

Jol Dantzig

Reluctant Renaissance Man

Jol Dantzig's resumé reads like a list of the most important 20th-century American guitar companies. From his creation of Hamer Guitars (considered the first true boutique brand) in the early '70s, to his work with Gibson, Guild, Gretsch, and Fender, Dantzig's innovative guitars have been heralded for their design, construction and feel, and have been played by some of the biggest rock stars in the world.

With his latest venture, Dantzig has added "artist" and "folk hero" to his curriculum vitae, leaving corporate America behind to create high-art electric guitars for influential musicians, art collectors, and discriminating individuals.

You started almost 40 years ago, building high-end guitars for rock stars. How is Dantzig Guitar Design different from what you've done before?

What's *the same* is I'm creating unique instruments by hand for a select audience. In the '70s, it was touring pros, guys who wanted great guitars. We didn't care about selling in stores or going to trade shows. It's the same now; I like people, I hate trade shows.

So, in some ways, you've come full circle, from being one of the first successful boutique builders, to mass production, and now back to individual builds. What drew you back to that?

Freedom. I worked with great people and loved collaborating with the bands. It was fantastic. But over time, my role changed, and I found myself in situations I never envisioned – too many meetings, conference calls, professional development sessions, corporate rigmarole. It had nothing to do with why I liked making guitars. I needed a change.

So you don't miss being a corporate leader?

Well, now I'm the leader of one (laughs)! I wasn't thinking about business; it was more about deciding what kind of life I wanted. By trade, I'm an artist, and I wanted to get back to that. Then, several collectors who were familiar with my work contacted me. They assumed I was building and were interested in collecting my new guitars, which at the time didn't exist! It started my whole thinking process in a positive direction and rekindled my desire to create hands-on.

So how would you describe your market?

My clients already have the "wish list" guitars from their youth, or have some custom-shop guitars, but now they want the next step up, a direct connection. I've built guitars for their favorite musicians and they want a

personal example of my work. No two are the same, and that's important, too.

Do you consider these "guitars as fine art"?

Yes, absolutely, and some of my clients are art collectors. But [my guitars] are still wonderful musical instruments, but I just don't think of them as merely products. I won't repeat one. With a product-type guitar, no matter how good or how custom, it's basically a lithograph, a rubber stamp. When you buy my Signature guitar, you own an original, something no one else can possess.

Would that include vintage collectors?

Very much so, vintage guys get it, because they understand rarity. I build instruments that are conceptually compelling, like vintage guitars. What I like about vintage guitars is that they have a story; they've hung in pawnshops, been on stages, they've settled debts or languished in closets, they all have a different history. That's what I create with my conceptual building process.

How do you come up with the concepts or themes for your guitars?

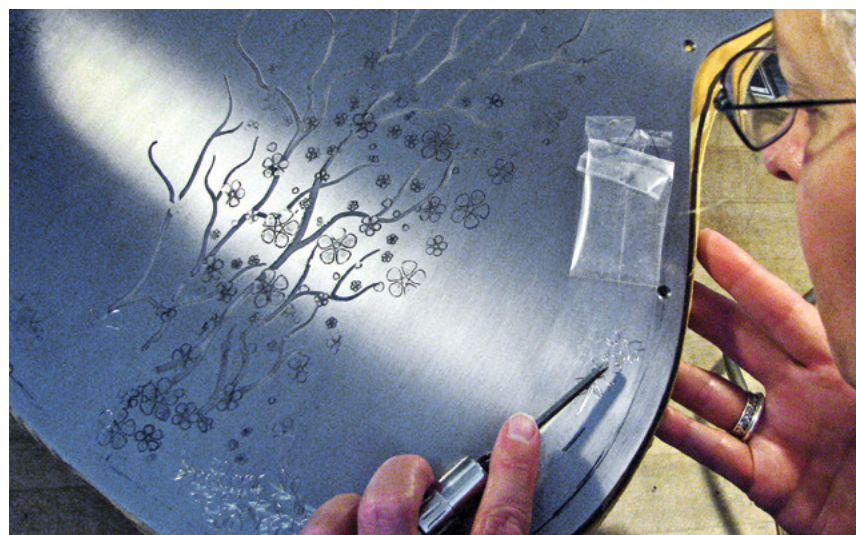
As Jean-Michel Basquiat said, "I don't think about art when I'm working. I think about life." And that's my inspiration. It comes from history, books, films or conversations with interesting people. My Crow guitar came from reading beat-generation poetry, and Kerouac's *On the Road*. I was doing photography of birds, especially crows, and they are scavengers, harbingers, and messengers. I made the connection between that and what Kerouac and Neal Cassady did – like touring musicians, scavenging their way across America, bringing their message to people. I wanted to make an instrument that summed up that feeling. It had to look *old*, not just worn. For The Crow's feathery look, I replicated the Duco process National used in the '30s. My guitars are developed over a long time and ideas have to be massaged, parts have to be made, just the right color or materials. I write it all down in a journal, along with drawings, color tests, scraps of material and wire. That becomes a hand-bound book, a copy of which is available with the guitar.

So are you making the parts for these guitars?

Some I make, some are scavenged, but all are unique. I bought some Western Electric telephone equipment at auction – old cloth-covered wire, original switching, things like that. Think of the millions of conversations, good news, or calls for help transmitted through those wires! Using that in my guitars adds to the instrument's soul. It's creating a new story from a



Jol Dantzig with The Crow.



The Heidi Roos engraving on Dantzig's Sakura guitar.

past history. Does it sound any better? You'd be missing the point. It's part of the romance that makes the owner's experience much more complete. It's not just a new, fresh smelling appliance hanging up in a big store.

What are your aspirations for Dantzig Guitar Design, do you want to get to a point where you're building more than three to four guitars a year?

I'm very focused on today. I have a shop in a small barn that works for what I'm doing now, but I'm already finding the limits of what I can do

there. I've had conversations with investors and business people who have interest in working with me, but at this point I don't want to get back on the treadmill. I am working with other artists. For example, the engraving on my Sakura guitar is being done by (master gun engraver) Heidi Roos. Her hand engraving is amazing. I like collaborating and feel a kinship with other artisans. That's the type of community I enjoy, and now I'm free to explore. I'm happier than ever, doing this one guitar at a time. – Tom Guerra