something Borrowed

MARTIN KEITH BEARS THE IMPRINT OF BOTH FATHER AND MENTOR

TEN YEARS AGO, Martin Keith answered an ad in the *Woodstock Times*. Guitar maker Joe Veillette was looking for an apprentice, and, since Keith had been rewiring junky guitars at home and “burning holes in my bedroom floor with a soldering iron,” he decided to apply. “I was just out of college,” Keith says. “He had work, he was five minutes away, and here I am.”

In the intervening years, Keith, like coworker Ande Chase, has become an integral part of the Veillette Guitars team. It’s Keith who does the final assembly and setup of virtually every instrument that goes out the door. The day I visit Veillette’s shop, Keith is finishing up a beautiful honey-blonde six-string and preparing custom battery boxes for the next run of piezo-equipped instruments.

“It’s a very low-pressure environment to work in here,” he says.

Like Veillette and Chase, Keith is a performing musician — “I play bass in public,” he says, “I play guitar at home” — and agrees that one practice feeds the other.

“I don’t know how you can properly assess the quality of a given thing unless you have enough understanding of it to know what’s good or bad. The playing is indispensable. I think the only way you can make good decisions when building an instrument is if you have a subjective opinion. Obviously, you can’t be right for everyone all the time, but I couldn’t ever see myself building an instrument that I couldn’t play.”

It’s no surprise that Keith’s life is surrounded by music and the tools that make it. His father is Bill Keith, pioneer of the melodic banjo style. The elder Keith picked the five-wire with Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys and then strummed it, plectrum style, with Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band. He also invented the famous banjo D-tuners that bear his name.

“I’m very much like my dad in the way that I like to look at technical puzzles,” Martin Keith says. “Dad was trained as a machinist and did a lot of tinkering. I don’t know whether it’s nature or nurture, but I’m very much his son in that sense.”

Keith’s instruments have certainly been

influenced by his time in Veillette’s shop. In fact, he says his own workspace echoes that of his day job. “I have basically the same gear in almost the same arrangement.” He also learned how to create jigs and fixtures for specific purposes. “Joe taught me how to use machines to do whatever you need to do, in ways that don’t necessarily jump out at you at first.”

Keith does, however, build a narrower range of instruments, with a heavy emphasis on basses. His most popular model is the Elfin, a sleek, downsized version of the early Singlecut

the body through the use of a cantilevered bridge tail. Its design and careful balance are specifically meant to alleviate the pains players develop from the long stretch to the low notes and the task of supporting the weight of the bass from the neck.

Each of Keith’s creations, including the narrow-waisted Sylph, is available with a variety of woods and custom options.

“It’s a really exciting time to be a builder,” he says. “There are so many people trying new things, and there are new materials that are



There must be a gene that delivers a predisposition for five-string instruments, because Martin Keith is the son of five-string-banjo master Bill Keith. Here, the younger Keith sits with one of the five-string Elfin-model basses he builds under his own name.

bass, which he helped develop at Veillette Guitars. It comes in four-, five- and six-string variations, with 24 frets on either a bolt-on or set neck.

Being a gigging bassist himself, Keith has tried hard to reduce the weight of his instruments and to increase their ease of playability. The Libra, which, in the double-cutaway option, has a shape reminiscent of a Greek lyre, pushes the entire scale of the instrument toward

starting to become more accessible, in terms of cost and practical usability.”

Keith is intrigued with the idea of creating an acoustic bass guitar that can honestly compete with and complement other instruments in a true acoustic setting, without an amp.

“I think I can do it,” he says, though his true dream is both simpler and loftier. “My ultimate goal is to be happy with what I do, and I’m already there.”



LEFT: Veillette has staked out the higher frequency range with the Gryphon and the lower end with the Grand 16 Baritone. "Our standard/suggested baritone tuning is B to B," says Martin Keith. "That is, from low to high, BEADF#B, which is a perfect fourth lower than standard tuning." The offset soundholes that Veillette uses on many of his guitars offer a couple of advantages. One, they allow for more stiffness at the end of the fretboard, which helps counteract the "sinking-top syndrome." And, two, they help reduce feedback when plugged in.

RIGHT: Ande Chase, the primary woodworker at Veillette, takes a rare break from work and shows off his personal bass, a custom four-string Paris model.



WEIRD IS GOOD

I first met Joe Veillette about a dozen years ago, at a gig at the Parting Glass pub in Saratoga Springs. I was aware of his work with Veillette-Citron, but hadn't been familiar with their instruments beyond seeing them in the ad pages of guitar magazines of the day — pictures of John Sebastian smiling and strumming a Shark. I was immediately struck by Veillette's amiability and his genuine interest in the music I was making. He wasn't a gunslinger, and neither was I, but we got the job done.

"I'm not a great guitar player," he says now, a sentiment that so many of us recognize. "I'm OK, and, in the right context, I can fool some people who don't know what a great guitar player is into thinking I am one."

Veillette likes to talk about alchemy when he talks about guitars. In ancient days, wise men believed they could transmute lead into gold. Veillette, Chase and Keith do something like that, turning rough piles of wood, sheets of vulcanized black fiber and various blobs of metal into musical instruments.

"There are lots of ways to make a guitar," he says. "We have a way that works."

When Joe Veillette lays his hands on a nearly finished guitar, it's with a gentleness that respects its elements and with a casualness that says he knows it's not finished until it's played.

"There's something magical that happens here," he says quietly. "I'm aware of how much joy gets moved between people because of what I can do, but I don't know how it happens."

Part of the secret, he believes, lies in not fighting the wood, but working with it. "I think, on every level, the least struggle you have is the best. I'm not mistreating the wood; I'm honoring it. This wood has this magical energy in it, and I'm releasing it. The less I struggle with it, the less pain I put it and myself through, the more I am letting this magic emerge."

Veillette says there is a "joy" in the fixtures, simply because they let his workers work more quickly and safely, and allow them to struggle less — transmitting those values to the instruments. "It happens quickly and easily.



That's the elegance of it."

"It's a graceful process," Keith adds, "and I think it results in graceful guitars."

"I don't think that I'm a genius," Veillette continues. "I don't think I'm all that intelligent. I don't think there's anything that I have that isn't in tons of other people. But when I see someone onstage, and their music is really getting to people, or when someone's making music by themselves in their room, and they're being inspired by their instrument, it moves me.

"That's what I do. I'm able to redirect some things, and then this wonderful sound comes out of it, like it was there all the time."

Tiny little guitars, strange basses, chambered electrics that sound like acoustics, necks that attach with single quarter-inch machine bolts. "I make weird stuff," Veillette says. And he does. His custom work includes a nine-string bass, an electric tres and an electric-guitar-style dulcimer with a scalloped fingerboard.


But in Woodstock, weird is good, and in Veillette's little corner of the famously funky town, weirder might even be

better. He has made his many discoveries and advances by being open to intuition, but also by employing an architect's knowledge of stress, form and function. His primary body style, for example, was achieved by laying the outlines of familiar shapes — Teles, Les Pauls and the like — over top of one another.

"I drew that on my kitchen table in 10 minutes," he says. "Some of the best stuff happens when you don't engage too much."

He developed the Tee Nut neck attachment as a way of creating a travel 12-string that he could take on an Alaskan trip, realizing later that, when matched to a pocket custom-cut for each guitar (no CNC here), it was a perfectly engineered way to couple body and neck.

Veillette's innovations aren't all revelations; he's the first to admit they're often just merely refinements. But he surely puts in the time, often spending 12-hour days in the shop, only to return after hours to play his creations or fiddle about without the phone ringing in his ear.

"I really like what I do," he says. "I keep thinking I've had my last good idea, and then something else comes up." 

Veillette in his true element.