



Seeing Redwood

RONIN'S SWEET-VOICED '67 FOIL SONGBIRD MARRIES PERFECTLY AGED TIMBER FROM HUMBOLDT COUNTY WITH A SET OF FINE AND FUNKY NEW OLD STOCK PICKUPS.

{ BY ADAM PERLMUTTER }

CALIFORNIA'S REDWOODS ARE the tallest and largest species of tree in the world, and among the longest living, as well. They are so majestic that tourists from all over the world travel to Northern California to walk among them. ¶ John Reed, however, is drawn to redwoods for more than their splendor. He finds that the timber yields an unparalleled musical sound when it is crafted into a guitar body. "It seems to hold onto a note indefinitely, and on a new guitar it sounds old, like it's been played every night for 50 years," he says. "It doesn't hide mistakes and captures every little nuance."

A New Yorker via California, Reed is the designer and luthier behind Ronin, a five-year-old line of handmade guitars and basses with vintage-inspired styling. His partner, Izzy Lugo, one of New York's finest repair techs (Lugo's clients include Keith Richards and Jim Campilongo), puts the instruments together and provides the meticulous fretwork. Each year, Reed and Lugo decamp to Humboldt County, California, where, along with Reed's father, Jack Reed, they build roughly 100 guitars in about four months. Then, Reed and Lugo return to their private showroom in Manhattan to peddle their wares. "It's impossible to do marketing or sales when you're up in the woods in middle of nowhere," Reed explains.

Reed's family owns 12 acres of protected forest in Humboldt County, and the Ronin team has exclusive access to another 2,000 acres that belongs to a family friend. The guitar maker is careful to point out that no living trees are harmed in the making of his guitars, as all of Ronin's redwood comes from stumps or from fallen trees, which have been cured by the sun to the perfect moisture content. A small portion also comes from the barrels of a wine factory that was decommissioned some 40 years ago. Reed says, "Judging from the ring count and size of the pieces, I would

estimate that this wood is between 800 and 1,000 years old. It's got wine built into it—all these sugar and mineral deposits which provide extra clarity to the sound."

Reed and his cohorts are very particular about wood in general and have a careful approach to assessing its sonic properties, similar to how an acoustic builder listens for tap tones in preparing a soundboard, but more scientific. "We separate the wood by origin, grain characteristics, and density," he explains. "We also use tuning forks and stethoscopes to listen for certain tones and attributes, which helps us further divide the wood into subcategories, like how we want it react to a particular scale length."

If the '67 Foil Songbird (base price, \$4,880) shown here looks vaguely familiar, that's probably because it draws visual inspiration from an odd, old production instrument. The body's asymmetric silhouette recalls that of the late-Sixties Hagstrom eight-string bass Noel Redding sometimes played with the Jimi Hendrix Experience. "I designed the Songbird to have the clarity of a great Tele but an alternative vintage look that's been overlooked by guitar makers until recently," Reed says.

This Songbird boasts a choice selection of woods. Its dense but lightweight body was quarter-sawn from an old-growth

redwood that fell when it was struck by lightning. The neck and fingerboard are fashioned from more traditional selections: Honduran mahogany and Indian rosewood, respectively. When the guitar is played unplugged, this trio of woods produces a remarkably rich and loud sound, almost like a tiny grand piano. "Strum a chord, put your ear to the Songbird's body, and you will hear something magical happen," Reed says.

Special details abound on the guitar. The finish is a Fifties-style noncatalyzed nitro-cellulose lacquer, sprayed thin to allow the wood to vibrate optimally. The knobs, little gold teacups, are vintage radio parts, while the capacitors are NOS Sprague oil-in-paper, providing timbres that range from warm jazz to stinging rock.

Most notable, however, are the Songbird's 1967 DeArmond gold-foil pickups, standard on guitars by Harmony, Silvertone, and other makers. Reed acquired them unused, with their wiring harnesses intact, and in their original packaging. "Those cheap old guitars sound great," he says, "but they were not built to professional standards and usually don't play well. So with the Songbird we've put some original electronics into a solidly built instrument to create something new from something old." GA