

Instrument Builders Who Also Sell Guitars

How Grant MacNeill's "hands-on" approach and keen eye for craftsmanship have turned his Toronto-based Twelfth Fret into a destination guitar shop

For a stretch in the 1970s and '80s, Toronto was one of North America's industrial music hubs, supporting a bustling trade of musicians who cranked out film soundtracks and jingles heard in the TV commercials of the era. What it needed was a shop that knew how to service their instruments—so when 21-year-old Grant MacNeill opened The Twelfth Fret in 1977, he was swamped with repair work overnight. Outside the city center in an old storefront in the "Beaches" district along Lake Ontario, his tiny workshop was off the beaten path for tourists but ideally located for the working musicians who brought in their guitars and basses for repair.

The idea of *selling* guitars might never have come up if it weren't for MacNeill's connection with Fender Canada. While taking time off from the University of Guelph, he'd answered an ad to do repair work in the distributor's warranty center, where he quickly found himself im-

mersed in what was then the "new" trade of guitar repairs. Although he worked there less than a year, he remained friendly with Fender personnel who were later happy to have him carry a few of their guitars in his repair shop. From there, he not only attracted other major

manufacturers but showed an uncanny knack for spotting up-and-comers—becoming the first international dealer for Dean Markley Strings, BC Rich Guitars, and DiMarzio pickups, among others. Nearly four decades later, The Twelfth Fret is a destination shop for new and vintage guitars of all kinds, yet MacNeill and his team would be proud to tell you they got there through the back door. At heart, they say, they're instrument builders who also happen to sell guitars.

"We've always been very hands-on," McNeill says. "We want our customers to pick up and try instruments. Where else can you come in for an afternoon and play perhaps \$200,000 worth of guitars in one

sitting? If you've got the time, you can really knock yourself out."

Now in its third location, a custom-built structure on Toronto's Danforth Avenue, The Twelfth Fret has one of the most varied guitar selections of any shop in the world. Just inside, there's an ever-changing wall of vintage pieces, followed by galleries of acoustic and electric guitars, basses, ukes, banjos and mandolins, amps, pickups, boutique effects pedals—and the list goes on. Upstairs is the service shop, an authorized factory repair center for most major brands, where five luthiers perform everything from basic setups to extensive restorations of historic instruments. Over the years, they've done work

for the Rolling Stones and Elvis Costello, among countless other major artists, working sidemen, and session players. The building dates from 1909, though much of it was gutted and renovated for The Twelfth Fret's needs—and only looks old. The original dark green façade has been restored, evoking what MacNeill describes as the look of a shop front in New York or Boston at the start of the 20th Century. On an average day there's a '51 Norton motorcycle parked out front, one of three vintage bikes in his collection.

"It's the same kind of fascination that I have for old guitars," he says. "My '51 Norton is a piece of history. I ride it imagining my grandfather, if he'd ridden it

back then, thinking this was cutting-edge, as good as you could get. A '51 Telecaster is very much that way too."

A guitar instructor since the age of 14, MacNeill grew up utterly without a business background, his parents both university botanists. He was studying science in college and playing part-time in bands when he took time off to work for Fender Canada, shooting up the ranks of their warranty department with—by today's standards—impossible speed. "I went from zero to 60 on day one in the warranty center, servicing pros' guitars," he says. "In those days, if you had any skill and expertise you were, overnight, a world-class expert." A short time later, he



A guitar builder by trade, Grant MacNeill is most at home in his workshop. He founded



The shop's main floor is divided into a series of small "parlors" ideal for trying out guitars.

"We moved in with no real planning," he adds. "I wasn't even sure I'd spelled 'twelfth' right. After I'd registered the company downtown, I rushed into a library just to make sure."

The Twelfth Fret's first tiny shop on Kingston Road had previously housed two other musical instrument builders, and before that a tailor's shop. For their first few years in business, the owners paid their bills just servicing the well-worn instruments of Toronto's working musicians. In the early '80s they added guitar-making classes, eventually putting 500 students through courses in building acoustic or electric guitars. Although they never really intended to go into retail, it was around this time that those first few Fender models came their way. "I knew the guys at Fender well," MacNeill says, "which is the only reason a long-haired kid like me got offered a dealership." One major guitar line led to others, and before too long The Twelfth Fret was also carrying Gibson, Gretsch, Martin, Larrivee, and Taylor.

Meanwhile, MacNeill's curiosity and knowledge of guitar making threw him into the path of some of the era's just-emerging innovators. A tiny ad in the back of *Guitar Player* magazine led him to Dean Markley Strings, and it was a similar story with offbeat new companies including John Pearse Strings and DiMarzio Pickups. "There was so little on offer in those days that when something like DiMarzio came along, it was a shining star—no one else was doing anything like it," MacNeill says. "A lot of these fellows were just starting out, and they were instantly good relationships. They were short on money; I was short on money, so we were all on the same page. Our clientele was almost entirely professional players, so they were eager to connect with us."

Perhaps because its retail side evolved in fits and starts, The Twelfth Fret would

develop an eclectic mix of instruments. Its builder-proprietors and their growing team brought a guitar maker's eye to each line, picking and choosing, wherever possible, to carry this model but not that model. Sometimes they'd pass on a guitar because of some design flaw; other times, just aesthetics and personal taste. Adding to the mix were guitars by private luthiers, many of them local, but some from far-flung builders trying to get their

names out into the world. Especially in their early years, MacNeill and his team built a number of guitars themselves, crafting customized instruments for lefty-playing customers or anyone wanting a variation in scale length, nut width, etc. "Back then, if you wanted anything remotely off the beaten track, I would have to make it for you," says MacNeill. As The Twelfth Fret gained prominence, it also launched into collaborations on

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The Twelfth Fret's storefront on Danforth Avenue dates from 1909—though the inside has been custom-renovated from top to bottom.

exclusive models with major guitar builders. In one notable project, the shop worked with Spain's Alhambra Guitars on its first "crossover" model, a classical guitar for steel-string players who want to make the jump to Latin jazz or Chet Atkins styling without navigating the traditional bulky neck of a classical guitar. For that model, Alhambra sent over a neck blank that MacNeill carved to his liking and sent back to Spain for Alhambra to replicate. An initial run of 100 guitars sold exclusively through The Twelfth Fret before Alhambra made them part of its regular production line.

On the vintage side, MacNeill found inspiration in the likes of Gruhn Guitars and Mandolin Brothers, who "introduced the world to the idea that a guitar could be collectible." Roughly 100,000 guitars have found their way through The Twelfth Fret at one time or another, from classic Strats and Teles to old department store guitars from the middle of the 20th Century. "I like those cheaper work-a-day guitars because they're what the average guy would have played," MacNeill says. "He'd buy a \$99 Kalamazoo and play the daylights out of it." Among the store's many finds was a "Martin & Coupa" guitar dating from 1840, a collaboration between the fledgling C.F. Martin and John Coupa, a

prominent guitar instructor of the day. Just inside the sound hole there's a fingerprint in glue, likely left by Christian Frederick Martin I as he picked up the unfinished guitar and laid it on a shelf to dry. Today, The Twelfth Fret entrusts the vintage side of the business to Chris Bennett, head of vintage sales. "We're well connected with the history side of it," says Bennett, who's also in charge of

THE WEBSITE OFFERS LUSH PHOTOGRAPHY, DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS, AND IN-DEPTH ARTICLES, BUT NO SHOPPING CART.

meeting with trade-in customers for appraisals of their used and vintage instruments. "The coolest moments for me are when an older couple come in and tell me the guy down the street offered them \$400 for their guitar and I'm able to tell them—"Well, that's a

nice offer, but your guitar is worth \$8,000.' Our reputation has always been built on that—being honest."

Much else, however, has changed since The Twelfth Fret opened 39 years ago. MacNeill's original partner, Dan Charman, left in 1982 and now runs an organic farm in British Columbia. The store itself outgrew its original location and moved in 1990 to a larger shop on Danforth Ave., "which seemed like a palace at the time," MacNeill says. "Then we outgrew it within months." He and his team made the best of it until 1999, when they moved again to their current home virtually across the street. Once inside, they overhauled the place,

blasting through the basement concrete to add three vertical feet of storage and blowing off the top of the building to add a second story, expanding the shop to a total of 4,400 square feet. High-tech humidification systems were installed, along with heavy duty insulation and vapor seal. Within the main shop, tin ceilings and old wood paneling restored the look of the original building. Archways and pocket doors divide the space into a series of intimate “parlors” where customers can try out guitars in private and get a feel for how they might sound in their own homes. While in previous locations repair techs worked alongside customers shopping for guitars, the service center has now been moved upstairs, keeping the dust off the showroom and distractions away from the techs.

Five experienced luthiers now man The Twelfth Fret’s repair shop. As MacNeill says, “The ‘new guy’ joined us 20 years ago.” All independent contractors, several work at The Twelfth Fret one-month-



This “Martin & Coupa” guitar dates from 1840 and was built by Christian Frederick Martin I.

on-and-one-month-off, spending the balance of their year building guitars in their home workshops. During business hours at the shop, one luthier is always on duty at the store’s “reception workbench” for “triage”—a first inspection of guitars brought in for service to determine what they’ll need, while customers look on. “The public is fascinated by this stuff,” MacNeill says. Store-wide, the rest of the Twelfth Fret team consists of seven retail staff and eight instructors who man the

store’s teaching studio. Each of the teachers is also a gigging musician. “That’s what hooked me when I was a kid, that my teacher actually played in bands,” MacNeill says. “He’d play a little at the beginning of my lesson—shivers down my spine. I think it’s the duty of all stores to introduce people to music. It’s essential to find teachers who enjoy teaching and don’t look at it as a substitute for their dream career.”

Online since 1996, The Twelfth Fret was early to ecommerce—though not as most merchants would recognize it. The shop’s first website was created by David Wren, MacNeill’s business partner from 1990 through 2008 and a guitar builder trained under Jean Larrivé. Site management was carried on by Patrick Keenan, an IT specialist and photographer but also a guitar maker by trade. This music-first approach produced a website that sells guitars around the globe but has never offered a shopping cart feature, “and probably never will,” says MacNeill.

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What it has instead is lush photography, detailed descriptions, in-depth articles on pieces of historical interest—and a contact form to fill out if you're thinking of ordering an item. That marks just the start of a dialogue between the customer and the shop on wood species, action heights, string gauges, etc. "Some customers are clearly surprised, because no one's ever asked them these questions before," says MacNeill. "And I'm thinking: what guitar shop would *not* ask these questions? It's like selling a customer a pair of shoes—and neglecting to ask which size they need. Discussions often lead us to realize that a customer is look-

ing at completely the wrong instrument for their needs, and we're able to match them with something that suits them."

In this way, The Twelfth Fret has made the acquaintance of guitarists in Europe, Asia, Australia and elsewhere, sometimes using translation software to make the dialogue possible. Today, MacNeill estimates the shop makes 20% of its sales through the website—though for various reasons (mainly because "web" sales are often follow-ups with local in-store customers) that's one of the few things it *doesn't* track precisely. What it does have is a database of more than 30,000 customers that records the type of



Chris Bennett, The Twelfth Fret's head of vintage sales, pictured with a 1920s Stroh guitar.



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guitar sold; the serial number; the date of the sale; and any setup, maintenance, and repairs the shop performed on it. That data log has proved invaluable not only for tailoring service to each customer but for helping customers document insurance claims and the like. Just this spring, the shop was able to provide detailed printouts to customers who'd lost everything in the wildfire in the Alberta town of Fort McMurray. "It's nice to have all the information at your fingertips," MacNeill says.

In 2017, The Twelfth Fret will turn 40. MacNeill himself is 61, having spent two-thirds of his life heading up the sales counter or workbench at The Twelfth Fret. For the shop's big anniversary, he hopes to reissue some guitars from the custom-crafted series he and his team used to build for customers back in the '80s. Often, he finds himself serving the children and grandchildren of his original customers. "Guitars are one of the few consumer products that don't become 'landfill' in a few years," he says. "The guitars I'm selling today will still be making music a century from now. And since we service everything, there's a good chance we'll see them again. So there's at least as much satisfaction for us as for the customers when we fit them up with an instrument that's going to suit them. And then if they get hooked on guitar or banjo or ukulele, we'll get to know them for years—which is great fun."

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