

McElroy Guitars

Seattle, Washington, luthier Brent McElroy specializes in lattice-braced flattops.

By Doug Young

Below: Brent McElroy in his shop, holding a Generation 2 Standard model built with an Italian spruce top and Maccassar ebony back and sides. Right: Generation 1 Standard model with an Adirondack spruce top and black acacia back and sides.

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, LUTHIER Brent McElroy is a former carpenter whose interest in music led him to become a mostly self-taught luthier. McElroy, who builds about 12 to 15 guitars annually, focuses on a relatively small number of basic designs, including his Standard (mini-jumbo), 000/OM, 12-fret 00, a classical, and his radical Neoteric (prices start at \$6,500). The Standard model was the first instrument he designed in the mid-'90s, and it is an attempt to appeal equally to fingerstyle players with a light touch as well as heavy strummers. Although McElroy admired the dreadnought's size and power, he didn't find its body shape appealing, so he developed a more curved body with a 12-inch upper bout, nine-inch waist, and 16-inch lower bout, a size commonly referred to as a "mini-jumbo." "I was trying to design a shape that was pleasing to my eye," McElroy says. "Certain curves and shapes can be sensual and seductive, and I was trying to achieve this aesthetic."

Lattice Bracing Provides Power

Although he focuses primarily on steel-string instruments, McElroy also builds a classical model, and he says that developing the classical has had a big effect on his approach to design. "I built a classical with lattice bracing, and it just wowed me—I couldn't believe how much power it got out of nylon strings," McElroy says. "It made me wonder what it would do with steel strings." This led to what McElroy calls his Generation 2 design, referring to the lattice-braced top that is now his standard approach to all his steel-string instruments, giving them a distinctive tone (though he continues to offer his previous X-bracing on request). McElroy says the lattice bracing gives the guitar "more power. It still has



the headroom you need to play it hard, but it has more power and richness to the tone. You don't have to wait years for it to open up." McElroy's lattice bracing uses a parabolic shape and the added strength of the design allows him to use slightly thinner tops than he could with the traditional X-bracing approach.

Nontraditional Neoteric Design

McElroy's Neoteric combines lattice bracing with a nontraditional top that has one small offset soundhole, thereby maximizing the vibrating surface area. The Neoteric's top is sloped (an innovation McElroy borrowed from classical builder Thomas Humphrey), which increases the angle of the string to the bridge. McElroy says the design produces a stronger fundamental

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and more power, with increased sustain and clarity. The Neoteric also features a floating, cantilevered fingerboard that doesn't damp the upper-bout portion of the top like a glued-on fingerboard extension does. This design allows the neck angle to be changed with an allen wrench—for example, to adjust the action. Players and guitar techs will also appreciate the access door found on the bottom of the Neoteric, which provides easy access to the inside of the guitar for adjustments and pickup installations. The Neoteric—which is currently only available in a modified 000 size—starts at \$8,500 and is enough of a departure for McElroy that he created a separate website for it (theneoteric.us).

Rosewood, Spruce, and Redwood

One of the joys of guitar building is exploring different woods, and McElroy finds something attractive in most woods. "I think rosewoods are always great," he says. "I like African blackwood and koa. They all have different qualities, but they all work." McElroy makes some adjustments for different wood choices to bring out their best qualities. For example, he says, "Maple can be too dry, so I try not to let that

happen. The way I voice the top, they still sound full."

Although his top preference seems to go through phases, McElroy tends to like stiffer woods, preferring spruce to cedar, for example. "Compared to spruce, cedar has less dimension," he says. "On the other hand, redwood has it all. Redwood has the loudness of cedar, but the depth and tone of spruce."

Signature Tones

One of McElroy's goals is to create guitars that can handle radically different playing styles, and the fact that his clients range from fingerstylist Bill Mize, who has an extraordinarily light touch, to Joel Tepp, who plays aggressive blues slide guitar, illustrates his success. McElroy is pleased that his guitars are recognized as having a signature sound, though he finds describing that tone in words to be challenging. "Everyone



McElroy's Neoteric model includes an offset soundhole.

has their signature sound," he says. "Just like a player, no matter how hard they try to play exactly like someone else, they still have their signature sound. As builders, we kind of do that, as well. I just keep trying to get a tone that I find the most pleasing."

McElroy describes his work as a quest for balance in tone, strength, playability, and beauty. With his commitment to hand-building and individual tuning, along with a sense of adventure that keeps him exploring new designs, his quest is sure to continue to produce great guitars. **AC**

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